

Gospel Gratitude

Good morning! Please open your Bibles to the book of Colossians...

I suggested last week that the book of Colossians is all about showing Jesus as supreme and sufficient. Paul is writing to the believers in the small city of Colossae who have come to trust in Christ, but who are being tempted to move on from the gospel (as if that's possible) or add to it (as if Jesus isn't enough).

This morning we'll be looking at verses 3-8 of chapter 1. It's one long sentence in Greek, but it is thick with meaning. And in these verses we will begin to see some of the themes that Paul will pick up later on in this letter. I have to admit these verses have been beating me up all week, and I hope they will do the same for you – in a good way of course.

I can tend to be somewhat of a grump at times. Maybe that's true for you as well. Or maybe you feel like you're a grump because you're surrounded by grumps. Whatever the case may be, I think this passage will help us re-align ourselves with what's really important.

So let me ask you this. On this morning, in August of 2023, getting ready for looks like a scorching hot week. What's the biggest problem you're facing?

-too much to do, too little time

-may feel like you're drowning

-may feel like everything is going pretty well (though you may be nervous that you won't be able to keep it up...)

-maybe you're facing tremendous pressures from the outside – financial pressure, difficulty at work, or strained relationships with family or friends

The story is told that over a hundred years ago, the Times newspaper asked several prominent authors the question, "What's wrong with the world?" And in reply G.K.

Chesterton wrote simply,

"Dear sirs: you ask what is wrong with the word?

I am.

Sincerely, G.K. Chesterton"

In a real sense, Chesterton is right. I am what's wrong with the world. More specifically, we could say that our sin is the problem. Our failure to obey the good and righteous commands of the Lord are what's wrong.

But we can get even more specific than that. Paul writes to the church in Rome and says this... **Romans 1:21**

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Failure to give thanks to the Creator is one of the fundamental sins in human nature. God has graciously created all things, including you and me. But we have failed to recognize God as the Creator and give Him the honor and thanks He deserves. That's what's wrong with the world.

The problem is a lack of gratitude. And we could make a case that that's one of the big problems in the world. And we could also make a case that a lack of gratitude may be one of the bigger problems you're facing in your life today.

That is not to dismiss the real struggles that you may be facing. But could it be that God desires for us to show gratitude and give thanks no matter what our circumstances are? Whether you've had a good week or a bad one? Is it possible to have that kind of gratitude? Well, our passage this morning will help us answer those questions.

Read Colossians 1:3-8

Let's pray...

Intro

When was the last time you felt truly grateful?

Maybe it was something someone else did for you. Maybe some situation in your life just resolved or worked out nicely.

I was grateful when...the pickup line at school went smoothly...or when the weather is nice...or the Boilers win...or when the kids are finally down for bed.

Thankfulness can easily become a formality, just a thoughtless part of life. And that's not necessarily bad. It's good to say thank you when someone holds the door for you or to say thanks when you are given a gift of some kind.

Maybe you're like me and you've notice that gratitude is easier when it feels like it's surprising and underserved. If I wasn't expecting something – that feels like a time to give thanks. Or if I don't feel like I deserve it, then it's easier to feel thankful.

But Paul's gratitude, at least here, is not like that. It's not just a formality. It would have been customary in letter like this for the writer to express their thanks. But what Paul says here goes deeper than what would have been normal. His gratitude here pushes beyond mere nice-eties.

Paul says that he always thanks God in his prayers for the Colossians. Every time he prays for them, he thanks God. Where do you get *that* kind of thankfulness? That kind of deeply rooted gratitude that isn't dependent on external circumstances?

A few years ago, the author Nassim Nicholas Taleb wrote a book on the topic of becoming "Anti-fragile." To be fragile is to be easily broken. To be anti-fragile is to be not vulnerable to the shifting changes in life and even using hardships and obstacles to become stronger. Like muscles that grow when they are under pressure and tension – they get stronger. Being anti-fragile means learning how to navigate life such that even the difficulties become opportunities for getting stronger.

That seems to describe what Paul has. He has an anti-fragile gratitude that seems to grow no matter what happens to him. So how do we get that? How do we build an anti-fragile kind of gratitude in our lives?

