

Series Colossians

This Message Be Filled, Be Worthy

Scripture Colossians 1:1-12

Today we begin a study of the letter written by Paul to the church fellowship in the city of Colossae. Colosse was a small town located in the Roman province of Asia, in what is present day Turkey. Colosse was just ten miles from Laodicea and thirteen miles from Hierapolis, both of which were larger and more important in the 1st Century. Ephesus was about 100 miles west. There was a community of believers in each of these cities. At one time, in the 4th and 5th centuries B. C., Colosse was an important city, but in Paul's day it was just a country market town.

The letter to the Colossian believers was written while Paul was in prison in the city of Rome. Colossians was probably the first of four letters written about A. D. 62. The others are Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. These New Testament books are referred to as the Prison Epistles.

This letter has an important place in the New Testament because of its unique description of Jesus Christ. Paul wanted his readers to understand that Jesus was completely adequate for all their spiritual needs. Paul exalts Christ as the very image of God (1:15), as the Creator (1:16), as the sustainer of all things (1:17), as the head of the Church (1:18), as the first to be resurrected from death (1:18), as the fullness of deity in bodily form (1:19), and as the reconciler of all things (1:20-22). And that's in just the first chapter!

The letter to the Colossians is only four chapters long, but there is in it an incredible amount of important information. Today we will focus on the first 12 verses. Most of the verses in this passage are a prayer. Verses 3 through 8 are one sentence in the Greek language, and verses 9 through 12 are another sentence. Verses 4-8 give the reasons why Paul is thankful and in verses 9 through 12 Paul asks God to move the Colossians believers toward a greater level of spiritual growth.

Read Colossians 1:1-12

Following the style of first century letters, the writer identifies himself at the beginning. Paul introduced himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus.” The literal meaning of “apostle” is “one who has been sent.” Paul frequently used this term in his letters to emphasize that he had been uniquely chosen, commissioned, and empowered to represent Jesus throughout the Roman empire and to give guidance and instruction to the increasing number of communities of believers.

Timothy was with Paul at the time of writing. He is identified as a “brother.” Timothy was a protégé of Paul, a frequent traveling companion, and a leader sent to “trouble-shoot” church problems in various locations. It does not appear that Timothy contributed any of the material in this letter. Most likely he was the scribe who wrote down words that Paul dictated.

The letter was addressed to the “holy and faithful brothers in Christ.” The word “brothers” is a term of affection used of fellow believers. Paul uses the word frequently to call attention to the closeness of the members of God’s family in spite of their culture, social status, and racial background. Paul thought of the Colossian believers as if they were bound together by a common bond of love and understanding.

That common bond was because they were “in Christ.” Paul uses this phrase or one of its similar forms, such as “in the Lord,” “in him,” “in whom,” many, many times in this letter. Paul wants to emphasize the spiritual identity and position of believers in this letter. They are “in Christ” because they have been united with Christ through faith, and through the indwelling presence of Christ’s life in them.

The last part of the greeting is a statement of blessing. The Greek word for “grace” denotes the favor of God. Grace describes the willingness of God to provide blessings to undeserving humans. The word “peace” has a special meaning in the New Testament. In our thinking, “peace” usually suggests the opposite of war or the absence of conflict. The New Testament meaning, however, is richer and broader, denoting wholeness or soundness and it includes such ideas as prosperity, contentedness, and good relations with others. Paul wanted the Colossian believers to continue to experience the grace and peace of God.

The second section of letters written in the Greek/Roman world usually contained words of thanksgiving. In the secular world, writers offered thanks to their gods for blessings, friendships, protection, etc. Paul uses the traditional form, but he expresses his thanksgiving in the form of a prayer addressed to “God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The prayer continues until verse 12.

