

All Things? All Things!

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Col 1:15-20

When I was very young —that is, a long time ago!— I was not a very good student. In third grade, every Monday we would be tested on what we were supposed to have learned the previous week, usually by means of a series of “True” and “False” questions. I hated those tests, whose only purpose seemed to be to spoil the weekend. But then I discovered one way to make them easier: there were some words that were a dead giveaway that a statement was false. These were absolute words such as “always,” “never,” “nobody,” “everybody,” “all,” “every,” “no one,” “everywhere,” and so on. That simplified matters, for many of the statements in my tests included those words, and therefore I could tell they were false without even stopping to see what they were about.

Eventually, I told my father about what I thought was a great discovery, and he told me that “Every rule has its exception,” and that part of wisdom was to discover and recognize such exceptions. If I really wanted to learn, and to learn how to think, rather than just wanting to pass my tests, when confronted by one of those test questions that said “always,” it was not

enough to know *that* they were false. It was even more important to know *why* they were false.

This is what is meant by the principle that “every rule has its exception.”

I went away and wrote what my father had said: “Every rule has its exception.” I was so proud!

That was wisdom! But then, reading what I had written, I saw that ugly word sticking out again:

“Every.” If I was given a test with the sentence, “Every rule has its exception,” would I mark it

“True,” or “False”? Did this rule itself have an exception? If it did, then the answer should be

“False,” for here was a rule without exception. If it did not, then the answer would still be

“False,” for here was a rule without exception. I went back to my father with the perplexing

question. He smiled, tousled my hair, and said: “My son, when you find the answer to that you

will be truly wise.”

All of this comes back to mind as I read Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians, for there these

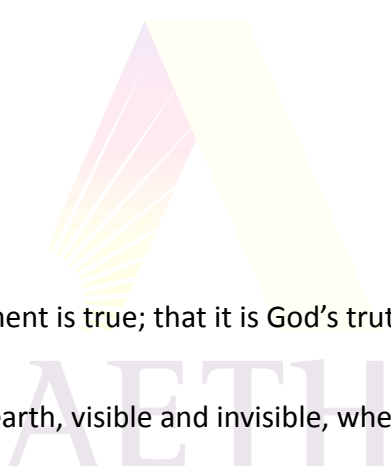
apparently dreadful and perplexing words appear repeatedly. Listen again to the passage that

was read:

He [Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of **all creation**; for in

him **all things** were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—**all things** were created through him and for him. He is before **all things**, and in him **all things** hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that **in everything** he might be pre-eminent. For in him **all the fulness** of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. [RSV]

Had I been given this passage as part of a test when I was in the third grade, I would have marked it “False” without even giving it a second reading. “All creation”? “All things”? “All the fulness”? Somewhere there must be an exception. Somewhere there must be something that proves this statement wrong.



And yet we know that this statement is true; that it is God’s truth; that indeed “in him **all things** were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities”; that God was pleased “ through him to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether on earth or in heaven.”

So, as I read this passage I wonder, is this the wisdom that my father spoke of so many years ago as he tousled my hair? Paul seems to be telling us that here is the exception to the rule, that here is a rule with no exception. He seems to be telling us that here is indeed the true

wisdom, the all-encompassing statement that we should mark “TRUE” in big capital letters, the Truth behind and under and above every other truth.

Somehow, even though we know it is true, we have difficulty really believing it. It is much easier to classify things, to declare some good and some evil, to attribute some to God and some to the Evil One. Once we have made that distinction, obedience becomes a simple matter of avoiding whatever we have decided is not part of God’s good creation. All we have to do is stay away from those evil things and use only the good ones.

We are not the only ones to feel this way. Throughout Christian history, there have been believers who thought that the best way to be holy is to run away from evil things, and from the enjoyment of God’s world. Some would flee to the desert to live in isolation, away from the evils of society. Others would declare that certain things would contaminate them, and thus abstain from certain foods or certain drinks. Some felt that the opposite sex was evil, and thus believed that celibacy was the true way of faith.

This is not surprising, for there is in us a natural tendency to divide things between those that are good and pure, and those that are evil or unclean, and thus to come to the conclusion that what we need to do to be good and clean is simply never to touch such things.

Even Peter himself did not quite overcome this tendency, and needed a vision, in which he heard the words: "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." And even then, when as a result of that vision Peter visited Cornelius, he was still not too happy about it. One of the first things he tells Cornelius and his company is: "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28). In other words, if it were up to me, that is precisely what I would like to call you. But God will not allow me to do it.

Paul sees this problem quite clearly, and this is why, in this very epistle in which he speaks of Christ as the one "in whom all things were created," he goes on to say: " why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" . . . according to human precepts and doctrines?" (Colossians 2:20-21).

This is puzzling, for I was brought up thinking that a mark of not belonging to the world was

precisely not handling, not tasting, not touching certain things that were evil. And here Paul says exactly the opposite, that submitting to such regulations is a mark of belonging to the world.

As we read the entire epistle, the reason becomes clear. The reason why Paul says that to submit to such regulations is to belong to the world is that belonging to Christ, and not to this world, is grounded on the fundamental declaration that “**all things** were created through him and for him,” and that the goal of God’s action is “to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross.”



