

“Celebrating the Gospel”

Colossians 1:1-8

April 3, 2022

This morning I have the privilege of introducing a new series in the book of Colossians. Next week we will have a unique service for Palm Sunday, focusing on prayer and worship as we celebrate the kingly reign of Christ. Then after Easter we will resume our study in Colossians with the help of several of our men while I am on medical leave and gradually transitioning back into my role here.

Exhort: While there will be a different rhythm this spring and summer with my absences, I urge you to make every effort to gather with God’s people and joyfully come under the word. Determine in advance to devote yourself to worship, the word, and the fellowship of believers. Create opportunities to gather in addition to Sunday worship:

- Prayer and worship
- Testimonies
- Fires
- games

The title of our series in Colossians is...

Mature in Christ:

Finding our Steadfastness in the Supremacy and Sufficiency of Christ

Colossians is one of the most Christ-centered books in the Bible. It celebrates Jesus as the preeminent Lord, supreme over all creation including the visible and invisible realms. And because of who He is, His death and resurrection are the singular and sufficient means of salvation. Paul’s desire for the Colossian believers (and us!) is to be steadfast and mature in Christ, not pulled away by the winds of culture that would persuade us to think that we need to add human or other-spiritual elements to the gospel.

Interestingly, Paul is writing to a church he did not plant and had probably never visited. The church of Colossae was planted by a man from Colossae named Epaphras who was likely converted by Paul in Ephesus and then

returned to his hometown to share the gospel which blossomed into a new church.

Paul wrote this letter not only to strengthen the church to hold steadfastly to the gospel, but also to address some winds of false doctrine that were influencing the church. Its hard to define exactly what the heresy was because Paul never states it directly, but he addresses both Jewish legalism and Jewish mysticism along with pagan philosophy. Perhaps the best term to describe what is happening in Colossae is *syncretism*. That is, a blending of various religious worldviews and practices. The first-century Greco-Roman world was known for this. Eastern cults would merge with those from the west forming new conglomerations of beliefs and practices.¹

So you can imagine that when some people heard the gospel, they were tempted to just add Jesus to their already growing number of deities. And likewise, to bring other religious beliefs into the church with them. But Paul writes to clarify the supremacy of Jesus as Lord of all and to dissuade them from the temptation to add other religious practices to the gospel that did not originate with Jesus and His apostles.

So the book of Colossians is very relevant to our modern-day pluralistic society that suggests there are multiple conceptions of truth or ways to God. In the face of a society that boasts of tolerance, the gospel declares that truth is in Jesus exclusively. This gospel may not be overly popular in our secular society, but what if Jesus is who Colossians claims He is?

- What if He truly is the Son of God? (1:13)
- What if He is the creator of all things? (1:16)
- What if He is the purpose for which all things exist (1:16)
- What if He is the great sustainer who holds all things together (1:17)
- What if He will one day resume the central and supreme place of all creation? (1:18)
- What if He alone can reconcile us to God by the blood of His cross? (1:20)

¹ David Pao. *Exegetical Commentary on the NT: Colossians and Philemon*, pg. 30.

Everything that matters in your life both now and eternally hangs on the supremacy of Jesus Christ and the sufficiency of His death and triumphant resurrection. If that's true, then we must be dressed with courage and filled with God's grace to take the singular, all-sufficient message of the gospel to our world. So Colossians is about the supremacy of Christ and the sufficiency of His gospel

Before we jump into Paul's opening words of thanksgiving in vss. 3-8, let me take a moment to comment on a couple highlights in his greeting in vss. 1-2.

First, notice that Paul identifies himself in vs. 1 as "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God." The term apostle in its "full 'official' sense" refers to one who has been "called by Christ Himself" to represent and proclaim Christ exclusively.² In other words, Paul is not writing to represent himself or anyone else, but Jesus alone. He is under the direct commission of Jesus. So the letter to the Colossians, like other NT epistles, carries the weight of Jesus' authority. So notice here, Paul's identity as an apostle is that of a servant of Jesus Christ.

Then in vs. 2 he identifies the believers to whom he is writing as "saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae." The term saints refers not so much to their practical perfection of character as to the fact that they have been made holy positionally, set apart unto God having been clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. When Paul proceeds to call them "faithful brethren," he's commending them for their true allegiance to Christ. So they are saints positionally and faithful practically. Furthermore, notice that Paul refers to them as "in Christ, at Colossae." Colossae is their earthly location, but "in Christ" is their primary identity. They are one with Jesus.

