

"The Most Important Thought That You Will Ever Think"

Colossians 1:15

12 March 2023

THE MOST IMPORTANT THOUGHT THAT YOU WILL EVER THINK IS WHAT YOU THINK WHEN YOU THINK OF GOD BECAUSE IT WILL DETERMINE EVERY DIMENSION OF YOUR LIFE.

The apostle Paul knew this. It's why he's writing to the Colossian church. He wants them to think rightly about God, because they have been entertaining false ideas about God, which were being peddled by some false teachers who crept into the church. Paul wants them to know who Jesus is.

Understand this: This is always the need of the church in every generation. Do we think rightly about God? Are we getting our ideas about who God is from His word, or from culture, or from our own hearts, our own thoughts.

And, that was the issue in the 4th century. So, I want us to go back again to the 4th century and look at the events leading up to and after the council of Nicaea, which gave birth to the Nicene Creed. This will be another sermon/church history lecture hybrid. We'll still be using Colossians 1:15 as our foundation, so turn in your Bibles to Colossians 1.

And, at the heart of the discussion in the church in the 4th century was this word:

Homoousios

That's a word that every Christian should know. In the 4th century, the church would stand or fall on that word: *homoousios*. I'll explain it in a moment. First, let's read our verse today. Colossians 1.

LOOK AT VERSE 15...

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Recall what we saw last week: Jesus makes the Triune God known to us. If we have seen Jesus, then we have seen God the Father. Jesus makes the invisible God visible in flesh and blood, and bone and tissue, and ear lobes and kneecaps.

We also saw that if you make Jesus less than God, then you make the Gospel less than good. If you mess up the person of Jesus, then you mess up His work. If you get the person of Christ wrong, then you get the work of Christ wrong. If you get Jesus wrong, then you get the Gospel wrong. And if you get Jesus wrong, then you don't have salvation, you don't have forgiveness of sins, you don't have anything but a brand spankin' new Jesus!

And, that's exactly what was happening in the 4th century. A winsome pastor was gaining popularity with his sermons, books, blog posts, and catchy worship songs. The problem was this: He taught that Jesus was not the eternal Son of God, but that He was the very first thing God created. His name was Arius, and his teachings were splitting the church right down the middle. When Arius read Colossians 1:15 that Jesus is "the firstborn over all creation," he believed that Jesus had a birthday in eternity past.

So, a soft-spoken bishop named Alexander stepped up to confront Arius. And, that started a 7 year "rap battle" between Alexander and Arius that led up to the Council of Nicaea.

This theological battle over the nature, or essence of Jesus was spreading all over the Roman empire, and threatening to not only destroy the church, but also the kingdom. So, in response to this, the emperor Constantine called together the church's theologians and pastors and Christian thinkers to discuss Jesus, to discuss the Son's essence and His relationship to God the Father. Was it eternal? Or, did God create Jesus?

And this happened in the winter of A.D. 324-325 in the city of Nicaea, at what is now known as "The Council of Nicaea" where Arius was condemned as a heretic, and the church created an official response to Arius known as "The Nicene Creed."

Let's read the Nicene Creed. By the way, I was required to memorize this in seminary, by one of my theology professors, Dr. Glenn Kreider. I am grateful for that. This is how important these words are.

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, Father, all-sovereign, maker of all things seen and unseen; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father as only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same essence, one in, with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, the things in Heaven and the things on earth, who because of men and our salvation came down and was incarnated, made man, suffered, and arose the third day, ascended into Heaven, comes to judge the living and the dead; and in one Holy Spirit. And to those who say "there was once

when he was not" or "he was not before he was begotten" or "he came into existence from nothing" or who affirm that the Son of God is of another nature or substance, or a creature, or mutable or subject to change, such ones the catholic (universal) and apostolic church pronounces accursed and separated from the church.

That beautiful piece of Christian theology came about because of one guy: Arius. So, as a result of the Council at Nicaea, Arius was condemned as a heretic, and Arianism was condemned as heresy. His books were burned, and he was banished to Yugoslavia. He was canceled before canceling became popular!