And as we'll see, Paul's gratitude is shaped by and grounded in the good news of Jesus. It's a gospel gratitude. And so it is a kind of gratitude that is unshakable. It's not dependent on what's going on around him. It's the kind of gratitude that I want.

How do we get *that* kind of gratitude in our lives?

This passage will teach us if we will let it. I see here two lessons for cultivating an anti-fragile, gospel gratitude: We see lessons both from the examples here and the content of Paul's prayer.

The Examples

The first lesson that we see in these verses is found in the examples we see here. I see two of them. The first is the example of Paul himself...

Paul – the praying teacher

If we take a step back from the text and just observe the whole thing for a moment, we will see that Paul is both praying in gratitude for the Colossians and teaching them how to pray. Verses 3-8 are Paul's prayer of thanksgiving. And then verses 9-14, which we'll look at next week are Paul's prayer for the Colossian believers. And if you look at verse 12, you'll see that Paul is praying that the Colossians would also be thankful.

So Paul is expressing his gratitude with the hope that it will be contagious for the Colossians. Gratitude is like that, you know. It can be contagious. It can go viral and spread from person to person. And that's Paul's hope here. He wants his readers – and us today – to hear of his gratitude and join Him in giving thanks.

So what can we learn from Paul's example?

First, we can observe that Paul is thankful and praying in the midst of hardship & suffering. Remember, he is writing this while imprisoned for preaching the gospel. More than that, he is wrongfully accused. He has not been trying to overthrow Rome or start a rebellion against Caesar. He was faithfully proclaiming that Jesus is Savior and Lord, and was thrown in prison as a result.

And so for Paul to begin his letter with his prayers of thanks for the Colossians – that's a remarkable thing. It's hard to be thankful when you've been wronged. But Paul is choosing to be grateful in the midst of unjust suffering.

This is a rebuke to me. If I were to put my life up next to Paul's and just compare and contrast them – I wonder I'd see. If we did that with your life and with Paul's – what would we see?

For example, at times I struggle to pray with gratitude and joy because I feel like I'm too busy. Or I feel like I'm too down or hurt to pray. Mainly, I often fail to pray because I'm too self-focused and too self-reliant. Far too often, I don't pray because I don't feel an urgency about it, or I don't feel like it would bring the kind of joy my soul desires.

But Paul has something to teach me and you if you're like me. He's not too busy to pray. He's not too hurt to pray. He's not too self-focused to pray. And so his prayers and his gratitude to God are not fragile – they don't come and go when life gets hard.

We'll look at the details more closely in a minute, notice also the kinds of things that Paul is thankful for. They are different from the kinds of things that I am most quick to be thankful for. I tend to be most thankful for things that are for me, for things that are usually temporary and physical. But Paul is giving thanks here for others, for eternal things, and for spiritual realities.

So the first application here is pretty straightforward. How are you doing at be thankful in your prayers? About giving specific expression to your gratitude towards God? About being thankful for important things?

Epaphras – the faithful evangelist “good news-er”

We not only see the example of Paul in this passage. We also hear about another man – Epaphras.

Paul is thankful that the Colossians heard the gospel from Epaphras.

Colossians 1:7-8

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

Look at how this man Epaphras is described. He is a beloved fellow servant. They know him and love him. He is a faithful minister. That is, he's consistent and reliable.

I think those qualities are becoming increasingly rare in our world today. Someone who is faithful. You can count on them. If they say they'll do something, then you can trust

that they will do it. Epaphras was that kind of man. A faithful servant. A minister of Christ. He was working for Jesus.

Our church needs more men and women who could be described like Epaphras is here, “a faithful minister of Christ.” Some of you Gen X’ers and Millennials and Gen Z’ers are needed to serve by teaching and leading and taking on responsibility for ministry.

Notice also that because Epaphras loved his friends and family in his hometown – he was faithful to speak the gospel to them. They learned the gospel from him. Today, we would call this evangelism – someone who shares the ‘evangel’ or the good news. He was a ‘good-newser.’

