

GIVE THANKS FOR FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

(SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2014)

Scripture Reading: 10 Words; Col. 1:1-8

INTRODUCTION

Listen to Romans 12:2.

Rom. 12:2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Every Christian and every generation of Christians faces the pressure to live, act, and think according to worldly standards.

This pressure has to be recognized. You cannot live thinking you are immune to it.

This pressure has to resisted.

And one of the key ways that you must resist is through the renewing of your mind.

I mention this as we begin a new study in the book of Colossians.

What good is it to study a letter written by the Apostle Paul almost 2000 years ago to a tiny group of Christians in the ancient city of Colossae?

What do we really have in common with the life and times of these people?

Obviously much has changed.

But what never changes are the temptations and pressures of the world and the dangers of false teaching.

And even more important, what never changes is the glory and truth of our great God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What 21st century Christians need are not new truths or new messages that we give to the world.

We need to faithfully confess God's truth and live consistently.

Our focus this morning will be the first eight verses of Colossians 1, but in giving an introduction to our new study, we will also be looking at the final verses of Colossians.

After considering Col. 4:16-18 we will then give attention to Col. 1:1-8 in two parts.

Give thanks for faith, hope, and love.

1. INTRODUCTION – COLOSSIANS 4:16-18

Col. 4:16 Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea. **17** And say to Archippus, “Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.”

Col. 4:18 This salutation by my own hand—Paul. Remember my chains. Grace *be* with you. Amen.

It may seem strange to turn to the final verses of a book for an introduction, but often in the final verses of the epistles you find important information.

From the final three verses of Colossians, we can make 5 introductory observations to the epistle or letter of Colossians.

1. Paul’s epistles were written to local churches and were to be read as part of the church gathered for worship.

The word **read** is used for the reading of scripture in synagogue services and Christian assemblies, local churches.

2. The epistle/book of Colossians was also then to be read to the church of the Laodiceans.

In close proximity to Colossae were the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis all part of what was called the Lycus Valley.

Hierapolis was known for its hot springs. Colossae was known for its refreshing water.

Rev. 3:16 notes Laodicea was rebuked by Christ as being ‘lukewarm’ even as its water supply was.

3. The Colossians were also to read the letter **from Laodicea**.

It is thought by some commentators that this letter from Laodicea is actually the book of Ephesians.¹

What we see very clearly from the end of Colossians is that the letters of the NT as Scripture were to be read by more than just the original recipients.

Nearly 2000 years later this is still the calling for local churches and individual Christians.

4. From verse 17 we may have the identity of the “pastor” of the church in Colossae or at least another key leader in the church – Archippus.

Before the entire congregation, he is called to take heed to his ministry given to him by the Lord Jesus Christ so that he might properly fulfill it.

Paul in chapter 1 spoke of his ministry using the same verb.

Col. 1:25 of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God,

5. Paul wrote to the Colossians while in prison or house arrest.

Paul ministered in Ephesus as we read in Acts 19 from about AD 52-55.

During Paul’s stay in Ephesus he likely sent out teams into surrounding areas to evangelize. One of the co-workers of Paul was a man named Epaphras.

Paul had never visited the church in Colossae, though we see from Philemon 22 that he wanted to spend time with them.

The traditional and I think the best view is that Colossians was written from Rome while Paul was under house arrest from AD 60-61.

In fewer than 2000 words in our translations and 95 verses, Paul powerfully answers and explains two things.

Who is Jesus Christ?

What does it mean to follow Him?

¹ For example see N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 12; IVP/Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 164-165.

Let us begin to answer these questions as we now turn to Col. 1:1-2 and then vv. 3-8.

2. COL. 1:1-2 – WE RECEIVE GOD’S GRACE TO US AS SAINTS AND FAITHFUL BRETHREN.

Col. 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

Col. 1:2 To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ *who are* in Colosse:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul as we have already seen from the end of the letter is the human author of Colossians.

It is not simply an old letter from Paul that we have but a divinely given message.

We do not make the letter to the Colossians the Word of God as neoliberalism teaches.

No, we receive the book of Colossians as the living Word of God.

Paul identifies himself not surprisingly as an apostle by the will of God.

Earlier this year I had a chance to study the book of Colossians with a number of pastors who originally were from other countries.

They commented on how a good number of pastors or supposed Christian leaders who use the title apostle.

From the stories I heard, some try to claim this title in what I would say is a blasphemous way, claiming that they are bringing new revelation and direction for the entire church of Jesus Christ.

