

SERMON: "Paul's Letter to Colossae"

SCRIPTURE: Colossians 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother. To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae; Grace to you and peace from God our father. In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in Heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit. For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

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Paul had been made aware of opposition, different prophets, that are misinterpreting the scriptures. So he writes to Colossae.

Paul had never actually been in Colossae, and so he must begin by making clear what right he must send a letter to the Colossians. He does that in one word, Apostle (One who is sent out). Paul's right to speak is that he has been sent out by God to be his ambassador to the gentiles. Moreover, he is an apostle by the will of God. That position is not something which has been earned or achieved; it is something which has been given to him by God. "You did not choose me", said Jesus, "But I chose you" (John 15:16). Here right at the outset of the letter, is the whole doctrine of grace. We are not what we have made ourselves, but what God has made us.

Paul links himself with Timothy, as he has linked himself to others in churches he has founded.

The fundamental necessity for Christian service and for Christian responsibility is fellowship and goodwill to others. In other words, the first requirement of Christian service is the ability to "get along with all kinds of people".

Then Paul has been told that the Colossians present the essence of Christian life, faith in Christ and love for their neighbors. Christians must have faith; they must know what they believe. But they must also have love for others; they must turn that belief into action. That faith and that love depend on the hope that is laid up in heaven. What exactly does Paul mean? Is he asking the Colossians to show faith in Christ and love for others only for the hope of some reward that is going to come to them some day? There is something much deeper here.

Think of it this way. Loyalty to Christ may involve us in all kinds of loss and pain and suffering. There may be many things to which we have to say goodbye. The way of love may seem to many to be the way of a fool. Why spend life in selfless service? Why not use it to get on – to achieve personal gain by the world's standards? Why not push those who are weaker out of the way?

The answer is – because of the hope that is set before us. Heaven. That hope is the certainty that, despite the world's ways, God's way of love has the last word.

The Christian hope is that God's way is the best way and that the only real peace, the only real joy, the only true and lasting reward are to be found in it. Loyalty to Christ may bring trouble here – but that is not the last word. The world may laugh at the folly of the way of love – but the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. The Christian hope is the confidence that it is better to stake one's life on God than to believe the world.

Verses 6-8 are a kind of summary of what the Gospel is and does. (1) The gospel is the good news of God. Its message is of a God who is a friend and lover of the souls of men and women. The gospel sets us in a right relationship with God. (2) The gospel is truth. All previous religions were guesses about God. The Christian gospel gives us not guesses but certainties about God. (3) The gospel is universal. It is for all the world. It is not confined to any one race or nation, nor to any one class or social status.

(4) The gospel is productive. It is a plain fact of history and experience that the gospel has power to change individuals and the society in which they live. (5) The gospel tells of grace. It tells not so much of his demand from us as his gift to us.

(6) The gospel is humanly transmitted. The possession of the good news of the gospel involves the obligation to share it. That which is divinely given must be humanly passed on.

Verses 9-11. It may well be said that this passage teaches us more about the essence of prayer's request than almost any other in the New Testament. Prayer makes two requests. It asks for understanding and insight into God's will and then for the power to perform that will.

Prayer begins by asking that we be filled with an ever-growing knowledge of the will of God. Its great purpose is to know the will of God. We are trying not so much to make God listen to us as to make ourselves listen to him; we are not trying to persuade God to do what we want but to find out what he wants us to do.

It so often happens that in prayer we are really saying "Your will be changed" when we ought to be saying "Your will be done". The first objective of prayer is not so much to speak to God as to listen to him.

So, when Paul prays that his friends may have wisdom and understanding, he is praying that they may understand the great truths of Christianity and may be able to apply them to task and decisions which meet them every day.

This knowledge of God's will, and this wisdom and understanding, must result in right conduct. Paul prays that his friends may conduct themselves in such a way as to please God. We pray not in order to escape life but in order to be better able to meet it.

Paul prays that his friends may be strengthened with the power of God. The great problem in life is not to know what to do, but to do it. For the most part, we are well aware in any given situation of what we ought to do; our problem is to put that knowledge into action. God not only tells us his will, but he also enables us to perform it. Through prayer, we reach the greatest gift in all the world – knowledge plus power.

Paul asks for three gifts for his friends, fortitude, patience and joy. Fortitude: It means not only the ability to bear things but the ability, in bearing them, to turn them into glory.

Patience: It is the quality of the mind and heart which enables us to cope with people in such a way that their unpleasantness and malice and cruelty will never drive us to bitterness, that their unwillingness to learn will never drive us to despair, that their folly will never drive us to irritation, and that their unloveliness will never alter our love.

Joy: It is a radiant and sunny-hearted attitude to life. The Christian joy is joy in any circumstances. It is easy to be joyful when things go well; but Christian radiance is something which all shadows of life can never quench.

So, the Christian prayer is: "Make me, O Lord, victorious over every circumstance; make me patient with every person; and give me joy which no circumstance and no one will ever take from me."

Verses 12-14: Paul turns to grateful thanksgiving for the benefits which Christians have received in Christ. God has given to the Colossians a share in the inheritance of God's dedicated people. The first privilege is that there has been given to the gentiles a share of the inheritance of the chosen people of God. The Jews had always been God's chosen people, but now the door has been opened to all people of every race.

In the ancient world, when one empire won a victory over another, it was custom to take the population of the defeated country and transfer every man, woman, and child to the conqueror's land. So, Paul says that God transferred the Christians to his own kingdom. That was not only a transference but a rescue.

PRAYER:

Eternal God, you set Jesus Christ to rule over all things, and made us servants in your kingdom. By your spirit empower us to love the unloved, and to minister to all in need. Then at the last bring us to your eternal realm where we may worship and adore you and be welcomed into your everlasting joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. AMEN.