But, Arius did not just lay low. He didn't just disappear after Nicaea. He didn't delete all of his social media accounts. In fact, he started posting even more! He doubled down on his beliefs! And, he continued to spread his teachings, especially through his catchy worship songs.

But, let's rewind just a bit and talk about what actually happened at the Council of Nicaea. A group of over 325 bishops and pastors gathered, and Constantine- *the government!*- picked up the bill and covered their expenses! Imagine the government picking up the tab at a pastor's conference! That's what happened. Bishops and presbyters came from all over- Europe, Lybia, Asia, Palestine, Persia, and even as far away as Spain.

So, imagine the scene! It reads like that wonderful nations-filled passage in Revelation 5:9-10. Every nation, race, tribe, and tongue showed up at Nicaea. Imagine the diversity! And all unified, primarily, to refute the teachings of Arius and defend the one true Gospel.

Arius, though he was a pastor, was not able to attend the meeting because he was not a bishop. But, a few of his friends were there, like Eusebius of Nicodemia. He spoke on behalf of Arius. Those who favored Arius thought that if they could just explain the logic behind their thinking, then this would all get resolved, and Arius would be cleared of any wrongdoing.

So, from May to July, this was the main item on the agenda: Did Jesus have the same *essence* or *nature* as God the Father? Alexander argued that Jesus was of the very *same nature* as the Father. The Greek word that Alexander, and later his friend, Athanasius, proposed was *homoousios* (from *homo*, "same," and *ousios*, "nature")-

*MAKE A SLIDE OF THIS

homoousios
homo, "same,"
ousios, "nature"

indicating that Jesus possessed the same identical nature as the Father; that the Son is God just like the Father is God; that He is the image of the invisible God, the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature (Hebrews 1:1-4).

So, Eusebius of Nicodemia spoke up and tried to present his case, on behalf of Arius. Once he was done, it was clear that this teaching was heretical and in direct contradiction of God's word. Eusebius' explanation caused several bishops to cry out, "You lie!" "Blasphemy!" "Heresy!" Eusebius was eventually shouted down and his speech was yanked from his hand, ripped to shreds, and then trampled underfoot. By the way, this is how you respond to heresy!

So, at this point it was clear that this was no minor doctrinal issue that could be easily cleared up. This was serious. The Council was in unison that they needed to reject Arianism in the clearest way possible because it contradicted God's word. But, they realized that it would be difficult to do this because Arius and his followers could just say that they interpret those particular Bible verses differently. They knew that they had to form a creed to reject Arius.

And, it was Constantine who actually suggested using the word *homoousios* (same nature/essence) in what would become the Nicene Creed. But some people at the Council of Nicaea proposed that if we said that Christ was *homoiousios* (from *homoi*, "similar," and *ousios*, nature") with the Father, this would be sufficient.

* MAKE A SLIDE OF THIS

homoiousios
homoi "similar,"
ousios "nature"

Some people wanted all the divisions and debates that were sweeping through the churches to end, so they said, "Let's compromise. Don't say that Jesus is from the same nature as the Father. Don't say that He is the image of the invisible God. Let's say that He is similar in nature to God the Father."

So, there was a big debate in all the churches over these very similar sounding words:

* MAKE A SLIDE OF THIS

homoousios = same nature

homoiousios = similar nature

And the debate that was sweeping through the empire was over one letter! The letter *i*! Did Jesus have the same nature (*homoousios*) as God the Father or was He just similar in nature (*homoiousios*) to God the Father? Was Jesus the image of the invisible God as Colossians 1:15 says, or was Jesus just similar to God the Father? These were the questions that were being discussed at Nicaea.

