

St. Matthew's Anglican Church

Lapeer, MI

“On Guard: Finding Strength in an Ever-Weakening World”

Part 1 of 4 – Colossians 1:1-14

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TEXT

Colossians 1:1-14

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ²To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶which 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, ⁷just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf ⁸and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

⁹And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. ¹¹May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

PRAYER

Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you.

It is in the name of Jesus Christ that we pray. Amen.

SERMON

Introduction

On June 7, 2003, the Episcopal Church of the United States of America consecrated its first openly gay bishop, a move that virtually cemented the permanent existence of our own denomination, the Anglican Mission in the Americas. Almost a year ago today, on July 14, 2009, the Episcopal Church decided that all ordained ministries were open to homosexuals, and after two decades of warnings, the Anglican Communion has finally decided to discipline ECUSA. Yet, these events were not the beginning of the Episcopal Church's decline. They had already ordained a gay priest in 1989, an action that many had been fearing for a decade or more.

Before I continue I want you all to understand my stance on the issue of homosexuality. I wholeheartedly believe that the church should be engaged in ministry to homosexuals, that we should love all people equally, welcome them into our churches, and do our best to show the love of Christ to them. However, we cannot compromise the Gospel, and the Bible is clear that homosexuality is a sin. While I believe that the church is the place for sinners to come and find peace for their souls, I also firmly believe that anyone who is openly engaged in sinful behavior is disqualified for leadership of any sort within the church. When sin has entangled us, it is time to listen and follow, not to lead. But the purpose of my sermon is not to engage the topic of how I envision ministering to homosexuals. Rather it is to understand how an entire denomination of once strong and orthodox Christians can be led to believe something which is false, heretical, and destructive to the soul, and more so how we can avoid the same mistake.

Many Anglicans believe that the adoption of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer led to recent events, because it downplayed personal responsibility for sin as compared to previous prayer books. I believe there is truth to this, but it is more complicated than merely making

theological errors. It also has much to do with adopting the ethics of one's culture as opposed to living as Christ has taught us. There were numerous theological and ethical mistakes made along the path to ordaining someone living in open sin; mistakes such as denying the inerrancy and full authority of Scripture over one's life, rejecting the existence of original sin, refusing to believe that Christ is fully divine and the only means to salvation, and allowing the culture to dictate one's moral standards, whether we're talking about homosexuality, premarital sex, abortion, or any other ethical decision.

The road to heresy and sin is usually a slow one. Most churches do not find themselves moving from living faithfully upon the words of Christ to living upon the standards of society over night. That is not the way Satan works. He moves slow. He tears down society an inch at a time, until what once was known as sin is now accepted, until the One who was our all in all is now just another path to heaven. How can we be on our guard against making such mistakes? How can we find strength in an ever-weakening world?

The Colossian Situation

The Christian church at Colossae faced much the same questions when Paul wrote to them and was about the same age as this church. The church was less than a decade old, and it was founded by Epaphras, not Paul, although the two had become friends and were imprisoned together. The town of Colossae itself had once been a thriving city but had fallen on hard times by the time Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians, much the same as has happened in Lapeer. Although there were numerous gods idolized in Colossae, the church remained obedient to the Gospel preached by the apostles.¹ Yet, it seemed that there were some who were tempting the congregation to deviate from the truth of Scripture.

¹ Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary 44 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), xxvi-xxx.

While we don't know the exact heresies that had begun to infiltrate the church, it seems that there was internal "pressure to conform 'to the beliefs and practices of their pagan and Jewish neighbours.'"² "No doubt those who sought to make inroads into the community presupposed that they were Christians,"³ and the church as a whole was in danger of being led astray by their false teachings. Paul knows that the church is at a crossroads, faced with both internal and external pressures to water down the Gospel and conform to society, a path that will lead them away from God, not towards him. "He is aware of the methods employed by the false teachers and issues a strong warning to the Colossians to be on their guard."⁴ But the letter to the Colossians is more than a warning, it gives us practical teaching on who Christ is and how to live in a world that would deny him. Over the next four weeks we will explore this letter together, draw strength from it, come to a deeper understanding of who Christ is, and in the process learn how to be on our guard against both ethical and theological mistakes.

Prayer for the Church

Paul's letter begins in his typical fashion, by identifying who he is and wishing the church grace and peace from God. Even here there are two things I want us to note so let's read those first two verses of Colossians together:

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ²To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

For our purposes today the first thing I want us to realize is that Paul and Timothy are writing this letter together. It was not uncommon for Paul to use a scribe to write his letters, but here he is giving equal importance to Timothy, I believe, because of the nature of what will follow, a prayer, but more on that in a minute. The second thing to note is the greeting of grace

² Ibid, xxxi.

³ Ibid, xl.

⁴ Ibid, xxxviii.

and peace. Paul uses this greeting often, and so do I in many of my letters and emails, but let's not take for granted what this means. The words sound so simple, "grace and peace," but the desire behind it is deep and rich. When you wish someone to receive the grace of God, you are intervening on their behalf that they would know the mercy of God, his free gift of salvation, and to wish them peace is to pray that their relationships will be whole, especially with God.⁵ So in fact to say "grace and peace" to someone is to pray for their eternal salvation and reconciliation.

