

Jacob London
 New Horizon United Reformed Church
 Mar 8, 2020

Thanksgiving to God

Colossians 1:3-8

Brothers and sisters of New Horizon when things go well in our church, when we receive blessings, if there is any good thing that takes place in our midst, it is God who should receive the glory.

It can be easy for churches to fall into pride, we can become egotistical, and begin to take satisfaction in ourselves as if we were doing the work. In many senses it is good to take pride in that which we work hard at, but we see in Colossians 1 that the Apostle Paul gives all the thanks and praise to God for the good that took place among them. It is God who did the work and God who deserves the glory. *“We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you”* (Col. 1:3 NKJV).

Lesson: The main point I hope you would take away from our time together is that Paul glorifies God for his work in his church. The opposite of that is that it is not our work, our church, and our glory.

Paul places this thought at the forefront of his letter because he wants to assert that God is the one in the midst of the church doing a good work, and he deserves the glory. He deserves the honour for what takes place in the Colossian church, and dear friends he deserves the honour for what he does in ours.

Now the manner in which this letter was written to the Colossians was very much the custom of their day. Often letters in the time period of the Apostles started with the name of the person sending the letter, as well as starting with a prayer and commendation. (We do not write emails in this manner).

If you have read Paul’s letters you will have noticed that typically in the first chapter he writes out a prayer and thanksgiving. Now the reason for this is twofold; 1) To direct thanksgiving to God who is the ultimate source of spiritual blessings; 2) and to encourage the believers.

*“We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your **faith in Christ Jesus** and of your **love for all the saints;**”* (vv3-4).

Immediately we see that Paul is writing this thanksgiving to encourage them for what they have been doing right, but not writing up a long list of the things that the Colossian church has done well, but is focused upon two things in his prayers. *Faith* and *love*. Let us take a moment and look at each of these attributes of the Colossian church.

Point 1: Thanking God for *Faith*

Paul in his prayer to the Colossians is praying and thanking God for their faith. But what does it mean to have faith? I am sure if you asked people on the streets of Toronto, ‘Do you have faith?’ most of them would say they have faith. Whether that's faith in another god, the government, even themselves, we all have faith in something. Yet Paul says here, he thanks God for their faith. Faith in the Christian religion.

Now, one does not simply have faith by bear profession alone. What does it mean to have true faith? One must lay claim to the object of faith by embracing the ministry through the preaching of the Word outwardly, but also inwardly dwells within our heart (HC Q&A. 21). Faith is an internal reality.

21. Q. What is true faith?

A: True faith is not only a sure knowledge by which I hold as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word; it is also a wholehearted trust; which the Holy Spirit works in me by the gospel, that God has freely granted, not only to others but to me also, forgiveness of sins, eternal righteousness, and salvation. These gifts are purely of grace, only because of Christ’s merit.

What our catechism makes clear, is that it is one thing to understand the gospel, but you must also lay hold to the object of faith. So we ask, what is the object of faith? *“We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your **faith in Christ Jesus**”* (v.3). It's faith in Christ that is *true* faith. Faith in Christ is not only intellectual but also an inward spiritual reality. It is faith in Christ that brings us from a state of damnation to a state of salvation.

Paul says that he first thanks God for the church's faith. Why? Typically when we pray we thank God for his Word, the congregation, his mercy, why start with faith? The reason Paul starts with the subject of faith is because it proceeds all other virtues of religion. Without faith one cannot be a Christian. Without faith one cannot understand the Word. You see, faith precedes all other spiritual blessings. It is the foundation and root of godliness; it is the gate of life, through which God himself enters our midst.

So we learn faith is essential to the Christian life. Simply put, without faith someone cannot be a Christian. *“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”* (Heb. 11:6 NKJV).

We see that the Apostle shows that a general assent to faith will not justify us in the sight of God. Paul gives thanks to God that they have beheld the object of a true and saving faith. And this object is, *Christ Jesus* who is the mediator and saviour. For *Christ Jesus* means nothing else than - anointed saviour.

Now Paul did not think this up out of thin air, the whole of the scriptures testify to this reality. Jesus said in John 5:39, *“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me”* The prophets described him; the ceremonies of the law foreshadowed him; the gospels reveal him. The principle object of all of the Bible and of our faith is Jesus Christ, our saviour and our mediator.

