

Grace undeserved

Colossians 1:1-2

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In his book, *Critical Path*, Buckminster Fuller, an author, architect, systems theorist, inventor, designer and futurist, presented the idea of the 'knowledge doubling curve'. Fuller observed that until 1900 human knowledge doubled every century. By the end of World War II the world's combined knowledge was doubling every 25 years. Building on Fuller's research, IBM later published a report that by 2020, the world's knowledge would be doubling every 12 hours.

Some would argue that knowledge is growing faster than we can absorb. At the same time, the useful lifespan of knowledge is decreasing. In some fields what we learned 5 years ago is now obsolete. At times we are trapped in an endless loop of needing to learn, unlearn and re-learn.

We now talk of Artificial Intelligence, Robotic Process Automation (RPA), Quantum Computing, Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality, 5G, space travel and the Internet of Things.

Many would argue that the newer the knowledge, the better it is. With this mindset the older something is, the more irrelevant it becomes. When applied to the spiritual and sacred, they reject the ancient truths of God as not applicable to our modern times. Christ is trivialized as a relic of the past. In an age where technology seems to be conquering new frontiers, deep down all mankind still struggle with the same problems. We fear death. We are enslaved to sin. We fight for power and security. We are controlled by a love for money and the lust of our hearts. We long to be loved. We search for joy and real peace. The hearts of man are the same as they have always been. Our tools, toys and trophies have changed, but under the façade we are very similar to all the generations who have gone before us. In our quest to fill that God-shaped void in our hearts, we have turned to the world, which promises much, but delivers little. It is for such a time as this that the book of Colossians was written.

The book of Colossians is a letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in Colossae. At this time, Paul was in prison in Rome. It was around A.D. 60 or 61. He had been visited by Epaphras, a church leader from Colossae who had reported to Paul about the heresies that were being taught about Christ in the church in Colossae. In response to these heresies about Christ, Paul wrote to the church in Colossae. It is likely that Epaphras had met and been taught by Paul in Ephesus during Paul's earlier three year stay there.

At this time in history, Colossae was a city that had known better days. In the past it had been a “great city of Phrygia”, but now it had grown smaller in comparison to its two neighbors, Hierapolis and Laodicea. These three cities were located in the Lycus valley and together they played a key role in the east-west trade route that passed through Asia Minor.

Though weakened, Colossae was still a cosmopolitan city with different religions and cultures that were mixed together. Most of the population was Gentile, but there were also a good number of Jews residing in Colossae as well. While we do not know the specific heresies that Paul was confronting, we do see that it was putting into question the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

As we read through Colossians, we see that some false teachers were adding good works as a condition to salvation, as if Christ was not enough. Others were seeking to syncretize Christianity with the other pagan religions in Colossae. Others were adding the rigid Jewish law to the Christian life, and others were even worshipping angels. Paul also warned them not to follow the empty traditions of man. It was a young church who desperately needed to be tied to biblical, theological moorings.

For the next several months, we will walk through the book of Colossians. These chapters give one of the clearest views of the identity and the work of Christ in all of scripture.

In the midst of a day when the timeless truths are being swept aside, it is essential that we turn back to the roots of our faith and understand who we are and whose we are in Christ. Colossians draws us near to Christ to understand Him as the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the creator of heaven and earth, the head of the body –the church–, the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, the one in whom dwells the fullness of God and through whom all things will be reconciled to God, making peace by the blood of His cross.

In a time where people want to call truth relative and want the freedom to choose which “truth” applies to them, Colossians states very clearly the truth of Christ, the supremacy of Christ, the beauty of Christ, and the absolutes of Christ in which are found the judgment and the salvation of man.

So, now, we start at the beginning of Colossians as Paul greets these believers who had heard of him, but whom he had never met in person:

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

When Paul stated his name, he was reminded of who he is in contrast to who he was. Though it is likely that Paul had always had two names (Acts 13:9), the name Saul was his Jewish name. It was the name that he had used as he had climbed in prestige in the midst of the Jews of Jerusalem. It was the name he had used when persecuting the Christians and clinging to the Jewish law. In contrast, Paul was his Roman name. Paul was a Roman citizen. Christ had called him to be the “***apostle to the Gentiles***” (Romans 11:13). It made sense that to use the name Paul in a Gentile context would be more advantageous. Referring to Himself as Paul was a constant reminder of the grace he had been given and the gospel mission on which he had been sent. One other note of interest is that the name Saul had a regal connotation to it, since Saul had been the name of Israel’s

first king. In contrast, the name Paul in Latin meant “small” or “humble”. When he introduced himself as Paul instead of Saul, it was a display of the humility that had replaced the pride which had previously dominated Paul’s life.

Paul was an apostle of Christ Jesus. This word “**apostle**” literally meant “one who was sent out”. The nearest English word might be emissary. It would be similar to the herald of a king or in some ways like an ambassador who is sent to a foreign country to represent his president or prime minister. A person who was sent out with a message. The message was not his; he was merely the messenger who was speaking with the full authority of him who had sent him, Christ Jesus.

The title Christ was clearly understood. Paul was declaring that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed One sent by God. Jesus was the One for whom the Jews had been waiting for centuries.

As an apostle, Paul was not sending himself out. He was the sent one because God had willed it as so. It was not his will, nor by his merit that Paul was going out in the name of Christ. Christ had willed it, so Paul obeyed. In this way Paul was able to speak in both in humility and with authority. He was humbled by his sinful past and could speak with conviction from his testimony of a dramatically changed life. He was humbled that he had been chosen as an apostle out of no merit of his own. At the same time, Paul was able to speak with authority because he was sent out by Christ Himself.