Thanksgiving -

As Paul often does he quickly moves to the content of his prayer for the Colossians, which will carry through the remainder of the passage we'll cover today. Let's just look at verses 3-8 together:

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶which 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, ⁷just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf ⁸and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

I don't know about you, but when I pray I have a tendency to jump directly to what concerns me. Even when I do take time to begin my prayer by thanking God for something, my mind is already racing ahead to the needs pressing me. How often do we stop, like Paul, and just focus on thanksgiving? Can you imagine what a difference it would make in your life to frequently thank God just for your salvation? "For Paul, prayers of thanksgiving are the proper foundation for the church because its life rests in the certainty of Christ's salvific work."⁶ Our first defense against making ethical and theological mistakes is to pray. But that prayer is not

⁵ Ibid., 5-6.

⁶ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting of the Word, Year C, Vol. 3*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 236.

alone. Remember that this letter is also from Timothy, and from this passage we know that Epaphras is there as well. Our first guard in this world is to pray without ceasing, corporately as well as individually, and to maintain a posture of thankfulness towards God.

Faith, Love, and Hope -

At a deeper level is what Paul is thankful for—the faith, love, and hope of the Colossians. Paul is thankful for the faith that the Colossians have in Christ, which is itself the basis of “Christian existence,” and for the way this shows itself through serving one another in love.⁷ We often think Paul and James are a world apart in their views of faith and good works, but that isn’t so. While James’ letter may focus more on the works aspect, he and Paul both believe that your faith should lead to loving service to others. But what is it that drives faith and love? It is the hope we have in Christ, “the act of hoping as well as the objective content of [our] hope,” namely our salvation, resurrection, and eternal life, all to God’s glory.⁸ In other words, what you believe about the future should affect your present behavior and guard you against false teachings.

Bearing Fruit -

Furthermore, Paul says that all of this, which is the truth of the Gospel, is nothing new, and it should bear fruit in your life which leads to growth. Have you ever noticed how we try to push fruit bearing until after we’ve grown into mature Christians. We want to think that we have nothing useful to say or do for Christ until we’ve mastered the Bible or spiritual disciplines. Yet that is not the pattern of nature, nor is it what Paul says. In nature as in Paul’s example, a tree bears fruit at the beginning of the growing season and continues to grow afterwards.⁹ The very

⁷ O’Brien, 11.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ben Witherington III, *The Letter to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 112.

act of bearing fruit leads to further growth. In the same way, the more you focus on what you are doing outwardly, how you are either positively or negatively, directly or indirectly, affecting others for Christ, the more you will grow inwardly. Which will in turn further protect you from being led astray by others.

Prayer, especially that which is thankful, faith, love, and hope, and bearing fruit for growth – all these will give you strength in this world of ours, but there is one other area that Paul covers in this passage.

The Knowledge of God

Let's read verses 9-14 together:

⁹And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. ¹¹May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

In addition to what Paul is thankful for in the lives of the Colossian believers, he specifically prays for them to be filled with the “knowledge of [God’s] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (v. 9). I believe this little paragraph is one of the best descriptions of the Christian life in the Bible. Walk through it with me. Knowledge of God’s will leads to right behavior that is pleasing to God, which bears fruit in our lives in service to others, which leads to further knowledge of God, an infinite circle if there ever was one (v. 10). As we continue to study and obey the Word of God with the Holy Spirit’s help, we will bear fruit in other’s lives and deepen our relationship with God. We cannot continue to think that what we do and say, or what we think about the truth of Scripture, has no affect on others or our relationship with God. It does!

Continuing on, as our knowledge of God grows, we will find more strength, and not just ordinary strength, but strength “with all power,” God’s power, which will give us not only endurance and patience, but the ability to do so joyfully (v.11). And what is it we are enduring for, where does our strength ultimately lay? It is in our inheritance, the gift that God has given to all the saints, that we have been freed from darkness and evil and given citizenship in the Kingdom of Christ, who has forgiven all our sins that we may have eternal life (vv. 12-14).

Those are all present tense verbs my friends. We aren’t waiting to be delivered from evil and given eternal life. Jesus’ kingdom is now! We may still live in the midst of temptation and suffering, but calling Jesus Lord and Savior means you are already immortal. You’re simply waiting on Christ to restore your body and mind fully into the image of God, to restore creation itself, and to destroy evil once and for all. We do not know when that will happen, but until then we are not left defenseless and weak to those who would deny its reality.

Conclusion

By continuing to seek after God’s will, through study and prayer, by placing our faith in Christ and showing love to others, which comes from our hope that we have in his promises, and by bearing fruit for growth, we will be on guard against the false teachings that have led so many other churches and individuals astray. Our strength does not rest in the ways of this world. That will only lead you farther from God. Our strength comes from Christ. He alone is truth. He alone can save you and give you eternal life. He alone can give you endurance and patience with joy. “We cannot generate such joyful hope by ourselves or from ourselves, but Christ working within us can and does create and sustain hope, which in turn gives us courage to love.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Bartlett and Taylor, 235.

If you do not have that hope, if you've never known Christ as Savior, or if you've grown distant from him and meandered into the world, come home to him now. He is calling you into a relationship with him. He is all the strength you need. Let us pray...

Lord Jesus, I pray that if there are any present who don't know you or want to know you better, that they will seek after you, that they will come forward for prayer now or during Communion, or that they will talk to me or Deacon Colleen as soon as possible. Amen!

Friends, my door is always open to you for prayer or counsel, and I know Colleen feels the same way. If you can't find the courage to speak to one of us today, I beg you to call the church office and find out when you can meet with one of us. This world can be a tough place in which to live, and our job is to help you in your walk with the Lord. I pray that your walk with him is a joyful one, and I pray that Christ is your strength. Grace and peace. Amen.

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