

THANK GOD FOR THE CHURCH Colossians 1:3-8

In her book *Springs in the Valley*, Lettie Cowman writes of a man who found a barn where Satan stored the seeds he sows in the human heart. To his surprise, the man found that the seeds of discouragement were more numerous than the others. Satan claimed they could be made to grow almost anywhere. But Satan reluctantly admitted that there was one place he could never get the seeds of discouragement to grow. "Where is that?" the man asked. Satan answered, "In the heart of a grateful person."

Of course, the story may be mythical. But the point is absolutely true. Discouragement cannot grow in the heart of a grateful person. The Apostle Paul is proof of this. Satan had done all he could to sow the seeds of discouragement in the Paul's heart. There he was, a globetrotting missionary, now under house arrest in Rome with an uncertain future. But Paul's grateful heart successfully resisted discouragement. In **Colossians 1:3-8**, we get a glimpse of Paul's grateful heart, as he thanks God for the church at Colossae.

The Christian life should be characterized by thanksgiving. **1 Thessalonians 5:18** says: "give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Every day, no matter what, you should give thanks to God for the physical, material, relational, and spiritual blessings in your life. And among the things you should continually thank God for is the church. You should give thanks for the church of Jesus Christ around the world. You should give thanks for the local church you are a part of. You should follow the example of Paul, who writes in **Colossians 1:3**, "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you."

But there is another way to read this text. If you read it from the perspective of Paul, it raises the question, Are you grateful for the church? But if you read it from the perspective of the Colossians, it raises the question, Are we the kind of church to whom these thanks could apply? Consider the text from that perspective. What kind of congregation is a church worth thanking God for? **Colossians 2:1** states that Paul and the Colossians had never met face-to-face. He only knew them by the report Epaphras had given him. That report included disturbing news that prompted Paul to write this letter. But he begins by giving thanks to God for this church. He thanked God because he heard that the Colossians were saved. Paul was grateful for that which the Colossians could never do by or for themselves. They were saved. Only God could do that. So God alone deserved the praise. **Colossians 1:3-8** teaches us what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. We should thank God for the marks and message and ministry of the church.

I. THANK GOD FOR THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH.

What are the marks of a true church? Verse 3-5a answers: "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, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven." These are the three great Christian virtues: faith, hope,

and love. **1 Corinthians 13:13** says, “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three: but the greatest of these is love.” In **Colossians 1:2**, Paul addresses this letter to “the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.” The proof the Colossians were faithful saints in Christ was that they exhibited faith, hope, and love. These are the marks of the church.

A. TRUE CHRISTIANS HAVE FAITH IN CHRIST JESUS.

In verses 3-4, Paul says, “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...” This is where Christianity starts. There must be faith in Jesus Christ. You cannot have love for the saints or the hope of heaven without faith in Christ. **John 3:18** says, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” True Christians have faith in Christ Jesus. The Philippian jailor asked Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” **Acts 16:31** records their answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” Note that their answer was a line, not a list. And that one-line answer pointed to belief, not behavior. **Hebrews 11:6a** says: “And without faith it is impossible to please him.” Sincere motives, moral behavior, water baptism, church membership, and Christian service cannot save.

We are saved through faith in Jesus Christ. **Romans 4:4-5** says: “Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” Salvation is not a reward you earn. It is a gift you receive by faith in Jesus Christ. Yet saving-faith is more than assent to the facts of the Bible. Saving-faith involves knowledge, assent, and most importantly, trust. The church is made up of those who trust Christ personally, actively, completely, exclusively, and continually. CHARLES SPURGEON said it well: “Faith is the Samsonian lock of the Christian; cut it off, and you may put out his eyes – and he can do nothing.”

B. TRUE CHRISTIANS HAVE LOVE FOR ALL THE SAINTS.

Again, verse 4 reports how long Paul has given thanks for the Colossians in his prayers: “since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints.” In this verse, Paul places *love* alongside of *faith* as an essential mark of salvation. It was the report of both their faith and love that convinced Paul the Colossians were born again. Obviously, Paul would not have been convinced if the Colossians did not believe in Christ. Likewise, he would not have been convinced if they did not have love for the saints. Both go together – faith in Christ and love for the saints. The British theologian, FRANCIS BURKITT, wrote: “Faith and love are inseparable companions. There is a necessary connection between them. Faith without love is no living grace, and love without faith is not saving grace.”

True Christians have love for all the saints. In **John 13:34-35**, Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Christians are not identified as such by their Bible knowledge, moral standards, ministry participation, good works, or spiritual gifts. Saved people are identified as saved people by their love for other saved people. Faith in Christ should result in inclusive love for those who share your faith in Christ. *What is Christian love?* The primary word used for *love* in the New Testament describes a disposition of goodwill that causes one to perform self-sacrificing acts for the benefit of the loved, independent of the worthiness of the one loved. It is the love that is modeled by God himself. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” *What is the proof of Christian love?* True Christian love is “for all the saints.” Real Christians do not pick and choose whom they will love. They do not limit their love to some saints, selected saints, or special saints. They loved all the saints, regardless of age, race, gender, status, or temperament. We are to love all the saints within our local fellowship. And we are to love all the saints beyond our local fellowship.