Paul then mentioned that he was accompanied by Timothy. Timothy was a young upcoming pastor to whom Paul was willing to lend his time and even his name. We see in this Paul's practice of not ministering alone, for the sake of making disciples, raising up leaders, moral protection, and greater fruit in ministry. He identifies Timothy as “**our brother**”, connecting him to them and all to Paul as children of God the Father, spiritual siblings in Christ. To some this might have been a new reality. Their church was likely made up of Jews and Gentiles, from different countries and customs. They were now to see each other as one, the family of God.

Paul then called them **saints**. This is not referring to some super Christian status for people who have done miracles and had great spiritual success on earth. In this passage Paul is speaking to the entire church or group of believers in Colossae, who were very likely at different levels of spiritual maturity. We know from Romans 3:23 that “**all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**” Therefore, they, like us, had been sinful. They were now in Christ and growing in godliness, but to some lesser extent they, like us, continued to sin even though they were now in the faith. With this in mind, how could Paul refer to them as saints?

One verse that helps us understand what Paul was thinking is 2 Corinthians 5:21, “**For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**” We are not saints because of what we have done. That would be unthinkable. We are saints because as the verse says, we are in Christ. It is based on our receiving of what Christ has done. Like it says in John 1:12, “**But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.**” For those who are in Christ, we now have put on His righteousness and have access to all His resources to grow in godliness and good works. We are saints because He, through Christ, has made us holy.

This leads us to the next phrase, *“faithful brothers”*. The church was made up of both Jews and Gentiles, and yet Paul addresses them together and binds them to Himself as brothers. Outside of the church this would have been unheard of. Jews and Gentiles were never to relate to each other. There were also likely distinctions between social classes, but yet in this body of believers they shared life and faith together as brothers, equals, co-heirs in Christ. No matter how the world viewed each of them, in Christ, in the church, they were united as one, as brothers.

Paul also mentions them as *“faithful”* brothers. This is not a word that is praising their perfection. It is recognizing their perseverance in the faith. They had not been like the first soil in the parable of Jesus (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23). They were not like those who hear the Word of God and it falls on their hearts like a seed on hard soil, so that they do not believe and are not saved.

They were not like the second soil, on which the seed of God's Word fell in rocky soil. These heard the Word of God with joy, but because there was no root to their faith, they believed for a while but then fell away during times of testing.

They are not like the third soil, where the seed of God's Word fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. These heard the Word of God and bore no fruit because they were choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit did not mature.

None of these first three soils would be considered *“faithful”*. It is in the fourth soil that the seed of God's Word is planted in the heart of man. It is he who believes and receives the Word of God in such a way that it *“indeed bears fruit and yields, in once case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”* Paul is addressing those in Colossae as *“faithful”* brothers, who continue to persevere in the faith.

They were able to persevere in the faith because they were **in Christ**. Scripture teaches that all who have turned from their sin and believed in Jesus Christ are now *“in Christ”*. Christ is also in them. As one who is in Christ, they have access to all the resources that are found in Christ. In Christ they could find peace, strength, grace, wisdom, mercy, joy, courage and love. While it must have been a joy for those who actually walked with Christ when He was here on earth, an even greater intimacy with Christ is now available to us. The Spirit of Christ now abides in us. We are not alone. We are no longer orphans. We now have been adopted into the family of God.

Paul ends his greeting with these words: *“Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”* It was mainly the common greeting that would have been found in letters in Paul's day, except for one variation. Usually people used the word *chairein* to mean greeting. In Paul's greeting he used the same root word, but changed the ending to slightly change the meaning. Instead of *chairein*, Paul used the word *charis*. It changed the word *“greeting”* to the word *“grace”*. For the Christians it was still a greeting, but it was a reminder of the grace that they had so undeservedly received through Christ.

It is interesting to note that the word for **peace** came from the word which meant *“to join”*. As we are joined with Christ, we have access to a state of tranquility, harmony and well-being. It does not mean there will be no struggles in the world around us, but in Christ we have access to an eternal peace that still can bring calm to our spirit even when the storm rages around us.

We are connected to Christ Jesus, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the creator of heaven and earth, the head of the body –the church–, the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, the one in whom dwells the fullness of God and through whom all things will be reconciled to God, making peace by the blood of His cross. It is He who can calm our nerves, quiet our hearts and renew our spirit.

Grace was what they were given, so that their sin could be removed, so that they could be reconciled with God. Peace was what they now walked in as they drew near to the Christ who lived within them. Until one knows and takes hold of grace, he or she have no access to the peace that only comes from being joined with Christ.

This was just the greeting of the letter to the Colossians. May we prepare ourselves by reading ahead through the following chapters and asking God to speak to our hearts much like He did to theirs. For now I close you with these words of Christ:

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Discussion questions:

1. What in this sermon did you find most interesting?
2. In your opinion, why do many people think “newer is better”? What is the danger in that?
3. How do you think our society is like that of Colossae?
4. Do you have anyone who has ever mentored or disciplined you like Paul did Timothy? Is there anyone in your life that God may be wanting you to invest in, disciple or mentor?
5. Paul called them saints. The same applies to us. How easy is it for you to receive that title from Christ? Why do you think that is?
6. Are you able to find the peace of Christ when the storms are raging around you? Practically speaking, how do we take hold of the peace of Christ?
7. What do you think you need to remember from this sermon?
8. What do you think you should do in response to this sermon?
9. How can we pray for you?