It is true that in the NT the term apostle can have several meanings.

But here Paul uses it in a very special way reflecting His powerful calling where he was blinded by the glory of our risen Lord.

As such, it would be foolish to try to use this title today even if we used it in the sense of someone who is a messenger or sent with a particular commission.

Supporting this interpretation we see that Timothy who served very importantly with Paul is not also identified as an apostle.

Timothy is mentioned here because for many years he served with Paul.

Not many years later, Timothy was ministering in nearby Ephesus when Paul wrote the letter of 1 Timothy to him.

From verse 2 we see how Paul identified the Christians in the city of Colossae.

How are they identified?

They are called saints and faithful brethren in Christ.

Our word saint comes from the Latin word *sanctis*, which translates the Greek word meaning holy.

All those who are in Jesus Christ properly are called saints.

You are identified this way not to boost your self-esteem, but this is the reality of all who are in union with Jesus Christ.

I am sure you are familiar with the Roman Catholic tradition of declaring certain Christians to be saints because of their holy lives and miracles attributed to them.

Some of this false tradition starts fairly early in church history.

The *Dictionary of the Christian Church* writes that Origen (182-254) was the first of the Fathers to permit the theology of the cult of martyrs. Cyril (376-444) and Chrysostom (347-407) also made the distinction between those remembered at the Eucharist and the ordinary dead.²

Much tradition followed but we can say sadly that some bad theology started to develop relatively early in church history.

It is vital that we properly use Biblical language.

You do not make yourself a saint by holy living.

Rather because in Jesus Christ you are holy, you are called to live a life of holiness.

To the saints, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ, one translation reads.³

The word *brothers* in this context does properly speak of both men and women.

² "SAINTS," *NIDCC*, n.p.

³ NET Bible.

Both your holiness and faithfulness are found in union with Jesus Christ. There is no other foundation.

The phrase *in Christ* is one of the most important phrases found in the NT.

We speak of being in Christ as our union with Him.

Let me quote from Robert Reymond on what this means.

“Union with Christ is the fountainhead from which flows the Christian’s every spiritual blessing – repentance and faith, pardon, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification. Chosen in Christ before the creation of the world, and in the divine mind united with Christ in his death and resurrection, the elect, in response to God’s effectual call, are through God’s gift of faith, actually united to Christ. Their union with Christ is in no sense the effect of human causation.”⁴

If you wrote a letter 2000 years ago, after identifying who you were and to whom you were writing, you would express some sort of greeting.

In place of a simple or casual greeting such as cheers or hello, we find Paul and the other NT writers expressing a greeting of grace and peace.

The two words grace and peace summarize all the spiritual blessings described in the OT and NT.

Shalom or peace from the OT and grace especially emphasized in the NT speak of God’s undeserved blessings upon His people.

Grace is found at the beginning and end of this book.

Grace is given as you receive the truth of God’s Word. Scripture is one of the means of grace.

Grace is something you don’t earn or deserve.

It is given sovereignly by God.

It is something you are called to desire.

You are called to grow in grace.

May the word of God strengthen this desire so that you will often cry to God, be gracious to me for the sake of Jesus Christ my Lord.

⁴ Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 739.

3. COL. 1:3-8 – GIVE THANKS FOR FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE.

Col. 1:3 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; **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, **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; **7** 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.

Verses 3-8 in the NKJV and in the Greek from one long sentence.

It is very clear what Paul is saying, but it can difficult to try to summarize it because it is so rich. There is not a word that we can say can be ignored.

I want to have us focus on three very important words used in these verses, a key summary of the Christian life – faith, hope, and love.

1Cor. 13:13 And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love.

Do you see how Paul has used faith, love, and hope throughout our verses?

Faith – verse 4

Love – verses 4 and 8

Hope – verse 5

Paul never had met the believers in Colossae and yet he gave thanks to God for them and often prayed for them.

We could pause here for important application regarding prayer and thankfulness.

You don't have to only be thankful for those you know really well. Prayer should not be reserved for only those you really know.

Returning to faith, hope, and love, I want us to consider these three great gifts and callings for the remainder of our time.

1) Give thanks that you can have a true confession of faith and not live your life based on a wish or a fool's dream.

Verse 4 reads – your faith in Christ Jesus.

One of the great difficulties of the Greek language is the use of prepositions – to, in, into, etc.

In English we hear the phrase, faith in Jesus Christ, and we automatically think of believing in Jesus Christ.