The prayer is an indication of the concerns that Paul will write about in detail in the latter parts of the letter. We will discover that the Colossian believers were under pressure to conform to some erroneous ideas and philosophies brought to them by false teachers. This is why Paul emphasizes “the word of truth” which the believers had “already heard about” and their understanding of “God’s grace in all its truth.” This is why Paul in the second part of his prayer asked God “to fill them with the knowledge of His will” so that they might “live a life worthy of the Lord.” Paul considered the theme of the sufficiency of Christ to be of such importance that he emphasized the word “fullness” over and over in the letter.

What are the implications of being “filled” with the knowledge of God’s will? What does it mean to “live a life worthy of the Lord?” These are the themes of this letter, and it is why the teachings in this letter are so valuable for us today. Our understanding of what God wants from us, our comprehension of God’s being and love and grace, this is the knowledge which should influence all parts of our life — our thoughts, affections, purposes, plans, use of time and energy, etc..

Paul was thankful because he had heard of the Colossian’s “faith in Christ Jesus” and “the love they had for all the saints.” Verse 5 informs us that this faith and love come from “the hope that is stored up in heaven.” Faith, love, and hope are the basic characteristics of God’s work in the life of a believer. They are the consequence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Paul mentions this triad of “faith,” “love,” and “hope” several times in his writings (*See Romans 5:2-5; I Corinthians 13:13; Galatians 5:5-6; I Thessalonians 1:3, 5:8*).

“Faith” is usually mentioned first because it represents the basic step in a person’s relationship with God. However, Paul is here not thinking of the initial step of salvation but the ongoing attitude which characterizes the behavior of a believer. Faith here represents the practice of the Christian life, the situation in which the Holy Spirit controls the thoughts and actions of the individual believer as well as the corporate body of believers. It is the life of faith. Paul is thankful that the believers in Colosse were demonstrating their faith in Christ Jesus through their day-by-day lives.

“Love” is the next characteristic for which Paul is thankful. He is not referring to a general concept of “love” here. He is referring to a specific display of “love” — “love for all the saints,” an unconditional concern for the well-being of others. It is love that counts no sacrifice too great for another. Paul was referring to the faith and love which was manifested among the entire community of believers at Colosse.

Paul goes on to explain that the faith and love in the community of believers was the result of their common “hope.” In the New Testament, “hope” represents the assurance and expectation of the blessings which await believers in heaven. Our experience of salvation is, at present, only partial. Yes, we have fellowship and communion with God and other believers in this life, but our present experience is but a foretaste of what is reserved for us in the hereafter. Believers have their feet on the ground, but their hearts in heaven.

According to the end of verse 5, information about “hope that is stored up for us in heaven” is part of the gospel message. How should we think about the gospel message? According to Paul, “faith” is associated with Christ, “love” is associated with Christian brotherhood, and “hope” with eternity in heaven. Later in the letter Paul will point out that an emphasis on these characteristics will lead to fullness of spiritual life and will prevent believers from becoming sidetracked on misleading subjective topics. Focus on the risen Lord Jesus, fellowship of the saints, and the anticipation of heaven is enough to provide an authentic spirituality in accordance with the gospel.

In verse 6 Paul commented on the gospel. First, he stated that the gospel bears fruit wherever it is received and understood. The Colossian believers were themselves evidence of the power of the gospel to bring about good spiritual results. Next, Paul stated that the gospel was not only “producing fruit” but that it was also “growing.” This was a reference to the spread of the gospel. The best way to understand these two terms, “producing fruit” and “growing,” is to think of a tree. A tree can both bear fruit in its season and, at the same time, grow bigger and taller. These two terms describe the inner and outer working of the gospel. It can produce good results in individual lives and do this in many places at the same time.

Paul next stated that the gospel conveys the knowledge of “God’s grace in all its truth.” The gospel provides everything that is needed for spiritual well-being and maturity. The Colossian believers had received “all the truth” of the gospel and they were manifesting faith, love, and hope. It was obvious that they did not have a superficial level of understanding.

