

## Reasons for Thankfulness

Col. 1:1-8; Psalm 100:1-5; Luke 17:11-19

We know a key to life is acts of thankfulness, and an attitude and lifestyle of gratitude. I suspect we don't aspire to be like the 9 lepers. So here are some quotes: "Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it." - William Arthur Ward.

"No one who achieves success does so without acknowledging the help of others. The wise and confident acknowledge this help with gratitude." - Alfred North Whitehead.

"We would worry less if we praised more. Thanksgiving is the enemy of discontent and dissatisfaction." - H.A. Ironside.

"Silent gratitude isn't very much use to anyone." - Gertrude Stein.

"Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, confusion to clarity, chaos to order. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend." - Melody Beattie

"The way to develop the best that is in a person is by appreciation and encouragement." - Charles Schwab.

Melani Knight tells this story that I'm shortening considerably. "I'm 16 & sitting on a plane going from Cancun back home to Toronto. I end up sitting next to a kind, gentle, old man, reading the New York Times. When the hot towel comes I start giggling with embarrassment & confusion, what do I do with this? And he says to me, "Just wipe your hands with it."

Melani thanks him and that breaks the ice. They talk for the entire flight, sharing about their lives, including that she lives in a Mennonite town, Elmira in Ontario. At the end of their flight she asks him for his email, but he says, "I don't have email, but let me give you my phone number and address." He writes it

down on the back of a napkin. They become pen pals and sometimes they phone.

One time Tom Fitzgerald called and says he wants to contribute to her university education. This amazes and confuses Melani. Her family doesn't need the help. But she checks with her parents. They do accept and receive a check. She sends Tom a copy of her acceptance letter to university with a "big fat thank you," her words, and moves to Newfoundland. But she did not pack the napkin.

Meanwhile, her mother moved to Vancouver, and didn't keep anything that was nonessential. So, the napkin was lost, as well as past correspondence. And as Melanie describes herself, "Being a moronic teenager, I didn't write his address down anywhere. It stresses me out just thinking about it again." She tried to google Tom but had no success in finding him among the many Tom Fitzgerald's. She goes on to talk about being so stupid, thinking about him, as well as having a pit in her stomach, over the next few years. And every once in a while she tried to find him again. She couldn't even send him an invitation to her university graduation which he had asked her to do.

Six years had gone by, starting the Petty Harbour Mini Aquarium in Newfoundland, marriage, & moving to BC. But then Melani hired a private investigator. He asked for a writing sample. Of course she didn't have one. But she remembered, "Tom likes marching bands, and he wrote his Ts a little weird. He adds a little hat to the top."

Two weeks later Melanie received a call. The investigator said, "I had to do some digging. I called a couple of people who were not your Tom and now their wives are mad at them, because they are not sure why some man is asking if they ever gave money to a young girl. But I found your Tom. His secretary affirmed the handwriting sample and in ten minutes he is going to call you. Is that cool? Is that ok?"

Tom was still alive, at age 85. They rebuilt their relationship. Melanie profusely apologized and thanked him. In 2017 Tom attended the anniversary celebration of the organization Melanie had started, and met her again. He saw his return on investment in Melanie. And Melanie has Tom's full name, number and address written down in many different places. I wonder, how many other people have been this grateful to Tom? And how often has Melanie reached out to help others?

Thankfulness, gratitude, appreciation, recognition isn't just an action. It's a lifestyle. A gut reaction. An attitude. And we see this in the Apostle Paul, over and over again. It wasn't just a way to butter up people before he had to straighten them out. Thankfulness toward and about others was a real emotion for Paul. And it was thankfulness based on specific reality.

So after introducing himself at the start of his letter, he offers his usual blessing. **“Grace and peace to you from God our Father.”**

Next he tells the believers at Colossae, **“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.”** How can you get mad at someone who is praying for you and is thankful for you?

Even though Paul needed to address some problems at Colossae, he began by expressing his thankfulness to God for the church. He uses the pronoun “we” to emphasize the corporate nature of his ministry. Thanksgiving must be part of every prayer that we pray. Notice Paul says that he “always” gives thanks. This was his practice and habit. The word “thanks” here comes from the Greek word that is translated, “Eucharist,” which refers to the Lord's Supper. Communion is a time of thankfulness for what Jesus has done on the Cross. So being thankful reminds us of communion.

