

## The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

Grateful for Growth and Grace

Colossians 1:3-8

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"3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this 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 growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, 7 just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf 8 and has made known to us your love in the Spirit" (Col 1:3-8).

A few weeks ago our family was sitting around a dining room table and opening a stack of cards that you had given to us at our Open House. We gave each of our kids a small stack to open, and it wasn't long until Savannah wanted in on the action. So she, like everyone else, began opening the cards. However, she thought that the cards were for her and that they were from us. So every time that she would open a card, she would run over to Sarah and me, say thank you and give us a kiss and a hug.

Now you need to know that in our family a Savannah kiss and hug is like a narcotic. Therefore, it wasn't long until our three boys were getting in on the action, and Savannah was like a gratitude bee bouncing from person to person. It was a great family moment, and it was one that you, College Park, created.

You see as I watched her gratitude and joy, I thought of you. Your kindness and your grace created gratitude in her heart, and it created gratitude in our hearts to God for you.

There is something very powerful and meaningful when we, by our attitudes and actions, create gratitude **in others** for what God has done in our lives. It is what happens when one of the pastors introduces us, and when you leave says, "Mark, sometime I've got to tell you the amazing story of what God has done in his life."

This morning I want to show you that growth and grace are God-given gifts that should lead to gratitude, if Jesus is the core. In other words, getting Jesus at the core of your life will produce some things that people will look at and say, "There's no way that would come out of your life except for God." And when they say that, using your life as conduit of gratitude, God is supremely glorified.

So on a day that we celebrate Pentecost, Mother's Day, and the Lord's Table, I want to call you to make your life a massive conduit of gratitude to God. Make Jesus the core and watch how much gratitude will spring out of and through your life!

### **Gratitude to God (v 3)**

Paul begins this letter by expressing his love to the Colossians, letting them know that he often thinks of them and prays for them. And when he prays for them, his heart begins to overflow with gratitude to God for what has happened in their lives.

The letter begins with a typical form of affirmation and gratitude.<sup>1</sup> However, this one stands out for two reasons: 1) It is plural ("We always thank God..."), and 2) it is focused on "the Father of Jesus Christ." This fits well with what we already know about Colossians. Namely that Paul was with a group of men during his Roman imprisonment who had received a report from Epaphras about the church at Colossae. Further, we have learned that the overarching theme of the book is learning how to live with Jesus at the center. So it just makes sense that Paul would say, "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ..." as he introduces his letter.

You can probably imagine that Paul and the men who are with him regularly gather for prayer, and as they survey the landscape of churches, they focus on the work at Colossae. The word for prayer here (proseuchomai) simply means communication with God, and these men are simply talking to God about what they know is happening at Colossae. And the product of their communication with God is that they are very grateful for what God is doing.

Notice that Paul is not commending them per se for what they've done. Rather, his heart is filled with gratitude because he knows that their lives have become a testimony of how great God is. In other words, they became conduits of gratitude to God. They were growing, changing, and maturing, and Paul sees all of this as a product of God's work in their midst.

The word for "thank" is the Greek word eucharisteo. And, of course, most of you hear a familiar religious word: Eucharist. It means "good grace." In other words, it is something from God (grace) and it is good. The form of the verb is such that it means continually, meaning that Paul is continually led to great joy in his heart when he thinks about what is happening at Colossae. He sees God at work, and he clearly sees how good it is.

Gratitude is an important theme in the book of Colossians as it should be. I mean, after all, if the focus is on Christ as the core then you would think that gratitude would be close by.

Listen to the three other places that gratitude surfaces in Colossians:

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<sup>1</sup> See 1 Cor. 1:4; 1 Thess 1:2; 2 Thess 1:3; Phil 1:3, Philemon 4, Rom. 1:8.

6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving (Col 2:6-7).

15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful (Col 3:15)

2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving (Col 4:2)

I want to suggest to you that people who really understand the centrality of Jesus are really grateful people. They are grateful for what has happened to them, and they are grateful for what God is doing in them. They are thankful for what they see God doing in others. They are so transfixed with Christ and the gospel that every where they look, they see grace.