If we find this surprising, we are not alone. Saint Augustine was puzzled by this. In fact, this puzzlement was one of the main obstacles that he had to overcome in his path to Christian faith. If God is the creator of all things, and if I am the creation of this good God, why is it that I find this evil in me? It would have been easy to say that some things are good, and some other things are evil; that some things are part of God’s creation, and some things are not. And for a while that was precisely what Augustine thought. But that was unsatisfactory, and for a while

Augustine toyed with the idea that good and evil are just an illusion, that there is no way to distinguish between them. But finally, led by this very claim that “in him **all things** are created,” he came to the conclusion that all things are good. But they are good in different ways.

First of all, there is the highest good, the good that cannot be turned to evil. This highest good is God, the creator of every other good. This good cannot be used; it can only be loved, obeyed, followed, enjoyed.

Secondly, there are lesser goods. The body, food, and everything else around us are lesser goods. Even the intellect is a lesser good. These are what in Colossians Paul himself calls “things which all perish.” While all these are good, they are not the highest good, and therefore can be turned to evil. Their purpose is not to be obeyed, contemplated, enjoyed as if they were the final good. Their purpose is to be used for the glory and enjoyment of the highest good—of God.

These lesser goods can be turned to evil by a third type of good, one which is neither the

highest good nor one of the lesser goods, but an “intermediate” sort of good. This is the will. In itself, the will is good. It is part of God’s creation. One may well say that the greatest sign of a parent’s love is not in caring for a child, or in providing for it, but rather in deciding to produce and to love a child that at some point will prove disobedient and cause anxiety and heartache. Indeed, any of us would consider it a great tragedy to have a child incapable of making its own decisions, even though such decisions may not be wise or correct. Likewise, God’s love for us is manifested in creating us with a freedom that is certainly good, but that being an intermediate good may use itself and the rest of creation for good or for evil.

So, as Paul says, in Christ and for Christ **all things** have been created. They have been created with a purpose. And that purpose is the final day when, again quoting Paul, **all things** will be reconciled to Christ, and he will be, as he says later in the same epistle, “**all in all.**”

So here we stand. Above us is the highest good, the all-loving God, the only eternal One. Below and around us, lacking this intermediate good that is the freedom of the will, stand all the other goods with which God has filled creation. They are provided for our use; for our use as we move

toward the love, contemplation, and enjoyment of the One highest good.

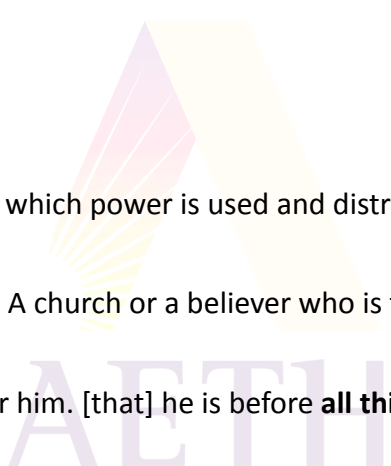
But that is not how we always use them. Instead of using them to lead all to the highest good, we set our greatest love on them. We go after them and enjoy them as if they were the highest good. As Paul would say elsewhere, we worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator. Or, as Augustine would say, we misuse that which we were intended to use, and in so doing our use becomes abuse.

I know that all of this sounds terribly abstract. But it has some very concrete applications. It means that God has given us the earth to use its goods and its wealth as we move toward the final good; but we turn those goods of the earth into the final objects of our love, and thereby abuse them.

Some wish to turn the abuse of the earth into a matter of simple convenience; but it is a theological issue. A church or a believer who is truly convinced that “**all things** were created through him and for him. [that] he is before **all things**, and in him **all things** hold together”

know that to abuse the earth is to fall into idolatry.

Some wish to turn the matter in which wealth is used and distributed into a purely economic issue; but it is a theological issue. A church or a believer who is truly convinced that “**all things** were created through him and for him, [that] he is before **all things**, and in him **all things** hold together” know that they cannot abuse wealth without falling into idolatry.



Some wish to turn the manner in which power is used and distributed into a purely political issue; but it is a theological issue. A church or a believer who is truly convinced that “**all things** were created through him and for him. [that] he is before **all things**, and in him **all things** hold together” knows that it cannot abuse power without falling into idolatry.

Granted, these are all difficult issues. They are debatable issues. That is part of the reason why we are tempted to take refuge in the “do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.” It is easier and safer to say that certain issues are spiritual issues, and to abandon the rest to their own fate. But that is not the message that the church is called to proclaim and to live. The message

we are called to proclaim and to live is precisely that “**all things** were created through him and for him. He is before **all things**, and in him **all things** hold together.”

I am convinced this is the wisdom to which my father was pointing when he said: “My son, when you find the answer to that you will be truly wise.” Every rule has its exception. Seventy years ago, I discovered the rule that absolute statements are usually false. Now, as I read that “**all things** were created through him and for him. He is before **all things**, and in him **all things** hold together,” I am pleased to announce to you that this is the great exception. Next to that statement, I am ready to write “capital T, capital R, capital U, capital E; **TRUE!**”



AETH

And may the God creator and source of **all things**, the Son who is the purpose and end of **all creation**, and the Spirit who leads us to **all truth**, bless and keep us till the end of **all time**.

So be it. Amen.