To be *in Christ* means that you are exclusively and inseparably joined to Him by faith as your Husband-King. To be in Christ means that He determines your values and behavior as your Lord. To be *in Christ* means that Jesus "encompasses [your] entire life." To be in Christ means that you have become vitally connected to other believers as brothers and sisters in Christ.³

Now, what I want you to see in both Paul's identity as an apostle and the believers' identity as saints, is this: ***Our core identity is determined by our relationship to God.*** In a world consumed with identities of every kind, there are essentially only two primary identities that ultimately matter. Either you are a child of God, redeemed and reconciled to Him through the blood of Christ, an heir of His eternal favor; or you are estranged from God living your life solely for the purpose of self-interest. All other identities are secondary and insignificant in comparison. Are you in Christ or apart from Christ?

Paul is writing to those who have a new identity in Christ. They happen to live in Colossae, but their true purpose and significance is to be the people of God and to advance the kingdom of Christ. Paul's motivation in writing to them—his desire and prayer—the end to which He is laboring in the Spirit, is that the Colossians may walk in the fullness of God's grace and peace: "grace to you and peace from God our Father" (2).

Grace is the undeserved, powerful working of God on our behalf to accomplish His good and holy purposes in and through us for His glory and our joy. Peace is the result of standing in right relationship with God, unclouded by sin. Last week I suggested to you that true peace is a disposition of confidence in the reality that your soul is resting in God's favor, knowing that in Christ God is with you and God is for you.

So in as much as this is Paul's aim for his readers to walk without hindrance in God's grace and peace, so I urge you to give yourself to the book of Colossians over the next few months—read it, meditate on it, memorize it, and see in it the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus as your only source of steadfast hope.

As we turn now to Paul's thanksgiving in vss. 3-8, we are going to see 7 aspects of the gospel that Paul rejoices in:

1. **The gospel is received by faith** (Col 1:3-4)

² Douglas Moo. *The Letters to the Colossians* (Pillar Series), pg. 75.

³ David Garland, *NIV Application Commentary: Colossians*, pg. 42-43.

Notice first in vs. 3 the posture of thanksgiving and the continual aspect of prayer that Paul models for us. Even though Paul is an apostle and has been given revelation from Jesus through the Spirit, Paul's unceasing prayer demonstrates a humble dependence on God as well as a strong confidence of faith as He prays for God's will and purposes to be fulfilled in the Colossians. Paul is modeling for us the kind of abiding relationship that should be characteristic of our lives as believers. Prayer is to be our first response and relentless practice.

And notice that his prayer is flavored with thanksgiving. There is never a time when we cannot pray with thanksgiving. Because of the promises of God, the nearness of His presence, and our ultimate eternal hope. So I challenge you to begin every prayer this week with the words, "Father, thank you..." Why? To bring God's character, God's promises, and the nearness of His presence into view so that we bring our needs to Him in faith.

Paul is specifically thankful that the Colossians have put their faith in Jesus Christ. That is, they have owned the gospel for themselves. We know from Ephesians that in one sense faith itself is a gift from God (Eph 2:8), that's why Paul here turns his thanksgiving to God for their faith rather than praising the Colossians. Yet we must also realize that faith is a very personal and intentional response to the gospel. Faith is not merely following tradition or casual mental ascent. Faith is believing in the atoning work of Christ to the point of trusting in Jesus Himself as the exclusive, supreme Lord. Faith is trusting to the point of obedience. Faith in the NT is not just adding Jesus to our belief system, but reorienting our whole world around Him as Lord. So faith on the one hand is taking hold of Jesus with wholehearted trust, and on the other forsaking all that opposes His loving reign over us.

What's so beautiful about faith is that it is not a matter of mere human striving. It's not work, but rather trusting in and receiving the benefits of the work Christ has already done on our behalf through His death and resurrection to reconcile us to God.

Here's the question: is faith in Jesus a living, personal reality in your life? Have you embraced the gospel with surrendered trust in Jesus that has

made a division in your life between love for the world and love for God? Is faith no longer a fuzzy reality in your life? Is your life marked by obedience to Jesus out of love for Him and the grace He has purchased for you?

2. **The gospel produces love for fellow believers (4, 8)**

[vs. 4...vs. 8] The outworking of faith in Jesus is genuine love for other believers because through our union with Christ, we become God's children, and therefore a part of the family of God, brothers and sisters characterized by Christlike love. Brotherly love in the church is a genuine, selfless care for each other as the result of a supernatural bond in the Spirit.

Of course there are times, like any family, when the family of God will struggle to get along and love each other selflessly. This is why Paul goes on in chapter 3 to instruct the Colossians to "*put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you...*" The mark of a true believer is not only faith in Jesus that forsakes sin, but also true love for other believers.