C. TRUE CHRISTIANS HAVE THE HOPE OF HEAVEN.

Verse 5a states the reason why the Colossians possessed Christian faith and practiced Christian love: “because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.” What is hope? It is more than wishful thinking. Christian hope is true assurance, patient waiting, and confident expectation. **Romans 8:24-25** says, “For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees. But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” Hope is about the future. It is strength for today that is rooted in assurance for tomorrow. Paul says the reason why the Colossians had abiding faith in Christ and inclusive love for one another is because they had hope for the future.

John Maxwell writes about a small town in Maine that was proposed for the site of a great hydro-electric plant. A dam would be built across the river and the town submerged. When the project was announced, the people were given many months to arrange their affairs and relocate. During those months, a curious thing happened. All improvements ceased. No painting was done. No repairs were made on the buildings, roads, or sidewalks. Day by day the whole town got shabbier and shabbier. A long time before the waters came, the town looked uncared for and abandoned, even though the people had not yet moved away. One citizen explained; “When there is no faith in the future, there is no power in the present.”

True Christians are people of hope. But our hope is not based on fickle people, temporal possessions, or changing circumstances. Verse 5 says Christian hope is “laid up for you in heaven.” This is a statement about the assurance of salvation. It tells the source of true assurance. It comes from heaven – not from preachers or parents or decision counselors. Assurance comes from God who puts

heaven in the hearts of his children. This statement also tells us the security of true assurance. It is laid up for us in heaven. **1 Peter 1:3-4** says: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”*

II. THANK GOD FOR THE MESSAGE OF THE CHURCH.

What is the basis of Christian hope? According to verses 5-6, our hope is based on the gospel. The word “*gospel*” means good news or glad tidings. This good news is the message of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The foundation of our hope is what God has done for us in Christ, not what we do for God. Hope is based on the gospel. In verses 5-6, Paul states three facts about the gospel for which we should give thanks.

A. THE GOSPEL IS TRUTH.

Paul’s letter to the Colossians is polemical. It was written to confront the false teachers that sought to lead the saints away from confidence in the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ. But Paul does not begin this letter by refuting the errors of the false teachers. He begins by affirming the faith of the Colossians. In verses 4-5a, Paul commends the saints for their Christian faith, love, and hope. Now, in verse 5b, Paul tells how the Colossians received these Christian virtues: *“Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel.”*

Note that Paul speaks of the word of truth and the gospel synonymously. The word of truth is the gospel and the gospel is the word of truth. In **John 5:39-40**, Jesus says, *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”* Do you know that you can be an expert in the scriptures and still go to hell? You will not find life in the scriptures until you meet the Life-giver in the scriptures. The gospel is the message of the Bible. It is the word of truth. To share the gospel is about more than calling a person to a first-time or one-time decision. The gospel is a call to live one’s life according to the word of truth. In **John 8:31-32**, Jesus says, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

B. THE GOSPEL IS POWERFUL.

Verses 5b-6 says: *“Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, 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.”* The gospel had come to Colossae. And Paul was sure that it was the true gospel, because it was the same gospel that was going all over the

world. Paul was not saying that everyone in the world had heard the gospel. He was saying that the gospel was doing the same thing every place it went in the world. And what does the gospel do? It demonstrates power. The power of the gospel is not military or political or economic power. It is spiritual power. **Romans 1:16** says, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”* This spiritual power is described in verse 6 with two agricultural pictures: *“bearing fruit and growing.”*

The gospel bears fruit. This is a powerful metaphor that describes the work of the gospel among unbelievers. In **Romans 1:13**, Paul writes, *“I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well among the rest of the Gentiles.”* This is the confidence with which we should proclaim the gospel. The gospel bears fruit. Likewise, the gospel grows. *Bearing fruit* describes the power of the gospel among unbelievers; *growing* describes the power of the gospel among believers. As we share the gospel, we should be like roots, not pipes. Water passes through pipes without any positive effect on the pipes. But as water passes through the roots of a tree, the tree grows stronger. As the gospel is bearing fruit among the lost, it should be growing and deepening and increasing among the saints. This is the power of the gospel. Trees do not bear fruit and grow at the same time. They grow until they reach the place of fruit bearing. But the gospel is so potent that it can bear fruit and grow at the same time.

C. THE GOSPEL IS GOD-CENTERED.

The last clause of verse 6 tells us how long the gospel had been bearing fruit and growing in Colossae: *“since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.”* The gospel is the truth about God and his grace, not about man and his works. **Ephesians 2:8** says, *“By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”* Good works, cannot save us. We are saved by the grace of God. Grace is unmerited favor, unearned kindness, and undeserved benevolence. It is when God gives you what you don’t deserve. It is when God gives forgiveness when you deserve punishment. It is when God gives heaven when you deserve hell. It is when God gives life when you deserve death. The grace of God is the gospel. The sin of man is the only way God could demonstrate his divine grace.