And even though Paul had heard some good things about the Colossians, he directed his thanks to the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul's frequent use of “Father” alludes to an

important Old Testament metaphor for God's covenantal relationship with His people. So right off, as we discovered last week, Paul thought carefully about his words. Each one it seems has a purpose. It points to some value, and belief and special reminder.

Then Paul goes on to say, **“because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus.”** This is not just flattery so that they will listen to him. Notice he elevates the role & position of Jesus. He uses the titles Lord and Christ regularly as well as emphasizing God the Father. These all tie into countering the heresy at Colossae. Paul has carefully thought out his message and does not waste any time or paper. He didn't have a computer to cut, paste, spell check & re-write!

So in the first three verses, Paul lays the groundwork for the major teaching of Colossians, which is: - The Supremacy of Christ. In verse 2, he uses the phrase, “in Christ.” In verse 3 the titles, “Our Lord Jesus Christ” are used. This triple name expresses the divinity, humanity, and messianic office of the Savior. The title “Lord” refers to His deity. He is God and Lord of all. The name “Jesus” speaks of his incarnation. He was born into the human race and walked on this earth. “Christ” reminds us that He came as the sacrifice for our sins as the promised Messiah.

To emphasize this point, notice the inverse word order of “Christ Jesus.” Usually we say Jesus Christ. But Paul's reason is to emphasize Jesus' messiahship. Christ, means, “messiah,” so this reads: Messiah Jesus. We will see as the letter goes on, one of the threats is from a Jewish group that may be questioning Jesus' messiahship and prominence. So Paul begins with Christ's awesome title in the first sentence.

Then notice three specific traits Paul is thankful for. **“We have heard of your faith, and of the love you have for all the saints – the faith and love that springs from hope that is stored up for you in heaven.”** This is a dose of I Corinthians 13. . Even though Paul had never visited the Christians at Colossae, he

heard of their faith, their love, and their hope. While these three virtues are linked together in other passages, the phrase is not a mere formula, thrown in for effect, but a genuine statement in which each word is profoundly significant. And the order is important.

**Faith in Christ Jesus** is the starting point for believing and following Messiah Jesus. This vertical focus leads to, **Love for all the saints**. The Colossae believers had an especially open and far-reaching love. Instead of only loving people who are "just like them," they had demonstrated a love for "saints," people set apart to God. We know Colossae attracted people from a variety of places. And when they arrived they were shown generous hospitality and showered with love.

Faith, that is belief in Jesus, can be faked. Love can be put on - at least for a while. But faith and love together are key earmarks of solid Christians. The vertical dimension of faith leads to the horizontal element of love. Because of what Jesus had done in their lives, they were able to love "all" the saints. Paul uses the article "the" in front of love to make it more concrete. This love is not an abstract principle or even a gushy feeling. This is agape love, which has sacrifice as its key character. It's displayed in actions. Love is a transforming act because it is really faith in motion.

Underlying faith and love, comes hope. And hope is built up from these two and "is stored up for you in heaven." Back to a vertical focus. This focus is not this-worldly, but other-worldly, set upon an inheritance for believers in heaven. This word "stored up," or "laid up" originally means, "to put away for safekeeping," and "to reserve as award or recompense." It was a common term in documents expressing appreciation of someone for a sense of civic or other communal responsibility. So Paul's readers had an understanding of why Paul was thankful for them. They were exhibiting faith, love & hope.

And hope here is more than a reward for faith and love. A solid hope is good protection against the enticements of heretical teachings of any kind. Paul had good reason for thanksgiving to God after hearing that faith, love and hope were imbedded in the Colossians' ongoing encounter with God. Hope here is joyful expectancy, a sense of certainty, and confidence.