Do any of you remember the ad in the late '70's or early '80's for Tootsie Rolls? The words went like this:

Tootsie Roll how I love your chocolatey chew. Tootsie Roll I think I'm in love with you. Whatever it is I think I see becomes a Tootsie Roll to me. The world looks mighty good to me cause Tootsie Rolls are all I see. Whatever it is I think I see becomes a Tootsie Roll to me.

That is what happens when your heart becomes captivated by Christ and what Christ does: Whatever you see becomes a conduit of God's grace. In other words, gratitude and the centrality of Jesus go hand in hand.

Getting Jesus at the core can create (should create) a new level of gratitude. But unfortunately, that doesn't always happen. The reverse is also true. People who get their focus off of Christ become ungrateful and driven by circumstances.

So my question for you on this point is two-fold: First, do you see the world through a lens of Christ-centered gratitude? Second, would anyone or could anyone use your life as a conduit of gratitude to God? How much praise to God did your life create this week?

You see, part of understanding and embracing the centrality of Jesus is realizing that the more we understand about Christ as the core, the more grateful we become, and the more others become grateful to God for us. And I want College Park to be filled with people who are like spiritual telescopes – they bring greater clarity and focus to the glory of God.

## Growing By Grace (v 4-5a)

The second thing we notice in the text is the specific things for which Paul expresses his gratitude, and they are laid out in a familiar triad: faith, hope, and love.<sup>2</sup> This was what he had heard from Epaphras, and this is what led him to say, “Thank you, God! You did that in them.”

First, he lists their **faith in Jesus Christ**. No doubt this is mentioned first because it is the very means by which they came to saving grace. However, the focus here is not so much on Jesus as the object of their faith as it is that Jesus is the living environment in which their faith is lived out.<sup>3</sup> In other words, faith **in** Christ means a position from which a life of faith flows.<sup>4</sup> It is a faith that is a product a Christ-centered core.

The centrality of Christ eclipses every faith-robbing potential enemy. You see this is where some of us miss the power of the gospel. We hear the phrase “faith in Christ” and we immediately think about the first time we came to faith in Christ; we only think in terms of salvation. However, Colossians is a book that celebrates a lifetime of faith in Christ – a faith that brought us forgiveness and a faith that we live in every day. This church had made Jesus central, and they were attempting to live in the reality of that faith. Thus, he celebrates their faith in Christ.

Second, we see his joy in their **love for all the saints**. There is a frequent connection between genuine faith and love.<sup>5</sup> Galatians 5:6 says that faith works through love, and 1 Corinthians 13:2 says that if you have incredible faith, but you don’t have love – you are nothing. 1 Thessalonians 5:8 is a very interesting cross reference because it calls believers to put on the “breastplate of faith and love” and then connects it to hope in a similar fashion to what Paul says in Colossians 1:4.

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation (1 Thess 5:8).

Christ, at the core, creates a faith-filled life of love. When Christ is really central, the church overflows with love for one another. We just can’t help ourselves.

Third, Paul identifies that faith and love are directly connected to **“the hope laid up in heaven.”** When a person comes to Christ, they place their hope in Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection as their own, and they place their hope in an unseen reconciliation between him or

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<sup>2</sup> See also Rom 5:1-5, Gal 5:5-6, Eph 4:2-5

<sup>3</sup> F.F. Bruce. The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> It is the difference between the Greek word *ev* in Col 1:3 and *eis* in Col 2:5.

<sup>5</sup> See Eph 1:15, 3:17; 1 Thess 1:3, 3:6; 1 Tim 1:14; 2 Tim. 1:13; Philemon 5; Rev 2:19

herself and God – a reconciliation that will not be fully realized until our time on earth is done. Therefore, believers in Christ constantly live in light of the hope laid up for them in heaven. And the result is that they view life differently and they live differently:

- They “set their minds on things above...” (Col 3:2)
- They know that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ” (Rom 8:39)
- They see present sufferings as “not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us” (Rom 8:18)
- They know that no matter the devil, the world, or the flesh throws at them that they have “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...” (1 Peter 1:4)
- And because of this they, along with the entire creation groans (Rom 8:22) and “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the Sons of God (Rom 8:19)

Paul hears about this radical God-centeredness, and it leads him to offer praise to God. He sees what is coming out of their lives as a testimony of God’s grace. God was at work in them; that is where all of this was coming from. God was doing it, and it was this work that created gratitude.