The word gospel was used in the ancient world to talk about those who gave a good report. The king has won the battle! The army is returning victorious! Celebrate! That’s our role today – share the good news! Our sins can be forgiven! Christ has defeated death!

Epaphras could have kept it to himself – I don’t want to speak up about what I’ve heard about Jesus. I wouldn’t want to impose on anyone else. He doesn’t think that. No, he loves his neighbor enough to open his mouth and testify – Jesus has forgiven my sins and He will forgive yours too if you trust in the truth of the gospel and receive it as a gift of grace.

Epaphras trusted in Christ through Paul’s ministry and then returned to his hometown and spoke the gospel to those who had likely known him all his life. You know, sometimes it can be hardest to share the gospel with people who know you the best. Have you found that to be true? But have you considered that God may have put those people in your life, exactly because he wants you to be the one to share the gospel with them?

I grew up just east of Rossville and went to school there from kindergarten through graduation, all in one building. That’s an unusual thing – to go through school with one group of people from childhood until adulthood. But then I moved away – went to PA for Bible college and then to Louisville, KY for seminary, and then to southeast Missouri before returning back to this area five years ago. And you know one of the unique

blessings of going back to your hometown? Occasionally, I run into people who knew me from years ago.

Most of my classmates knew that I wanted to be a pastor, so I get an opportunity to tell that that yes, I did end up going into ministry. And I can share with them why I love serving as a pastor. It's a great way for me to talk to old classmates about Jesus. And these people know me in a way that other people never will. I have a unique opportunity.

Are there people in your life – maybe friends from long ago, maybe family members who have fallen out of touch with? Maybe old work associates? Are there people whom you can share about Jesus, maybe in a way that no one else can? You are the Christian in their life.

You have a unique testimony to those who have known you. Epaphras did. And he was faithful to take advantage of it. So who could you be faithful to speak the gospel to? Who are the people in your 'hometown'?

If we lined up your life next to Epaphras's – what would we find? Would we find that you are faithful in service like him? That you share the gospel with those around you like he did?

May we learn from the examples of Paul and Epaphras here in Colossians 1.

The Content

The next lesson that we can learn from these verses comes to us from the content of Paul's prayer. He prays from a heart of gospel gratitude, and it will be helpful for us to see what fuels Paul's prayers. The content of Paul's prayers can be summarized by four words: faith, love, hope, and the gospel. These are the particular things that fuel Paul's gratitude.

Faith

The first one is faith. Look again at verse 3, **Colossians 1:4**
...since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus...

Paul is thankful for their faith. That's what causes him to give thanks. And the faith that Paul is thankful for is not just a generic faith in whatever. Everyone has faith in someone or something. Some people trust in particular authors or teachers, certain voices that you hear online or read about. Others trust in other religions or belief systems. Still others follow certain news channels or celebrities.

But that's not what Paul is saying here. It's not, "I'm grateful that you believe in something." No, Paul is thankful that the believers in Colossae have faith *in Christ*. They are trusting in Jesus, and that drives Paul to gratitude. They are trusting in Jesus, and Paul knows that is the only hope they have.

I wonder, who are you thankful for in the church? Whose faith are you thankful for? Who would you say, "I'm glad you're a Christian"? I'm so happy that you are trusting in Christ. I speak with some people who are burdened by the fact that they have family and friends and people they love who are not trusting in Christ. And that is a heavy burden to carry.

But how often do I turn to God and give thanks for those loved ones I know who are trusting in Christ? Those people who are believers – that I know if they were not, I would be deeply burdened for them to have faith. Am I thankful for their faith?

Who would that be for you? Maybe you and I should pray like Paul does here – thank you God for the fact that this person whom I love has faith in Christ. I'm thankful for the faith of my brothers and sisters here at Cornerstone, for my parents who trust in Jesus, for those who taught me the Bible and how to live the Christian life.

Who would that be for you?

Love

Secondly, Paul is thankful for the love of the saints. **Colossians 1:4**

...and of the love that you have for all the saints,

Our faith and our love are linked together. They're connected. We show that our faith is alive through our love for one another. Jesus said, they'll know you are Christians by your love.