Application:

Now why does this matter to you? Dear person listening to this message, how does this affect you in your daily life?

1. When we thank God for all of the blessings that he has given us let us not overlook the gift of faith. Faith is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8)! Is it the root of all other blessings.
2. Thus, the whole of the Bible is your comfort and solace in Christ. Because it all pertains to him, we can seek him in each book, chapter, and verse and be nourished and encouraged in our faith.
3. Thus, we see in our friends and family members we must encourage them to go beyond a general assent to faith. Have we beheld the object of our faith, the Lord Jesus Christ? It is he alone who makes our faith real and saving.

Point 2: Thanking God for Love

The second characteristic that Paul praises God for is the attribute of love. Love in our culture and time is often understood as something that is without boundaries. The popular romance movies are about breaking the rules for the sake of love, running away from mom and dad for the sake of love, doing whatever you want for the sake of love! There are no boundaries to love. Yet, this is simply not true. Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians that love comes from God. *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,”* (Gal. 5:22 NKJV). The only way we may truly know good and perfect love is if we know God. John says, *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”* (1 John 4:7-8 NKJV). Love comes from God.

Notice that he does not say, “I am thankful because you are loving, or that you do love, or that you are in love.” No, he says, *“and of the love you have for all the saints-”*. I am thankful you love the saints, says Paul.

Now this is not to the exclusion of others, for Jesus himself taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves. But to those who are joined with us to God we ought to embrace with a special love.

Now we mentioned that the object of faith is Christ, so Paul saying that the object of our love is the saints? Or is it Christ?

Paul commends them for their love for the saints, but the saints are neither the only nor the primary object of Christian love. St. Augustine says, *there are four objects of our [Christian] love; one, that which is above us, God; another, that which is ourselves; the third, that which is near to us, our neighbour; that which is beneath us, our own body.*

Obviously the chief of our loves should always be God himself. But it is out of a love for God that we love our neighbours, our brethren in the Lord. When we see in our lives a lack of love for our neighbour, it displays for us a lack of love for God. When we struggle to submit to our church, our elders, it really shows us that we need is a greater love for the Lord.

For out of love for him springs up love for others. Paul commends them for their love for each other, knowing that it reflects the ultimate reality of their love for God.

Application:

1. I would like to address a very real application in our day and age. When I was in young people's (youth group), we were youth just when Facebook was becoming popular. The dawn of the social media age. I cannot even begin to describe the impact that it

had on the minds of the young people I went to church with. We went from young and silly preteens who took silly pictures for fun, to young adults trying to look like models. We had women in our schools, churches and friend groups who struggled with anorexia and bulimia because they were comparing themselves to other people online. I know men and women who have struggled with depression, where they hated who they were, due in large part to social media. How can we encourage these people? What we need for these young men and women is to encourage them to a greater love of God. When we love God more we begin to rightly love our neighbours, church, and even ourselves. We see humans, including us, as made in the image of God. When we love God we love God we see who we truly are, as sons and daughters of the King of glory.

Point 3: - God produces *Hope*

In verses 3-4 that Apostle explains why he gives thanks to God, the *faith* and *love* of the Colossians. Now we must remember that Paul is writing this where is he? A Roman prison. The Christian faith is illegal in the Roman empire. They are being persecuted and despised by many. Why does he give thanks for their *faith* and *love*, which is so small and feeble?

Paul tells them, “*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*” (v.5).

We may draw three comforting truths from this doctrine. 1) The name of our heavenly reward: *our hope*. 2) The manner of receiving this reward: *laid up*. 3) the place of receiving it: *in heaven*.

3.1- *Our Hope*

Notice the word *hope*. This points us forward, it encourages us to look to the celestial happiness we shall receive with Christ in heaven. This is the hope of the resurrection, that in the return of Christ our bodies will not be left in the grave but shall be raised to new life with him. This is the hope of salvation that we experience in part now but shall receive in fullness in eternity.

And this hope is offered to all who are in Christ Jesus. And you know what else the Bible teaches us about hope? It should be expected by us with patience.