So, after 3 months of discussion, it came time to vote. These are the results, and when you read about it, the number of positive votes varies, but the negative votes are very clear. It was a landslide, even though the number of positive votes varies. Stephen Nichols explains:

"Sticking with numbers, the vote at Nicaea was not close. Pinpointing the number of bishops in attendance is difficult. Numbers range from 220 to 318. The number of yea votes ranged anywhere from 218 to 316. Scholars know the number of nay votes with accuracy. There were two, cast by friends of Arius." (For Us and Our Salvation: The Doctrine of Christ in the Early Church, p. 57)

So, you have between 218 to 316 bishops voting in the affirmative that Jesus has the same nature/essence as God and there were 2 votes in the negative- two votes that were cast by the friends of Arius. 316 to 2.

The council of Nicaea wants you to know that-

THE MOST IMPORTANT THOUGHT THAT YOU WILL EVER THINK IS WHAT YOU THINK WHEN YOU THINK OF GOD BECAUSE IT WILL DETERMINE EVERY DIMENSION OF YOUR LIFE.

In every generation, this is the most pressing thing before the church. A.W. Tozer said it this way in his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*-

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us... For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he deep in his heart conceives God to be like... Before the Christian Church goes into eclipse anywhere there must first be a corrupting of her simple basic theology. She simply gets a wrong answer to the question, 'What is God like?' and goes on from there. (pp. 9-12)

This is why we cannot abandon God's word and we must read it in community: the community of the local church and church history.

So, Alexander and Co. prevailed over Arius, insisting that Jesus was of the same nature (*homoousios*) as God and not similar (*homoiousios*) in nature. And, as a result of the Council at Nicaea, Arius was exiled along with many of his followers for teaching heresy.

But, the debates didn't just end after Nicaea. Condemning Arius and his teachings at the Council of Nicaea was relatively easy compared to the task of rooting out Arian teachings from the church. Athanasius, who took over as bishop of Alexandria after Alexander, had to spend the rest of his life laboring to refute Arius. He continued to preach against Arius, filling his sermons with the orthodox position of Nicaea. He began writing books to counter the claims of Arius, like, *Against the Arians* and *On the Incarnation*.

Though there was victory at Nicaea, Athanasius kept getting sent into exile by whoever was the emperor. Athanasius was even arrested and exiled one time right in the middle of serving communion! This was the life of suffering that Athanasius endured for the sake of the Gospel. In the end, Athanasius was exiled 5 times!

Once by Constantine (336-338)

Twice by Constantinus (339-346 and 356-366)

Once by Julian (362-364)

Once by Valens (364-365).

Athanasius spent more time in exile than he did pastoring his church and serving as bishop! In his 46 years as bishop of Alexandria, he only spent 17 years in the city! Eventually, a slogan began to spread on social media about him: *Athanasius contra mundum*, which means, "Athanasius against the world." He battled against the world political system and even the church.

But get this: For over 60+ years, Athanasius defended the doctrine that Jesus is of the same essence or nature as God the Father. For over 60+ years Athanasius defended that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. 60+ years defending and explaining Colossian 1:15! 60+ years defending the church against one letter: *the letter "i"* in *homoiousion*.

Church historian Stephen Nichols says this about the tenacity of Athanasius-

"Athanasius took hold of an idea, the word homoousion, and would not for life or limb or exile let go...the church could not be as grateful to anyone as they can and should be to Athanasius, a theologian who wrangled over not just a word but over a letter for six decades! Athanasius spent his life in one long theological debate over apparent minutiae. And if he hadn't, we'd all be in trouble... One has to ask why Athanasius endured so much for so long. Why did he wrangle for decades over one word, over one letter, i? The reason comes in a phrase also found in the Nicene Creed, a phrase that is attributed to Athanasius. It may not be too much of a stretch to claim this phrase to be one of the most profound, if not beautiful, phrases in all of theological literature, the phrase "for us and for our salvation." Athanasius wrangled with the best minds of the day and endured persecution at the hands of the most powerful politicians of the day, all for the sake of the gospel. The person of Christ, Athanasius believed, had everything to do with the work of Christ. If the church got it wrong on the person of Christ, the church would be wrong on the work of Christ. Athanasius spent six decades contending for a letter and contending against the world for the sake of the gospel." (For Us and Our Salvation: The Doctrine of Christ in the Early Church, p. 65-67)

And why is this important? Why is Nicaea important? Why do we affirm the Nicene Creed? Why do we care about the word *homoousion*? Why?