William Barclay offers this helpful explanation. "Christian hope is that God's way is the best way and the only real peace, the only real joy, the only true & lasting rewards are to be found in it. Loyalty to Christ may bring trouble here, but that is not the last word. The world may laugh contemptuously at the folly of the way of love. But the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man. Christian hope is the confidence that it is better to stake one's life on Almighty God than to believe the world."

Why have faith in Christ if there is no hope for a glorious future? Why love others if it doesn't matter in the end? Hope makes all the difference because we have a confident expectation that everything God says in His Word is true today, or will come true in the future. Hope is stored up for us like a treasure. God guarantees our salvation in eternity. We can blow it down here but we will never lose our salvation because we didn't do anything to get it in the first place.

And these reasons for thankfulness come from, "the **word of truth**, the gospel that has come to you." Today many people are sharing their version of truth about many ideas. And this can confuse us like I'm sure the believers at Colossae were. So it's important to grab on to and hope in the word of truth, the gospel. It's the truth of Almighty Creator God. The word of truth and the gospel are the same thing. "Gospel" simply means "good news." The verb form means to "preach or proclaim good news." The gospel is to be shared with others because it is the word of truth. There is no other truth worth proclaiming.

The Gospel is for the whole world. Paul is rejoicing because this gospel is going “all over the world.” The gospel that has come to the city of Colossae is the same gospel going around the globe today. The Savior has one message of good news, one word of truth for everyone. This is why we support a variety of organizations that share good news – verbally and practically with love, bringing hope. It’s a key purpose and call on us as a church.

And Paul is thankful that the Gospel produces life and growth. Verse 6. **“All over the world the gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth.”** The grammar here indicates that there is an innate energy in the message of the gospel. The gospel is alive, growing, spreading, bearing fruit, and spreading some more. When the gospel is heard and believed, lives change radically. We each have our own stories of the Holy Spirit at work in us and among us. It is the power of God, convicting us of sin and changing lives in many ways, for the better.

And Paul is grateful for “God’s grace in all its truth.” The message of God’s truth is a message of grace. We cannot earn acceptance before God. Salvation is by grace alone through faith. We don’t have to jump through certain hoops or follow a set of human made regulations. One of the false teachings in the church of Colossae was legalism and so Paul establishes that the gospel is the truthful good news of grace. We receive what we don’t deserve, not when we’re good enough, but when we recognize that we’re bad enough to be disqualified from it.

Of all the world religions, Christianity alone offers salvation without demands for pious works. The gospel of grace is truly good news. It brings growth and fruit in faith, love, hope, truth, and sharing it with others.

Then to finish up, let’s remind ourselves about **Epaphras**. Verses 7 and 8. We can assume he is a founder of the church in Colossae. He is

described as a fellow servant and colleague of Paul. The word here can be translated, “fellow slave.” So in Paul’s reference to Epaphras he’s pointing out they both have a master – Messiah Christ Jesus. He’s described as a faithful servant minister of Christ. And Epaphras is the one who told Paul about the situation of the church in Colossae. So Paul doesn’t hide where he received news about the believers.

We don’t know much about Epaphras, but it’s safe to guess that he was a native of Colossae and converted by Paul during his ministry in near by Ephesus. The mention of Epaphras as co-worker at this point in a Pauline epistle is unusual, and the strength of Paul’s endorsement of him is also important to notice. And it’s not a bad tactic to praise a founding pastor before offering some corrective theology.

He is mentioned one other time in Colossians 4:12 which reads, “Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.” Please notice he is described as a “prayer warrior.” He wrestles in prayer for the Colossian believers - even from the distance of hundreds of miles away in Rome, where we assume Paul wrote this letter.

And we hear about him again in Philemon 23: “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings.” (Philemon 23) So at some point, Epaphras was also a prisoner, who was either in jail with Paul or living with him under house arrest. We don’t know the circumstances of Epaphras’s imprisonment.

So to make all this information practical, what do you think about Paul’s tactics? What are some actions steps you can take from Paul’s example of thankfulness? How are you thankful for this church and the conference and Anabaptist theology? Please take some time this week to reflect on this scripture passage, the sermon & a commentary. May it help all of us grow and be fruitful in our faith, love, hope, trust in the truth, and become more thankful.