- **God demonstrated his divine sovereignty in creation.**
- **God demonstrated his divine faithfulness in the Exodus.**
- **God demonstrated his divine holiness in the Law of Moses.**
- **God demonstrated his divine love through Jesus and his cross.**
- **But God demonstrates his divine grace through the church – those who have been redeemed by grace through faith in Christ.**

In **Ephesians 3:10**, Paul says the mystery of God’s will is that *“through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”* Think about that. The plan of God is that the spirit-world may see the glory of God put on display through the church. This is why

everything that happens in the church should be God-centered, God exalting, and God-intoxicated. **1 Corinthians 10:31** says it best: *“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”*

III. THANK GOD FOR THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH.

Colossians 1:7-8 are a commendation of Epaphras that tell us about his relationship to Paul, to Christ, and to the Colossians. These verses also give us a helpful glimpse into the spiritual dynamics of a Christian-centered ministry in a local church. Congregations are often measured by their ministry programs. But here Paul focuses on ministry priorities, not ministry programs. The church at Colossae had two priorities that we should strive to emulate.

A. THE CHURCH IS TO BE A PLACE OF LEARNING.

In verse 7a, Paul points the Colossians back to their introduction to the gospel: *“just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant.”* Apparently, Paul did not view the gospel to be merely a simple set of facts. He viewed it as something that needed to be learned.

In defending that authority of scripture during the 16th century Protestant Reformation, the Reformers argued for the perspicuity of scripture, which means that scripture is clear. We do not need the pope or church councils or selected experts to interpret the scriptures for us. The word of God is clear enough so that the open mind and receptive heart can understand its central message with the help of God. This was an important affirmation of the priesthood of all believers that fueled the recovery of the biblical gospel. However, this same doctrine was used to bring division among the Reformers and continues to be a cause of the sinful individualism we see among believers today. The danger lies in a misunderstanding of perspicuity. Perspicuity means that scripture is clear. It does not mean it is simple. In **2 Peter 3:15-16**, Peter calls Paul’s writings scripture. But he also says that some of it is hard to understand.

So Paul rightly says the Colossians learned the truth about God’s grace from Epaphras. Colossians was a learning church. And so it should be with every true church. The church is to be a place of learning. This involves the receptivity of members. The members must be willing to learn. We don’t come to church merely to feel better about ourselves. We come to learn the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Likewise, this involves the responsibility of the ministers. In verse 7, Paul describes the ministry of Epaphras in relation to Paul. He was a *“beloved fellow servant.”* He also describes Epaphras’ ministry in relationship to Christ. He was *“a faithful minister of Christ.”* This is what the church needs: faithful ministers.

B. THE CHURCH IS TO BE A PLACE OF LOVE.

Notice verse 7-8 again. Concerning Epaphras, Paul says, *“He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.”* This is the second reference to Christian love in this passage. Verse 4 refers to the nature of Christian love. It is selfless, not selfish. It is sacrificial, not close-fisted. It is action, not sentiment. It is inclusive, not selective. It is a lifestyle, not an event. But verse 8 refers to the source of Christian love. It is *“love in the Spirit.”* With this reference to the Holy Spirit, each member of the Godhead is put on display in this passage. Verse 3 speaks of *“God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Verse 4 speaks of *“faith in Christ Jesus.”* Now verse 8 speaks of *“love in the Spirit.”*

The Holy Spirit is the source of Christian love. Only the Holy Spirit can produce love in the hearts of Christians. You cannot do it by yourself. **Galatians 5:22** says, *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love.”* True Christian love is not produced with human intellect, by human energy, or through human resources. Nothing in us can prompt it. Nothing in us can sustain it. And nothing in us can accomplish it. In **John 13:34**, Jesus says, *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”* That phrase, *“just as I have loved you,”* is the standard of Christian love. We are love one another the way Christ has loved us. Do you know how Christ loved you? He lived for you. He suffered for you. He died for you. We can only love one another in a Christlike way by the dynamic help of the Holy Spirit.

A.J. GORDON, one of the founders of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, said that one day he was out walking and looking across a field at a house. And beside the house was what looked like a man pumping furiously at a hand pump. As Gordon watched, the man continued to pump rapidly; he seemed absolutely tireless, pumping on and on, up and down, without slowing up. It was a remarkable sight. So Gordon started to walk toward it. And as he got closer, he could see that it was not a man at the pump. But a wooden figure painted to look like a man. The arm that was pumping so rapidly was hinged at the elbow and the hand was wired to the pump handle. The water was pouring forth, but not because the figure was pumping it. It was an artesian well, and that water was pumping the man.