And Paul says that this love is for ‘all the saints.’ It is a love and a care and a compassion, and a forgiving spirit and forbearance for **all** the people. Not just some of the people. Not just the people who like the things you like, who value the same things, who share common interests and backgrounds, who dress and talk like you, or who are your same age. Paul is thankful that their love is for all the saints.

I was grateful to see our church family enjoy this kind of love for all the saints last week at our church family day out at Camp Cary. It is a joy to see our people get to know each other, to have unhurried conversations, and to start or deepen relationships. A sign of a healthy church is when people get along and care for each other in ways that are uncommon in the world at large. Cornerstone, I’m grateful for the love you have for all the saints. We’re not perfect at it, as I’m sure the Colossians weren’t either. But we can be grateful to God even for our broken attempts to love each other.

Hope

Third, we see Paul’s gratitude is grounded in hope.

Look at verse 5, **Colossians 1:5**

...because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

He starts with ‘because’ and then he gives the grounds or the reason underneath their faith and love. And here, Paul says somewhat surprisingly, that the source of their faith and love is hope.

Other places Paul mentions faith, hope, and love and he will describe love as the greatest of these. But here Paul wants us to know that their faith and love are grounded in the hope they have for the future. Christians have an inheritance in heaven, the sure belief that one day we will enjoy the presence of our Creator.

This kind of hope – this kind of optimistic, joyful, eternal perspective – this hope empowers the kind of faith and love that Paul is grateful for. This is how Paul’s gratitude becomes anti-fragile. It’s not dependent on temporary things because his thankfulness looks forward to the hope laid up in heaven.

Is your hope in heaven today? Has the temporary and the seemingly urgent taken your mind off of the hope that is yours in Christ? Have you forgotten that nothing can

separate us from the love of God – not even death itself? There is nothing that can happen to you that Christ cannot fix. Our hope is in Him.

So we see that Paul's prayer of gratitude is thick and rich, not thin and weak. It's not just a list – I'm thankful for this and for that and for that other thing. No, they are interconnected and build on one another. He is thankful for their faith in Jesus, for their love for all the saints, and the hope laid up for them in heaven. And then fourth, he is thankful for the gospel.

The Gospel

This gospel is the root of Paul's gratitude. If we were digging down into this passage, it's like we just hit a root. The faith, love, and hope we have seen were the fruit, but the root of those things is the gospel message.

The gospel is what leads to these other things. It is the fundamental source of our gratitude toward God. It's the big thing underneath all the other blessings He lavishes upon us. Look again at how Paul describes it...

Colossians 1:5-6

Of this [the hope] you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, **6** 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,

Notice that in verse 6, Paul says that they understood *the grace of God in truth*. Those are descriptions he wants to give of the gospel. It is true and it shows the grace of God.

The gospel is true. What is the gospel? It's so important that we get this right. I would love for us to be confident that we can clearly think and speak about the gospel at the end of our study of Colossians. It's so important. So, think to yourself – what would I say the gospel is? You got your answer? Let me give you mine.

I'll be brief – there's a lot more that we could say. But at its core the gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ is the Son of God – truly God and truly man.

He lived a perfect and sinless life.

He died in my place for my sins,

and He rose again from the grave and will return one day to usher in His kingdom.

This is the gospel. This is the word of the truth. And salvation comes only by the free grace of God. We cannot earn the forgiveness of sins by our good works. It's only by grace. But this gospel message must be heard and understood. That's what happened with the Colossians. They heard it and understood it. They believed.

I may be talking to someone here this morning who has never trusted in this gospel message. But you have heard it this morning. I don't believe you're here by accident. God wants you to hear and understand and trust that the gospel message really is true. That it is really available only by free grace. Jesus is calling you to believe today.

I would love to more with you about that if you would like – today or sometime this week. It would be my joy to do that.

Finally, Paul describes how the gospel message is at work in the world. He says that it is 'bearing fruit and growing' or 'being fruitful and multiplying.' This is a phrase that is loaded with meaning and echoes of the Old Testament.

