

Encouragement and Admonition

In the name of Jesus, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father.” With these words the Apostle Paul begins his letter of instruction to the Christian Church at Colossae. It is for several reasons unique among Paul’s epistles. Just for instance, we have no record that Paul himself ever visited the congregation. It’s likely that most of the members never met him; but they surely would have known about him. You see, on his third mission trip Paul spent three years in the city of Ephesus on the west coast of what is Turkey today. During this time he trained a number of evangelists and pastors to continue the work of spreading the Gospel in the area after he’d gone. One of them, we don’t know who for sure, took the saving message of Jesus to Colossae, about 100 miles from Ephesus. And there, by God’s grace and the power of his Word, sprang up what we might think of as a second generation church – a church not founded directly by one of the Apostles, but rather by a disciple of an Apostle.

It seems that for some time the congregation there enjoyed a period of relative stability and growth in matters of the Spirit. Unfortunately, whenever things are going well in a church, you can bet that Satan is not happy about it. And so he goes to work to undermine what the Lord is doing through his Word to bring the sin enslaved and lost into his kingdom of light. That’s what happened at Colossae. A pack of false teachers – like the thieves who fell upon the man traveling to Jericho – descended upon the congregation and began throwing its members into confusion. We don’t know everything that these wolves in sheep’s clothing taught, but based on what Paul writes to help those who were under assault, we have some pretty good ideas. In general, it seems the false teachers were insisting that Christians must follow a number of Jewish ceremonial laws that were originally meant to point to Christ. In addition to that, they imposed a rigid form of asceticism on their hearers. That is, they said that in order to be a really good Christian you had to be constantly fasting and depriving yourself of many of life’s valid pleasures. To be truly holy, they said, you had to avoid as much as possible the good gifts of creation that the Lord made for our enjoyment.

And we can understand why Christian people might be tempted fall for these kinds of teachings. After all, the Old Testament is full of ceremonial laws that the Lord wanted his people Israel to obey. So it *seems* a very biblical and godly thing to continue to follow them. It’s not though. As Paul will write to the Colossians later in the letter, “These things were merely shadows of what was to come”, namely Christ and his work of atonement on the cross. Now that you have the object, Christ, why in the world do you want to focus on the shadow he cast? It doesn’t make sense. Likewise, it seems only natural to people that an ascetic lifestyle – one of purposely going without certain pleasures – should somehow be pleasing to the Lord. It’s like saying, “See, Lord? Look how I’m choosing to suffer for your sake. See how devoted I am” in the hope that earned you special favor in his eyes. And that, of course, is the problem with what these false teachers were saying. They were directing Christians to look for the assurance of their salvation in the observance of ceremonial laws that are no longer applicable and in self imposed disciplines rather than in Christ who lived the perfect life for us and died as the sacrifice for our sins.

The pastor of the church at Colossae was a man named Epaphras. He may well have been the evangelist who first preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ there, or he may have come along later; it really doesn’t matter. What did matter was that his authority and credibility in the congregation were being undermined by the false teachers. The people didn’t know whom to trust. They respected Epaphras; but what the false teachers were saying sure made a lot of

sense to them: the old flesh always wants to imagine there's something it can do to please God. And if these teachers were right, well, then ol' Epaphras was full of beans on this score at least. And something to understand was that Epaphras couldn't just pull out his handy Bible and show the congregation that what he was teaching was right. The New Testament hadn't been written yet. So poor Epaphras found himself outnumbered by his adversaries who had the backing of both of the Old Testament Scriptures (or so it seemed) and human reason.

He was in over his head. Fortunately, he had the humility to admit it. So it is that Epaphras traveled all the way to Rome, some fourteen hundred miles away, in order to consult with the one man he knew could sort things out: the Apostle Paul, who was in prison there on account of his faithfulness to the cause of Christ. Actually, at this time, Paul was under more of what you might think of as house arrest. He was living in a home constantly chained to a guard. But at least he could receive visitors and continue his studying, teaching, and writing.

Paul's letter to the Colossians is the result of the consultations Epaphras had with him there in Rome. It was likely hand carried by Epaphras back to his troubled congregation in order to prove to them that what he had been teaching all along was the correct interpretation of the Gospel. This is why Paul begins his letter by introducing himself as an "Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." What he's saying is "the Lord chose me and gave me the message I proclaim" – unlike those self appointed false teachers who have come to you outside of God's will and who are now leading you astray. Paul also mentions that Timothy is with him in writing the letter – so it's likely that the congregation knows Timothy and respects his authority too. But it's essential to see that Paul is presenting his credentials to speak authoritatively so that the members of the church at Colossae will know whom to trust. And this is why too Paul specifically commends Epaphras and calls him "a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf." He's saying, "Listen to your pastor. He's got the Gospel down right and he is teaching it correctly."

But going back to the beginning of the letter, as we've seen already, having presented his credentials, Paul begins by wishing the congregation grace and peace from God the Father. Though sometimes it sounds like it, this is more than just a churchly way to say hello. Remember, the big problem with the Colossian church was that they were not completely relying on God's grace in Christ. They were instead muddying the pure Gospel with their own supposedly good works, which is the opposite of relying on grace. Therefore they could have no real peace with God the Father. On the contrary, they forced themselves to be always worried about whether they were properly obeying the laws and sufficiently depriving themselves of worldly pleasures to be counted righteous. Whenever you add Law to the Gospel, you leave the question of your salvation in doubt – which is a frightening thing to have hanging over you.