Hope in this sense is not “I wish upon a star” or “our wildest imagination” when the Bible speaks of hope, it speaks of hope as a certainty of what is to come. “*But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.*” (Rom. 8:25 NKJV). We need to have a patient expectation when it comes to the hope of scripture. While on earth we patiently await Christ's return, but we never forget it, but eagerly expect it.

Christ is the only one that deserves our *hope*. This world will let us down and not support us, only Christ is never failing, only Christ is ever faithful, and he is your *hope*, if you come to him in faith. And this shows us that we are to place our hope in him and his gospel and not other worldly or carnal means.

3.2 - *Laid up*

Though we have Christ and his gospel in part, we do not experience all of its blessings immediately. The fulfillment of the hope of the gospel is said to be *laid up* for us in heaven.

Now the words *laid up* indicate to us that we can be certain of the attainment of eternal life. Therefore, when you close your eyes that final time, when you breathe your last, you can be certain that what awaits you is your blessed hope. It is a treasure kept in heaven for his children from God the Father himself.

What this means is that even though on earth we will all die; although sickness may claim us from this life; even though this world will seek to destroy us (government discourages us), that our inheritance in Christ is kept safe in heaven for us and we will enjoy it on the last day. Christ has already taught us this, “*Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*” (Lk. 12:32 NKJV).

We have a great certainty of eternal life because we are taught that this treasure is *laid up in heaven* for us.

3.3 - *In heaven*

Behold the place where the treasure is! And what we learn is that once you receive the treasure of Christ he can never be taken away from you. Think of how comforting this is for those in the persecuted church whose possessions, wealth, and even lives are taken from them, but the evil one will never take away their Christ... What is hidden in heaven is beyond the danger of loss. Kept in heaven forever.

Secondly, we learn by the words *kept in heaven* is that our salvation is not anything low, human, or earthly, but divine, celestial, and magnificent.

Lastly, if our hope be laid up in heaven, where should we cast our minds for comfort, for hope, for encouragement? We cast our minds to heaven. *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* (Lk. 12:34). Jesus, our hope, our treasure, is in heaven and there may our hearts be also.

Point 4: *Through the preaching of the gospel*

“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, 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; as you also learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf” (vv.5-7).

Paul is the apostle of God and he commends the faith and love of the Colossian church, the reason they have faith and love is on account of the hope that they have in Christ. But where does this hope come from that springs up faith and love? How does God produce within us faith in Christ, love for God and his people, and hope in salvation and the life to come?

The Apostle answers, it is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is found in his life, death, and resurrection. It is found in the God-man himself. Through the preaching of the gospel God the Spirit worked in their hearts hope, which produced faith in Christ and a love for God and love for their neighbor.

Thus Paul asserts again to this wayward church that its the preaching of the gospel that is the instrument that God uses to produce faith and hope in his people.

And not only does the preaching of the gospel produce in us faith, love, and hope, which are invisible and intangible. But Paul reveals even more the glory of the gospel, *“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” (v.6). This truth, simply put, is that the preaching of the gospel is efficacious to do its work. The gospel had come to the Colossians not the Colossians to the gospel. It was God who sought them out and did a good work in their church, and it is God who does the work throughout the world as well.

Conclusion:

Brothers and sisters may these words comfort our souls. In Paul’s opening words of thanksgiving, he ascribes the whole of their salvation, their love for one another, their future hope, and the fruits of ministry to the work of God. It was God who brought about faith, love, and hope. It was God brought forth the fruits of the ministry, and God is able to bring these about in the Colossian church he is able to do it in our church as well. It is God who we trust with the results of the ministry.

Today, I offer some homework to you saints here at New Horizon. The first question is, do you pray for our church? I bet you if we spent as much time praying and thanking God for his work in his church as we do criticizing it, that the church would be in a much better place. So, the question stands do you pray for New Horizon, do you pray for the church as a whole? And, are your prayers more to do with what is wrong, then celebrating the good that God has done?

Paul lays down for us an example of how we should pray for God’s church. Yes, bring all of your needs, wants, and desires before him. Let us never forget to rejoice in the good that he has done in us, and is doing, and will do in our midst.