

“Thanksgiving and the Gospel”

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

²To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints,

⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel,

⁶which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth,

⁷just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf ⁸and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

What is your response when you see someone else succeed? Do you get jealous? Do you feel frustrated that it was not you? Or are you happy for the other person? Do you get excited at the idea of success even if it wasn't you this time? If we are honest with ourselves, we are usually a little jealous when someone else succeeds. It is easy to see this kind of thing in children. A child almost always gets jealous if someone near them gets a toy, and they don't get one as well. In our sinful hearts, we find it difficult to be happy for other people. On the other hand there is definitely a situation where we are happy to see other people succeed. It is when someone we are close to or have trained goes on to succeed. When there is no competition, only the natural development process, we can be happy to see other people develop. In our passage of Scripture, we read about Paul being thankful to God for the Colossian church. Paul is usually thankful to God for the ways that the gospel works in a place or community of people. However, in this situation, Paul had not been to Colossae to help plant this church. Other people had taken the gospel to them. The church organized based on the Apostles' teaching, but they did not learn it directly from Peter or Paul. Humanly speaking, Paul could have been jealous that he wasn't the one who established the church, but instead he was thankful to the Lord for establishing the church. Specifically, Paul praised God because the Colossian Church believed the gospel and lived it out.

Believing the gospel is a gracious work of God. The gospel itself sounds foolish to most people. God sends his Son to die for rebellious sinners, and salvation is freely given to anyone who calls out to God asking for it in the name of his Son. It seems too easy, but in fact it is deadly serious and calls for all of our lives to be transformed by the Holy Spirit. Looking at the outer appearances of a person, it is easy to say that you are a Christian, but the work of God in the heart is harder to see. It shows up as a change in motivations and ultimately in a new way of life. However, even though salvation is totally complete in our Lord Jesus, we have to grow up as Christians. That means that we have to learn that new way of life. In Colossians 1:1-8, Paul praised God that the Colossian church believed the gospel and showed the fruit of the gospel in their faith, hope, and love. I want to challenge us to be thankful for the work of God in other churches as well as for us to grow in our faith, hope, and love. In other words, I want to challenge us to believe the gospel and live it out.

1. “Background and giving thanks” vv. 1-3

Now as we turn our attention to the text, we need to set up a little bit of context. Colossae was a small

town in the southwest of ancient Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. At one point it had been a center of textiles trade, but a long time before the letter to the Colossians was written the trade routes had shifted. Therefore the most important city in that area was Ephesus. According to Colossians 2:1, Paul had not visited the church. The letter to the Colossians then is similar to the letter to the Romans. Paul is writing to encourage and teach a group of Christians that were largely unknown to him. Paul had received news of the church from Epaphras and others, but he was writing to them on the occasion of some false teaching that was affecting the church. But before he starts talking to them about some of the challenges they are facing, Paul gives thanks to God for them. He says that,

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints...

which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.” Paul’s reason for thanks is that the Colossians believed the gospel and that they have gone on to display many of the fruits of the gospel. They were modeling faith, hope, and love.

2. “Faith” v. 4

Faith is one of the essential Christian virtues. Faith is sometimes difficult to define, but it basically means accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and for eternity. Or to put it another way, faith is putting all our lives into the hands of Jesus. We face a tension when we talk about faith between knowledge, belief, and faith. Usually we use these words interchangeably. The only slight difference in meaning comes when we stress the difference between knowing something (i.e. the names of the people in your workplace), believing that that information is true, and trusting that information enough to call out to your coworker when you see him or her outside of work. The difference comes down to whether or not the stuff we think might be true is worth building our lives around. The Colossians were evidently building their lives around Jesus. The testimony of their faith in the Lord Jesus was so evident that people were talking about it. We know from our passage that Epaphras told Paul about the Colossians. There were other people from Colossae telling Paul about them. Colossians were generous, dedicated, and really had put their faith in Jesus. As we have time to ponder what it means to have faith in the Lord Jesus, we should remind ourselves of the person and work of Christ Jesus. Faith is a gift from God. We don’t generate it ourselves nor do we keep ourselves faithful. The Holy Spirit causes faith to grow in our lives and holds us up when we are weak, but we should be stirring up our faith. Remind yourself often of the great love of God. How he sent his Son to be our savior. How Jesus gave us his teachings through the Apostles. How the gospel spread throughout the entire world and ended up calling you to believe in Jesus. Note this important element in the way I am describing faith here. It is not just belief. It is belief in Jesus. Faith has to have an object. We don’t put our faith in faith. We have to remind ourselves of who Jesus is so we can continue with the same passion, excitement, and humility we had when we first accepted the gospel.