Continuing the letter, Paul then moves on to commend the congregation for what they were doing right. "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for the saints." The same pattern appears in many of Paul's letters to churches: he tries to find something good to say before he corrects them. It is, in part, the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. But beyond that, it reminds us that some good is produced even by congregations in conflict. Wherever the powerful Gospel of Jesus is being proclaimed it produces fruit in the lives of the people who receive it in faith. This is true even when the message is being distorted or added to somewhat, as it was at Colossae. It's just that it's not nearly as effective as it could and should be. It's like deliberately planting your fields with a mixture of half wheat and half weeds. Some wheat will grow and you'll be able to harvest it; but it's hardly the optimum use of the ground. And this is why even today we can give thanks to God for various churches and

denominations that manage to proclaim the Gospel and yet get important points of Christian doctrine wrong. For the truth that they teach, we commend them; and at the same time we deplore their errors. A lot of people don't understand this. They get all offended if someone speaks against an error being taught in another church. Somehow that gets translated into "You're saying they're all going to hell." That's nonsense. We don't judge people. God does. What we are called to do, however, is to judge doctrine – to recognize the difference between grains of wheat and the seeds of weeds, and to ensure that here, at least, we get only the former.

Good. Having given an atta-boy to the congregation, Paul begins to get into meat of the letter. He writes, "From the day we heard about what's going on there, we have not stopped praying for you, asking that that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so 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."

There's a lot here to unpack; but what's immediately noticeable is Paul's deep concern for the congregation at Colossae – a concern he shares with all those who are with him in Rome. Having heard of the problems, they are in prayer constantly for this troubled church, pleading with the Lord to restore it to the fullness of truth. It reminds us of how the Church of Jesus Christ is one even though it consists of many individual congregations spread throughout the world, and how we all ought to be upholding one another in prayer. We often treat prayer as if it's the last resort when it should be our first response whenever we hear of fellow Christians in difficulty. Such prayer places our focus where it ought to be: on the Lord and his work – for he's the only one with the power and wisdom to bring healing to his churches in crisis.

And pay close attention to what Paul and the others are praying for: that the members of the church at Colossae be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Or, say it another way, they're praying that the members of the church hear and believe good, sound doctrine. This is key: knowledge of God and his will doesn't just fall down from heaven and fill people as if by magic; they have to be taught it. And the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God that people hear being taught and explained to them then creates faith and understanding in people's hearts and minds. I hasten to add that this is a lifelong process. None of us fully understands God's will, nor do we possess all spiritual wisdom and insight. We are to be constantly growing in these things through continued exposure to God's Word and solid teaching. This is necessary because the more we understand, the more firmly we will be rooted in God's truth and therefore less likely to be led astray, no matter how attractive or seemingly logical are the errors taught by the false teachers who come along – and they always do come along. You can count on it.

But there's another reason to want to grow in the knowledge of the truth. It's because believing what is right and good leads to behavior that is right and good. It's important to get the sequence correct. Right understanding of God, his holy will, and his plan of salvation in Jesus produces in our lives the fruit of the Spirit – the real works of love that the Lord wants to be evident in the lives of his people. The Colossians were incorrectly being taught that what God wants from his people is obedience to a bunch of outdated ceremonial laws like circumcision, dietary restrictions, Sabbath and feast day regulations, and what not; and also that they voluntarily refrain from enjoying the good gifts of creation: don't eat this, don't drink that, don't touch, don't get married – the Lord wants you to be free of all such earthly desires. It sounds so pious; but what good does any of that do for anyone? Your neighbor isn't helped even a little bit by what you eat or choose not to, or by which day of the week you choose to worship. When all is said and done, such works are meaningless. No, what the Lord wants from his people are works of love. We heard about some of them in today's Old Testament lesson. They involve

helping the poor, being hospital to strangers, upholding justice, and defending the rights of those who are being oppressed. It also includes treating your employees fairly, protecting peoples' reputations, and assisting those with difficulties rather than turning away from them.

These are the things that the Lord wants us to do – the kinds of things that help our neighbors, like the Good Samaritan did – because that's how his love is shown in our lives. And such love grows in us the more we know and trust in his love for us in Christ Jesus his Son. He is our Good Samaritan. He found us where we'd fallen by the road, beaten by Satan and left to die in our sin. He came to our aid. He treated our wounds. He lifted us up and had us carried to a place of recovery – his holy Church. He paid all of our debts when he died on the cross for our sins. Or, as Paul says it, He delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son. In him, Paul says, we have all that we need: redemption and the forgiveness of sins. When we truly understand and trust that, we are empowered by God's Spirit to do to unto others as Christ our Lord has done for us.

You know, considering what Paul has to say in this introduction to his letter to the Church at Colossae, the question we need to ask is this: what would Paul write to our church here today? We are, after all, not a second generation congregation, but one many generations removed from the apostolic era. You might expect there to be some major differences. But what really sticks out is, despite all the years that have passed since Paul penned these words, how contemporary and up to date his comments are. The same words of encouragement and admonition apply to us. And therefore the same prayers are needed on behalf of this church – and all the other churches of God that are in Christ.

Let this then be our prayer: that the Lord may fill us with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so 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. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!