

2. Paul The Encourager

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Let's be honest. Which kind of a person you'd like to hang around with – the one who encourages you and gives you helping hands when you are down and out or a person who thinks that God abundantly blessed him with the gift of criticism and exercises that gift every chance he has on you? Naturally, we'd like to hang around with the encourager.

The apostle Paul was a great encourager, and this epistle is a good example of the grace of thanksgiving. In this section, v3 through v8 which is one long sentence in the original Greek, he gave thanks for what Christ has done in the lives of the Colossian church congregation. But he also mentioned thanksgiving in 5 other places in this letter: Colossians 1:12, 2:7, 3:15,17, and 4:2. When you recall that Paul wrote this letter in prison, his attitude of thanksgiving is even more wonderful.

Like Paul, we should be grateful for what God is doing in the lives of others. As Christians, we are all members of one body. If one member of the body is strengthened, this helps to strengthen the entire body. If one church experiences a revival touch from God, it will help all the churches. In this expression of thanksgiving, Paul traced the stages in the spiritual experience of the Colossian believers.

A. FAITH IN CHRIST JESUS

Colossians 1:3-4 We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints;

It is possible to hear and choose not to believe, even though the Word of God has the power to generate faith in those who hear. Millions of people have heard the Good News of salvation and yet not believed. But those who believe in Jesus Christ receive the gift of eternal life from God.

We are not saved by faith in faith. There is a cult of "believism" today that promotes faith but has little to do with Jesus Christ. Saving faith is grounded in the Gospel. It is the Word of God that gives us assurance. As we grow in the Lord, our faith becomes steadfast and established.

The false teachers who had come to Colosse tried to undermine the believers' faith in Christ and the Word. This same kind of undermining still goes on today. Any religious teaching that dethrones Jesus Christ, or that makes salvation other than an experience of God's grace through faith, is either confused or anti-Christian and born of Satan.

B. THE WORD OF THE TRUTH

Colossians 1:5 because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the Gospel,

As believers, our hope is built on a sure foundation, and that is the hope of heaven. The apostle Paul spoke of faith that springs from this hope.

It is a bit like the Golden Plovers. Native to Hawaii, these little birds migrate during the summer to the Aleutian Isles, some 1,200 miles away. There they mate and lay their eggs. Then, after their little fledglings are born, they return to Hawaii. Even more amazing is that their little fledglings, which are too young to return with their

parents, fly to Hawaii once they have grown a little. God has given them a homing instinct that makes this possible.

In the same way, God has given us a homing instinct for a place we have never been to. We have never been to heaven, but we long for it because heaven is our home. C.S. Lewis calls it the inconsolable longing. This is what the Bible means when it says that God has set eternity in our hearts. Like the Golden Plovers, we have a heavenly GPS.

The “Word of truth” – this means that it came from God and can be trusted. There are many religions and doctrines that claim to be called true, but only God’s Word can be the truth and it has proven itself to be. Satan is the liar. To believe his lies is to be led astray into death. Jesus is the Truth and when we trust Him, we have life. Throughout history, men have tried to destroy God’s truth, but they have failed. The Word of truth still stands and will continue.

Everybody has faith in something. But faith is only as good as the object in which a person puts his trust. The jungle pagan worships a god of stone; the educated city pagan worships money or possessions or status. In both cases, their faith is empty. The true Christian believer has faith in Jesus Christ, and that faith is based on the Word of truth. Any other kind of faith is nothing more than superstition – it cannot save.

C. THE GRACE OF GOD IN TRUTH FOR THE WHOLE WORLD

Colossians 1:6 which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth;

Near King’s Cross station in London, England, there is a cemetery containing a unique grave, that of the agnostic Lady Anne Grimston. She is buried in a marble tomb, marked by a marble slab. Before she died, she said sarcastically to a friend, “I shall live again as surely as a tree will grow from my body.”

An unbeliever, Lady Anne Grimston did not believe that there was life after death. However, a tree did grow from her grave. A tiny seed took root, and as it grew, it cracked the marble and even tore the metal railing out of the ground and became one of the largest trees in England. Our God has a good sense of humor.

The Word of God is the seed. This means the Word has life in it. When it is planted in the heart, it can produce fruit. When God’s Word is planted and cultivated, it produces fruit. Faith, hope, and love are among the first fruits in the spiritual harvest. These spiritual graces are among the evidence that a person has truly been born again.

Faith comes through the hearing of God’s Word. Our Christian lives start with saving faith, but this is only the beginning. We learn to walk by faith and work in faith. It is faith that gives power to prayer. Faith is a shield that protects us from satan’s fiery darts.

The apostle Paul said that the Gospel was bearing fruit in all the world. The Word of God is the only seed that can be planted anywhere in the world and bear fruit. False teachers do not take their messages to all the world. They go where the Gospel has already gone and try to lead believers astray. They have no good news for lost sinners.

If people are to be saved, they must hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And if they are to hear, we who are saved must carry the message. Are you doing your part?