3. **The gospel provides the assurance of hope (Col 1:5)**

[vs. 4-5] It's typical to think of faith producing hope (Heb 11:1). For example, if you believe, you have hope. Or if your faith is faltering, you lack the present experience of hope. Functionally that is true to a degree. But here Paul says that hope produces faith. That is, the reason we exercise faith (the reason we believe) is because the gospel provides a substantive hope for us to trust in. The hope of the gospel is the foundation for faith and love. So hope is not the result of what you do or how well you believe, but the result of what Christ has done and offers to all who will believe.

This hope, Paul says, is laid up—kept, reserved, protected—for you in heaven. Our hope is secure because God is the one doing the keeping! Just like a parent at their child's birthday party may do the keeping of a child's money so that it doesn't get lost in the chaos of the birthday party.

As 1Peter 1 says, we have a “Living Hope,” an “inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away reserved in heaven [for us]—we who are protected *by the power of God* through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” That is, our future hope of final salvation is protected by God who secures and sustains our faith in the hope of Christ. In one sense, Peter and Paul are both reminding us that the climax of our hope is eternal life in heaven.

Yet more importantly, Jesus Himself is the essence of our hope. Col 3:3-4 says that our life is now hidden with Christ in God and that when Christ, who is our life, is revealed, we too will be revealed with Him in glory. And that hope is not just a future expectation, but also a present reality because Col 1:27 says that Christ in you is the hope of glory.

How do we access this hope? According to the end of vs. 5, through “the word of truth, the gospel.” Christ who *is* hope, becomes ours through the true word of the gospel as we become one with Him by believing in the sufficiency of His atoning death and victorious resurrection.

4. The gospel is universal in scope (vs. 6)

[vs. 6] Whereas Judaism was for the Jews, the gospel crosses every geographical, political, and social boundary—the call for people of all ethnicities to be reconciled to the God of all the earth through the blood of Christ. The gospel is not just some local cult like others in Colossae that could be tampered with and adapted to one’s personal liking.⁴ The gospel is universal in scope and fully sufficient in and of itself because it is the only means by which all people can be reconciled to the Creator.

Imagine what a delight it must have been for Paul to see his converts not only taking the gospel to other cities but planting churches and seeing those churches bear fruit. Church, the gospel that we have been entrusted with is to be proclaimed and shared without discrimination. Not just with those we think would make “great Christians.” We know that the gospel is for all nations, but do

we forget it is for all people in our own sphere of influence—even those who seem the least likely to follow Christ.

5. The gospel is powerful to effect change (vs. 6)

Notice how in vs. 6 the gospel is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, in all the world. The gospel is not only spreading from person to person, city to city, and nation to nation, but it is also transforming those individual people to live genuine lives of love and obedience to Christ.

6. The gospel bestows divine grace and reveals divine truth (vs. 6)

[vs. 6] The transforming work of the gospel effects change in our lives as the grace of God transforms our desires and the truth of God renews our minds. Remember, John 1:14 tells us that Jesus was “full of grace and truth.” So it is the work of God’s grace and truth in us that reshapes us into the image of Christ through the gospel.

7. The gospel spreads through the witness of faithful believers (vs. 7)

[vs. 7] How did this grace-giving, truth-revealing, life-transforming, soul-saving gospel come to them? By the gracious hand of God, yes, but it was delivered through one ordinary man whose own soul had been captured by the grace of God. They simply heard the gospel from Epaphras.

This ordinary man was being used as a tool in God’s hand. He likely planted the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis as well as Colossae. No wonder Paul calls him a faithful servant of Christ.

In these first 8 verses, Paul has opened his letter with a celebration of the gospel, as it has come to the Colossians. This morning as we come to the Lord’s table, we celebrate the gospel as it has come to us.

What we celebrate in the Lord’s supper is that the sinless, supreme Son of God willingly laid down His life as the only and all-sufficient means by which

⁴ John MacArthur, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Colossians*, pg. 21.

we could be set free from the condemnation of our sin. This grace which we personally embrace by faith in Jesus as Lord, powerfully and progressively works to affect change in our lives. How? As we respond to the Spirit's leading to turn from our sinful independence in humble submission to Jesus. This is why we come to the Lord's table: to confess and turn from our sin, to confess Jesus as Lord and turn to love and obey Him by His grace. Here at Trinity, we practice open communion, meaning that we welcome all believers to join us at the Lord's table who are not clinging to any known sin.

As we prepare to partake of the elements together, I encourage you to carefully examine your soul in the following ways:

- Is faith in Jesus a personal active reality in your life?
- Has any sin or selfishness interrupted your love for another believer or anyone else?
- Is there any particular way in which you are resisting the Spirit's work of change in your life?

I encourage you to invite the Holy Spirit to work in your heart by His grace to fully renew your fellowship with Jesus and restore your joy in His mercy.

Communion

Bread: **[Col 1:19-22]**

Cup: **[Col 2:13-15]** That's what the blood of Christ can do.

Forgive our sin and free us from Satan.