Paul reminded his readers that they had “learned the word of truth” from a man named Epaphras. He had been an effective evangelist and teacher in Colosse. He had communicated the message of God’s grace with thoroughness. Paul was obviously enthusiastic about the ministry efforts of Epaphras. He had pointed the believers down the correct pathway and, in verses 9 through 12, Paul prayed that they would continue on — that they would build on what they already knew. The purpose of the prayer is in verses 9 and 10: “we are asking God to fill you with knowledge” so that “you may live a life worthy of the Lord.”

Full and accurate understanding — that’s what the word “knowledge” (*epignosis*) indicates. The on-going need for “knowledge” is related to the will of God, and this kind of knowledge comes “through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” Our understanding of who God is, and how He wants to influence our lives — our thoughts, affections, purposes, plans, use of time and energy — is possible when we allow God to fill us with the knowledge of His will.

The second request in Paul’s prayer is that the Colossians might “live a life worthy of the Lord.” Correct living comes out of correct knowledge. Knowledge of God’s will is not given to people just to make them smarter; it is given for practical reasons. Knowledge should lead to changed behavior. The phrase, “to live a life,” literally means “to walk,” but in the New Testament the phrase is used to describe how believers are to go through each day (*see Colossians 2:6; 3:7*). They are expected to behave in ways that are “worthy of the Lord.”

The ultimate aim of knowing the will of God and living a worthy life is that the readers “may please God in every way.” In the remaining verses of this section, Paul described four ways to live the kind of life that would be pleasing to the Lord. These four ways are expressed in the Greek language by four participles: “bearing fruit” (v10b), “growing” (v10c), “being strengthened” (v11a), and “giving thanks” (v12). These participles are all in the verb form which emphasizes habitual action. In other words, believers are to do these four things constantly, consistently.

Paul wanted his readers to bear fruit “in every good work.” Paul talked about good works a lot in his letters (*See Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 2:12-13; Titus 1:16; 2:7-8, 14; 3:8*), but he was very careful to describe works as the fruit, not the root, of a right relationship with God. Works were to be the result of a right relationship; they did not help a person to obtain righteousness.

In verse 6 Paul described how the gospel was both “bearing fruit” and “growing.” In verse 10 Paul explained that believers should do good works in their lives. In another letter he wrote that believers are “created (saved) in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for believers to do” (*Ephesians 2:10*). God has a “good-works” plan for every believer. At the same time, believers must be growing in their understanding of God. (Remember the illustration of the tree.) Spiritual growth is related to “the knowledge of God.” Just as rain and sunshine nurture plants, the knowledge of God is essential for the growth and maturing of a person’s spiritual life.

“Being strengthened with all power” is the third way to live a life pleasing to God. Believers cannot live righteous lives in their own strength. We require God’s spiritual power, power “according to God’s glorious might.” Believers need God’s power “so that they may have great endurance and patience.” Endurance is the ability to continue a calling or task as long as necessary. Patience is the attitude of self-restraint that tolerates persecution or abuse without retaliation. “Joy” is closely connected with “endurance and patience.” Believers who, in their earthly lives, experience God’s power will have joy in spite of adverse circumstances.

The fourth way to please God concerns gratitude. The term, “Giving thanks,” brings us back to the point where the prayer began, with verse 3. We are expected to give thanks to God because He “has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints.” The focus here is not on a future inheritance, but for a style of life which is possible now on earth. Believers do not have the ability to make themselves acceptable to God. They can experience the kingdom of light only because God made it possible through His grace and mercy. He is the One who “qualifies” people to be in His kingdom. The word “qualify” means to make sufficient and adequate and acceptable. The Father declares us to be acceptable when we believe the good news about Jesus Christ. If we are “in Christ,” then we have met the requirements to be in God’s family of saints and to have a “share in the inheritance of the saints.”

This phrase, a “share in the inheritance of the saints,” is explained in the next section of the letter. All of the privileges which have been given to Jesus, God’s Son, are also available to us in the kingdom of light. We have a glorious inheritance.

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