D. THEY WERE DISCIPLED

Colossians 1:7-8 as you also learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, 8 who also declared to us your love in the Spirit.

The apostle Paul is thankful for the faith of the Colossian church congregation in Christ Jesus and their love for all the believers. Because genuine faith in Jesus will always have a true love for God's people as a companion.

The Colossians believers had been taught well – not by Paul, but by a man named Epaphras who founded a church in Colosse.

These new believers were in danger of turning from the truth and following the false teachers. Paul reminded them that it was Epaphras who led them to Christ, disciplined them, and taught them the Word. Like the Colossians, we should beware of any religious leader who does not seek to win lost souls, but who devotes himself to "stealing sheep" from the flocks of others. We should never forget that new Christians must be disciplined. Just as the newborn baby needs loving care and protection until he can care for himself, so the new Christian needs discipling.

Matthew 28:19-20 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

The Great Commission does not stop with the salvation of the lost because in that commission Jesus commanded us to teach converts the Word as well. That is what the fellowship of the local church is all about. The New Testament does not teach the kind of "individual Christianity" that is so prevalent today – people who ignore the local church and who try to find all their spiritual food in books, radio, TV, or the internet.

The word "disciple" is found more than 260 times in the Gospels and Acts, and the verb translated, "to learn as a disciple" is found 25 times in the NT. In that day, a disciple was not simply a person who sat and listened to a teacher. He was someone who lived with the teacher and who learned by listening, watching, and living. Discipleship involved more than enrolling in a school and attending lectures. It meant total surrender to the teacher. It meant learning by living. Perhaps our modern-day medical students or trade apprentices come close to illustrating the meaning of discipleship.

But we who disciple other believers must be careful not to get in the way. We are not to make disciples for ourselves, but for Jesus Christ. We must relate people to Him so that they love and obey Him. Epaphras faithfully taught his people and related them to Jesus Christ, but the false teachers came in and tried to "draw away disciples." Human nature has the tendency to want to follow men instead of God – to want "something new" instead of the basic foundational truths of the Gospel.

Love is another evidence of true salvation because the unsaved person is wrapped up mainly in oneself. The fact that these people loved all the believers was proof that God had changed them and given them eternal life. Christian love is not a shallow feeling that we manufacture, rather it is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

This Spirit-given love was for “all the saints” as it was mentioned in v4 and not only for the people of their own fellowship. As Christians, we also need to realize the vastness of God’s love and share it with all the believers. We as the followers of Christ should be knit together in love so that there will be a true spiritual unity to the glory of God. The bond that unites us is love.

Listen, uniformity is the result of compulsion from the outside, but unity is the result of compassion on the inside.

Hope is also a characteristic of the believer. Unsaved people are without hope because they are without God. The biblical hope does not mean “hope so.” Our hope in Christ is as definite and assured as our faith in Christ because Christ is in us, we have the hope of glory in heaven.

The false teachers tried to unsettle the Colossian believers and move them away from the hope of the Gospel. But Paul made it clear that this hope is laid up for believers in heaven. The words translated “laid up” carries the meaning of “to be reserved, to be set aside for someone.” It was used to refer to money laid up or hidden. The tense of the Greek verb indicates that this hope has once and for all been reserved so that nothing can take it from us. It means not only has this hope that is our glorious inheritance in glory, been reserved for us, but we are being kept by God’s power so that we can be sure of enjoying heaven one day. We are being guarded for glory. How about that for something to look forward to?!?!?

What is the relationship between faith, hope, and love? Certainly the more we love someone, the more we will trust him. We do not trust a casual acquaintance to the same degree that we trust a confidential friend. As we come to know God better, we trust Him more and we love Him more. Love and faith encourage each other.

But hope also has a valuable contribution to make. Wherever there is a relationship of faith and love, there will be a growing hope. When a man and woman fall in love and learn to trust each other in that love, the hope for their future always becomes brighter. In fact, Paul taught that hope is a motivating power for love and for faith as it is mentioned in v5.

The final goal of going to heaven should not be escaping this troubling world, rather going to heaven to be with our Savior and Lord Jesus. That should be the motivating and powerful force in the Christian’s life. When we realize the joy we shall have in heaven, it makes us love Him more. The fact that we know we shall be with Him in glory encourages us to trust Him more. Even the problems and trials here on earth do not move us away from that hope.

The hope of seeing Christ and going to heaven is not only a motivation for faith and love, but it is also a motivation for holy living.

1 John 3:3 And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

The apostle Paul is encouraging the congregation of the Colossian church to keep their faith, hope in Jesus, and love for the Lord and each other. I believe that this message is for us as well in the 21st century.

E. APPLICATIONS

- 1) When God's Word is planted and cultivated, it produces fruit – faith, hope, and love. We who have the fruit must carry the message to others who do not have eternal life.
- 2) We who disciple others should point them to Christ, not to ourselves.
- 3) We as the followers of Christ should share His love with one another, not hoard it for ourselves.
- 4) The hope of seeing Christ and going to heaven is not only a motivation for faith and love, but it is also a motivation for holy living.