Because-

THE MOST IMPORTANT THOUGHT THAT YOU WILL EVER THINK IS WHAT YOU THINK WHEN YOU THINK OF GOD BECAUSE IT WILL DETERMINE EVERY DIMENSION OF YOUR LIFE.

If we don't have a right view of Jesus, then we don't see the real Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God. He makes God known to us. The real Jesus makes the real God known to us.

And, the real Jesus is reigning on God's throne right now. And He could come back any minute and when He does all His enemies will be put under His feet. They will bow their knee to Him, the real King. And when He comes again, He will usher in the new heavens and the new Earth and any chance to repent and be reconciled to Him will be over. So, if you're here today and you don't Jesus, turn from living for you and turn to Him and then you can really begin to live! Trust in what Jesus has done for sinners- through His life, death, and resurrection- in order to reconcile us to God. This is the real Jesus. He's the Colossians 1 image of the invisible God. He's God's anointed Son. The King. And He will squash all of His enemies when He returns, and they will be thrown into the everlasting fire. That's something to avoid!

Understand this: The real Jesus is not a pansy. The real Jesus is not a pushover. The real Jesus does not have nice, feathered hair and soft hands that smell like strawberry lotion. The real Jesus is the most powerful King that has ever been. He can take you out today and throw you in Hell. Nobody else can do that!

But, even though He is all-powerful, He is also merciful. He is compassionate. He is gentle. He is kind. And His kindness toward you is meant to draw you to repentance. If you don't know the real Jesus, today would be a good day to bow your knee to the King. And when you do, you'll discover just how loving and kind and merciful and generous and caring He is! The real Jesus is really merciful to real sinners! And that's why I love Him so much. I hope you come to love Him too, perhaps even before this sermon is over.

The real Jesus wants the real you! He wants to welcome you into His family. He's crazy good to people like us. He welcomes people like us into His presence. If you don't know this about us here at Grace, we're sinners. We really mess up sometimes. We really do! I do! As the pastor of this church, I really blow it sometimes! More than I want! And yet, God is still quite fond of me. Can you believe that? And God is still quite fond of us. Wouldn't it be great if you belonged to a God like that? Wouldn't it be great to say, "*God is so fond of me.*"

You can belong to Him if you're willing to bow the knee to the real King, if you're willing to get real with the real Jesus, and fess up to your sin and open the empty hands of faith. Wouldn't it be great if you belonged to a God like that? I think so. So, just come. Trust in the gentle and lowly Jesus of Colossians 1.

I read a quote by A.W. Tozer earlier. It's on the cover of your worship bulletin this morning:

"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.."

C.S. Lewis read that and broke out in theological hives, and replied by saying:

I read in a periodical the other day that the fundamental thing about us is how we think of God. By God Himself, it is not! How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important. Indeed, how we think of Him is of no importance except in so far as it is related to how He thinks of us.

I don't think the 2 quotes need to be reconciled, because I get what each man is saying. But, what really is the most important thing about us? It's what does God think of us! What God thinks of you is infinitely more important! Are we in Christ? Are we one of His children, united to His Son by faith? If you are, then these wonderful promises are true for you:

Jeremiah 31:3

I have loved you with an everlasting love...

Jeremiah 31:34

For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Stuff those promises in every nook and cranny of your heart. They are true because Jesus *is* God's eternal Son. Because He has shown the Father to us. Dane Ortlund says-

Jesus is the embodiment of who God is. He is the tangible epitomization of God. Jesus Christ is the visible manifestation of the invisible God (2 Cor. 4:4, 6). In him we see heaven's eternal heart walking around on two legs in time and space. When we see the heart of Christ, then, throughout the four Gospels, we are seeing the very compassion and tenderness of who God himself most deeply is.