Without trying to confuse anyone here, the preposition “in” that is used in verse 4 can have the meaning of the “living environment within which their faith is exercised.”⁵

F. F. Bruce further states, “The faith referred to is the faith which they have as men and women who are ‘in Christ.’”⁶

Whatever is the best translation or understanding, what is such a blessing is that our faith rests in the Lord Jesus Christ, the one through whom creation and redemption have been accomplished.

I am going to say that most people who are part of false religions know in their heart that their entire religion is really based on tradition. They do it because it is simply what they have been taught to do. There is an emptiness that nothing truly satisfies.

For most people in the west, science has become their basis for faith.

Technology is the grace we crave.

Progress or solving all the world's problems is the great goal.

And yet this is another empty tradition for those who pursue such. There is nothing that can provide assurance for the soul in the face of increasing doubt about being able to know anything.

Oh, how our hearts should be filled with thankfulness that we have something to fully trust in.

We know how we have ended up on earth.

We know the ultimate purpose for life.

We have full assurance that death is not the end.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

Later in Colossians 2:7 Paul writes,

Col. 2:7 rooted and built up in Him and established in the **faith**, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.

2) Give thanks for love. We have meaning and purpose in life in terms of our service to Jesus Christ and His people.

Verse 4 is a very good summary of what we observed the two previous weeks in our study of 1 John 4.

So much of the world is occupied by a search for meaning.

Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?

The only main question that you as a believer should have is how can I best use my time in service for Jesus Christ and in love for His people?

Paul through his friend and fellow worker, Epaphras, heard how the Colossians showed love for all the saints as we read in verse 4 and their love in the Spirit as we read in verse 8.

Rom. 15:30 Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me,

It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that the Christian is able to demonstrate true love for others.

Gal. 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

We are not told the details of the love shown by the Colossians.

From the testimony of Scripture we can define love in terms of how we *treat* each other and how we *serve* each other.

Later Paul writes in Colossians 3:12-14,

Col. 3:12 Therefore, as *the* elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; **13** bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also *must do*. **14** But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.

I believe it can be said that the things most worth doing in life are difficult. That which is most important is rarely easy.

This is why true Christian love must be the fruit of the Holy Spirit in following the great example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What is the love that you are showing to the saints who are part of this congregation?

Give thanks for the call and challenge of showing love.

3) Give thanks for the hope that we have not based on what we see on earth, but a hope that is laid up for you in heaven.

Take a look at Paul's logic in verses 4 and 5.

What does Paul say is the motivation for their faith and love?

Verse 5 begins with the word because.

Paul is presenting the reason why the Colossians demonstrated real faith and love.

It was due to a hope laid up in heaven which they heard in the proclamation of the gospel.

I really think that for Christians in the west, hope is not as important as it should be.

I say this especially because of all the blessings we enjoy in our nation, we really live pretty comfortable and satisfied lives.

Why do you need hope when you can have it all now!

I think you see this demonstrated when you talk to many people who live in the suburbs. We have it pretty good, from the perspective of the majority of the world's population.

It is vital that even as you acknowledge God's many gifts, that you never lose sight of our heavenly hope.

All the joys we have now are nothing in comparison to the glory that one day will be revealed.

All the sorrows also of life now are nothing in comparison to the glory that one day will be revealed.

Rom. 8:24 For we were saved in this **hope**, but **hope** that is seen is not **hope**; for why does one still **hope** for what he sees? **25** But if we **hope** for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for *it* with perseverance.

Titus 2:13 looking for the blessed **hope** and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,

From verse 6 we can add a reason for giving thanks.

Not only have you been given hope but as Paul describes the message of the gospel was bringing forth fruit in all the world.

It is often very difficult to judge the statistics about the spread of the gospel in South America, China, and other parts of the world.

In Brazil, for example, there is a massive cult group called the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

The unbelieving press identifies this false church, which just opened a \$300 million dollar building patterned after Solomon's Temple, as part of evangelical Christianity.⁷

These reports should trouble us but not discourage us.

As we look forward to the blessed return of Christ we also can have confidence that His true church will persevere and endure.

We can have confidence that God's truth will continue to spread even through times of darkness and confusion.

And this should be part of the encouragement that you continue to demonstrate truth faith and love.

CONCLUSION:

Lord's Supper in light of faith, love, and hope.

⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/01/brazil-evangelicals-politics-presidential-election>

Prayer

Hymn: 365

Benediction – Hebrews 12:1-3

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.