### **Grounded in the Gospel (v 5b-8)**

So we have gratitude to God because of the amazing growth and grace we see in others, but that leaves us with a question: where does this come from? Or, what is the cause of this of this growth leading to gratitude? The answer is so important: it comes from gospel.

Notice the following in verses 5-8:

- The gospel is called the **word of truth**. The “good news” of the Bible is simply the truth about who God is and who man is. The gospel identifies that the only solution to man’s problem of sin and separation from God is Christ. That is the truth. That is the gospel.
- The gospel is **alive**. Verse six says that it came to them and that it is bearing fruit and growing among them and among people all over the world. So this “good news” (gospel) is full of power (Rom 1:16), and changes people.
- It involved **hearing** and **understanding**. They had heard the message, and like Lydia in Acts 16:14, God had opened their hearts to pay attention to what was said by Paul.
- The message came to them by **Epaphras** (v 7) which is how the gospel usually comes to others – by another person.

This is the gospel. It is a message of truth and grace that changes people’s lives. The gospel is the simple, but powerful good news that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ can

result in full and free deliverance from sin on the basis of faith in Christ.<sup>6</sup> It comes to us by people who declare it, and when it is heard and understood, it changes everything!

All of the change, all of the grace and growth we experience have their roots and foundation in the gospel. Now when I say “gospel” many of you may immediately think that I mean knowing that you are saved, going to heaven, or receiving Christ as your savior. And I certainly mean that. But there is more here. Receiving Christ is deciding to turn from your sins (repent) and trusting Christ. But from that moment on everything about your life is rooted in the gospel and is because of the gospel.

Christ provides the foundation. The Spirit empowers the fruit. And the Father receives gratitude and glory. And living with Jesus as the core means that we continually come back and preach the gospel to our hearts – even after we have received Christ.

Living with Jesus as the core becomes a life characterized by the amazing mystery of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 2:7).

- It is amazing faith, love, and hope of a faithful wife to an unfaithful husband who says, “Jesus, I know you can change my husband; I choose to forgive him, and I believe one day you’ll make sense of all this pain.”
- It is the amazing faith, love, and hope of a dying man who says, “Jesus, I know you’ll not abandon me – even in death so I’m going to minister to people while I’m dying. And I’m going to do this because you see it and brings you joy.”
- It is the amazing faith, love, and hope of a person with horrible abuse in their past who says, “Jesus, I trust that you rule over everything even the bad and unfair stuff. And I choose view my past through the lens of Christ-like love, and I choose to believe that you can take what people intend for evil and use it for good—even if I can’t see how right now.”
- It is the amazing faith, love, and hope for the couple who looks at a negative home pregnancy test for the fifth time and pray, “Jesus, we don’t know why you won’t give us the desires of our hearts, but we choose to trust you. We won’t let this divide our love for you or each other, and we choose to believe that this suffering is not pointless. One day you’ll explain all of it to us and how it made us like Christ.”

But it is not only real for the traumatic cases. Living with Christ at the core through faith, love and hope applies to many other areas of life as well:

- To stay-at-home moms who labor to clean up Cheerios and dirty diapers and point kids to Christ

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<sup>6</sup> Merrill Unger; R.K. Harrison, ed. “The Gospel” - The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1988.

- Middle management types passed up from a promotion because you won't sacrifice your family for the next career move
- Teenagers who are ridiculed because you refuse to be in the wrong places, say the wrong things, or watch the wrong stuff
- Grandmas and Grandpas who have to pray from a distance as they watch their kids or grandkids make bad choices.
- Faithful servants who joyfully serve Christ week after week even though you are rarely thanked

When Christ is the core we see life differently, and we live differently. And the product of that amazing difference is the expression of gratitude to God. People see what God has done and they praise Him.

College Park, you need to know that there have already been multiple times where the history of what God has done here and the present fruit that I see has created a lot of gratitude to God in my heart. I find myself shaking my head, dumbfounded at the amazing stories and the wonderful things that God is doing here. I am grateful to God for you.

And this morning I want to call you to be the kind of people who create even more gratitude to God. I want our church to be so saturated by the centrality of Jesus that it leads to amazing spiritual growth. The kind of amazing, gospel-grounded, Spirit-empowered, Father-exalting growth that people look at your life and say, "Wow, God did that!"

And then you say with passionate joy, "Yeah. God did it."

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