As you consider the Father's heart for you, remember that he is the Father of mercies. He is not cautious in his tenderness toward you. He multiplies mercies matched to your every need, and there is nothing he would rather do. "Remember," said the Puritan John Flavel, "that this God in whose hand are all creatures, is your Father, and is much more tender of you than you are, or can be, of yourself?"

Your gentlest treatment of yourself is less gentle than the way your heavenly Father handles you. His tenderness toward you outstrips what you are even capable of toward yourself.

The heart of Christ is gentle and lowly. And that is the perfect picture of who the Father is. "The Father himself loves you" (John 16:27). (Gentle and Lowly, p. 133)

We lose all of that if Arius is right. We lose the heart of God if Jesus is the first thing God created. Thankfully, Jesus *is* the image of the invisible God. He is Heaven's eternal heart walking around on two legs in time and space. He is a God that you can truly and wonderfully enjoy. Go enjoy Him today.

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Sermon Study Questions

1. READ Colossians 1:15. Read and discuss The Nicene Creed.

We believe in one God, Father, all-sovereign, maker of all things seen and unseen; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father as only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same essence, one in, with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, the things in Heaven and the things on earth, who because of men and our salvation came down and was incarnated, made man, suffered, and arose the third day, ascended into Heaven, comes to judge the living and the dead; and in one Holy Spirit. And to those who say "there was once when he was not" or "he was not before he was begotten" or "he came into existence from nothing" or who affirm that the Son of God is of another nature or substance, or a creature, or mutable or subject to change, such ones the catholic (universal) and apostolic church pronounces accursed and separated from the church.

What does it tell us about God the Father? What does it tell us about Jesus? What does it tell us about the Holy Spirit?

2. Discuss the 2 words at the center of the theological discussion in the 4th century:

homoousios = same nature

homoiousios = similar nature

What do we lose if Jesus merely has a *similar* nature as God the Father?

3. Discuss what A.W. Tozer said:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us... For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he deep in his heart conceives God to be like... Before the Christian Church goes into eclipse anywhere there must first be a corrupting of her simple basic theology. She simply gets a wrong answer to the question, 'What is God like?' and goes on from there.

Discuss how C.S. Lewis challenged Tozer's thought:

I read in a periodical the other day that the fundamental thing about us is how we think of God. By God Himself, it is not! How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important. Indeed, how we think of Him is of no importance except in so far as it is related to how He thinks of us.

4. Discuss what Pastor Benji said in the sermon:

Understand this: The real Jesus is not a pansy. The real Jesus is not a pushover. The real Jesus does not have nice, feathered hair and soft hands that smell like strawberry lotion. The real Jesus is the most powerful King that has ever been.

5. READ Jude 1:3-4. Discuss why Athanasius (and we must) defend the faith. Where are people deviating from the truth of God's word today?

6. Discuss this thought from Dane Ortlund:

Jesus is the embodiment of who God is. He is the tangible epitomization of God. Jesus Christ is the visible manifestation of the invisible God (2 Cor. 4:4, 6). In him we see heaven's eternal heart walking around on two legs in time and space. When we see the heart of Christ, then, throughout the four Gospels, we are seeing the very compassion and tenderness of who God himself most deeply is.

As you consider the Father's heart for you, remember that he is the Father of mercies. He is not cautious in his tenderness toward you. He multiplies mercies matched to your every need, and there is nothing he would rather do. "Remember," said the Puritan John Flavel, "that this God in whose hand are all creatures, is your Father, and is much more tender of you than you are, or can be, of yourself?"

Your gentlest treatment of yourself is less gentle than the way your heavenly Father handles you. His tenderness toward you outstrips what you are even capable of toward yourself.

The heart of Christ is gentle and lowly. And that is the perfect picture of who the Father is. "The Father himself loves you" (John 16:27). (Gentle and Lowly, p. 133)