3. “Hope” v. 5

Another of the essential Christian virtues is hope. Hope is the idea of having our eyes on something that we do not yet possess but that is assuredly coming in the future. There is a kind of hope that is not Christian hope. A blind desire for something, or anticipation of something that was not promised to you. Christian hope is different. Christian hope looks at the promises of God for the future and not only believes them, but anticipates them. Hope waits for them. Hope lives like the promises are already fulfilled. So, I think that true faith and hope have to go hand in hand because you cannot really put your faith in the gospel without looking forward to the coming Kingdom of God without hope welling up at the same time. We have an eternal future. We have an

eternal home. We have an eternal King that will bring his reign to the world. We look forward to no more pain, strife, and injustice. We look forward to eternal peace. The testimony about the Colossians was that they were putting their attention on the “hope laid up for them in heaven.” They loved the saints and put their faith in Jesus because they had this hope. As they dealt with all of the stuff of this life they could endure it and actually bring some of their hope to fruition because of the hope they had in the future. I do not know how this strikes you, but I am encouraged and challenged by this. Their hope for the future did not just help them endure this life, but it actually motivated their faith and love. They trusted the gospel more and loved more completely because they had their attention set on heaven. I think a lot about the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. The thing that has grabbed me for a long time is that when we take part in the Supper we are setting our attention on the future. The heavenly meal we will eat with Jesus in the Kingdom and we are declaring our hope that Jesus is coming back to bring justice to this world. If we live with the hope of the return of Jesus we will be seeking to bring about Jesus’ rule on earth in our lives, in the church, and in the world.

4. “Love” v. 4, 8

Now we turn our attention to love. Love is the highest of the Christian virtues. Jesus said that his followers would be known by their love for one another and the NT is full of commands, explanations, and exhortations for Christians to love one another, to grow in love, and warnings that a lack of love is a serious thing. Christian love is horizontal and vertical. We have to love God with all of our being, and we are supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves. This love has more to do with dedication and service rather than feelings, but once we start serving one another the feelings of deep connection usually come too. We see love coming up as self-sacrifice, forgiveness, and seeing the best in people even when they are mistreating us (this is not a call to endure abuse). Love is not going to brag on itself. Love will always seek the good of others. Practically, knowing how to love someone is often a matter of discretion though so I cannot give you a blueprint on how to do it. In other words, for some people giving them a helping hand when they are down might be the loving thing to do and for other people or in different circumstances it might be more loving to let the person figure out what is best on their own. The testimony about the Colossians is that they love all the saints and that Epaphras tells Paul about the love that they have “love in the Spirit.” I think we can assume that the Colossians were not engaging in the same divisions between Jews and Gentiles. We can also assume that the Colossians were contributing to the support of the saints in other places. We can assume these things because they seem to be the biggest recurring themes around love in the letters of Paul. Their love is situated in the same place their faith and hope are found--in Jesus. They love the saints because they have heard the gospel. They love the saints because they have their eyes on the future fulfillment of all the promises that Jesus made to the church. Love is so important to the Christian life because love is what took Jesus to the cross. Love is the reason why Jesus came to the world in the first place. Love should be the thing that we prize the highest among all other virtues. Our love needs to be tested, but it also needs to be taught. We should be involved in other people’s lives by serving them without expecting anything in return. We need to pray and study God’s Word so we can know what love is and how to love.

Conclusion and Application

We can have our attention diverted from the real theme of Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving by looking too closely at the individual reasons behind Paul’s thanksgiving. The overall effect of Paul’s prayer was praise to God who brought these things to pass. Seeing the gospel take root and bring its fruit to a church and to the world is one of the sweetest testimonies of the NT. Moreover, it is one of the sweetest things we get to see as Christians. In Japan, we often get the impression the church isn’t growing or that we are the only ones holding on to Christ. While it is true that there aren’t many people who are claiming faith in Jesus, it is not true that we are alone and that the church will only decline. Look at the Colossian church. They had never received a visit from Paul, but they were

flourishing because they believed the gospel and embodied its values. The gospel brought salvation to the members of the church and it was bringing faith, hope, and love to the people and places around them. We can strive for these same things. We should take Paul's attitude about the Colossian church to heart by praying for the churches around us and partnering with them in any way that we can. There is no competition between one church and another...or at least there should not be. We are all seeking to proclaim to the world that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. If we are all holding on to the faith once for all time delivered to the saints, we are on the same team. Even if we cannot do much in partnership, we should be regularly praying for all the churches around us. Asking God to bless, grow, and increase the faith, hope, and love of the sister churches in Kansai, Japan, and the world.

Lastly, we should be striving to manifest the fruit of the gospel in our own lives. I have already mentioned the need to remind ourselves of the reasons for faith, hope, and love, but it cannot be stressed enough how important it is for us to look up to God instead of dwelling on our circumstances. The reality is that we have so many things to be joyful about and we have innumerable reasons to be hopeful about the future. Jesus said that everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame. We may face the hatred of people around us, but that he would never leave us or forsake us. 1 John 1:8-10 says that if we confess our sins he will forgive our sins. Jesus left us and sent us the Holy Spirit to accompany us until he returns. When he returns he will take us to a place where we will be fully and finally adopted as children of God. Don't walk through life with no hope. Don't walk through life with a cold heart. Look up to Jesus. See the gospel and believe it. Live out the faith, hope, and love you find in Jesus.