It's a phrase that God used in the Garden of Eden in Genesis when He told Adam and Eve, who were created in His image, to be fruitful and multiply – to fill the world with those who bear His image. But they failed. And again, after Noah and his family are saved through the flood waters, God calls them to be fruitful and multiply. Again, when God makes a covenant with Abraham, he is told to be fruitful and multiply. The prophets speak about the New Covenant in which God's people will be fruitful and multiply. Jesus told the parable of the soils, and the good soils bears fruit and multiplies 10, 30, and 100 fold. That's the language Paul uses when he describes how the gospel is bearing fruit and multiplying as it came to the Colossians and indeed all over the world.

The gospel is God's big plan for the universe. It is the root of the Christian life, and it is bearing fruit all over the world as it both spreads and deepens.



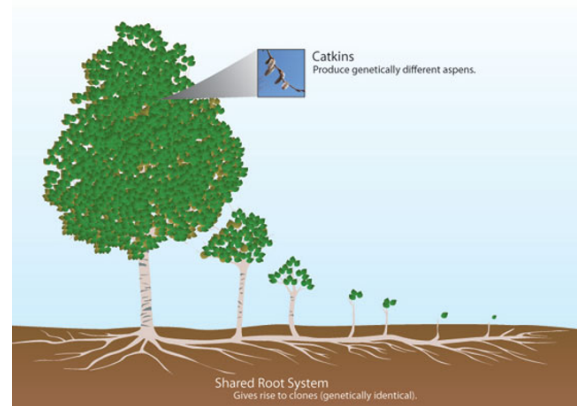
Do you know what this is? (show picture)

It's a picture of a forest. But not just a normal forest. It's a forest of over forty thousand trees in Utah. But there's something unique about this forest. All these trees are

quaking aspen trees. But more than that, they actually share the same DNA. They share the same root system. They are really a single living organism.

It's remarkable isn't it? The same roots are bringing forth fruit, or in this case trees, in many places. (show picture)

You see where I'm going with this don't you? Paul says that the gospel is being fruitful and multiplying all over the world. It's the same gospel message that you and I believe today – the same one that Paul professed in his day – and the same one which has saved sinners all around the world.



The gospel is at work all over the world. It's at work this morning in our town as other churches teach and preach the gospel. Places like City of God, Faith Church, Kossuth Street Baptist, Wea Ridge Baptist, and Calvary Baptist. It's at work in the Fields Church in Westfield (which just celebrated its one year anniversary, by the way). The gospel is at work around the world.

We are connected with Pastor Maccene who is preaching the gospel in Haiti, with Bill Tully preaching the gospel in Romania, and with missionaries through the International Mission Board who are preaching the gospel in churches all around the globe. This common root of the gospel is bearing fruit and growing all over the place.

The gospel continues to bear fruit and grow today. And it will continue to do this – it's unstoppable. It's the power of God for all who believe.

And when we get this. When the hope of the gospel is rooted deep in our souls, it will bear fruit and grow in our lives. And we should give thanks to God – with a gratitude shaped by faith, love, and hope and rooted in the gospel.

Whatever else is going on in your life – you can always be grateful for the gospel. You can always thank God for the word of truth and grace. That's the way to build an anti-fragile gratitude – return to the roots again and again.

Final Applications

I want to end our time doing something a little different. After seeing Paul's example and the content of his prayer, I want us to spend some time in prayer ourselves. Let's be doers of the Word. First, I want us to pray individually – just you and God. And let's thank God for bringing us salvation. Thank Him for the person that spoke the gospel to you. And for the faith, the love, and the hope that we share in Christ.

What are you thankful for? We'll pray about that.

And then I've invited a couple men to come and share just briefly about what God is doing in different parts of the world and in our own backyard among the nations, as the gospel continues to bear fruit and grow. (So you guys can come up now.) And they are going to lead us in thanking God for this gospel fruit and pray for our missions efforts.

So would you pray with me? I'll mention some things, and invite you to pray just you and God to yourselves, right where you are, let's give thanks to God...

- for your salvation
- for the faith of those you love
- for the love of the saints and the hope of heaven
- for the gospel fruit in your life and the lives of others

Let's pray...