

“Living With Integrity”

Background

This letter was written to first-generation Christians at Colossae (a city in present day Asia Minor). The city lay in the valley of the Lycus River on a strategic road to Ephesus. These new converts to the Christian faith were surrounded by those who believed in a variety of gods and philosophies, and by a culture that questioned, disputed, or ridiculed their faith in Christ. They were daily challenged to keep their faith in Christ and live in ways that honored their trust in the Lord.

Is this not similar to our daily challenge? Christians must reflect on what it means, in the midst of our contemporary social, political, and economic situations, to be decisively reshaped by our relationship to Christ. It is a matter of integrity... in other words, even in the midst of an indifferent culture, do we “practice what we preach?”

Opening Greeting (Col. 1:1-2)

Paul begins his letter like this: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...” [The title of apostle was reserved for those who had been witness to the Lord’s resurrection and directly commissioned by the Lord to “make disciples of all nations.” In Paul’s case the risen Lord appeared to him in blinding glory and commissioned him to preach the gospel (Acts 9).] In this greeting Paul is reminding them of his apostolic authority to speak to the Colossians and the truth of what he says about Christ. Timothy is mentioned, and the fact that he is named along with Paul suggests that Timothy had a significant role in helping Paul with the congregation. Epaphras was a Christian evangelist and teacher in the Lycus Valley, and probably the link between Paul and Timothy and the Christians of Colossae is (that area of Asia Minor). He brought the authentic gospel to them and is able to report back on their faith to Paul.

It is so vital in our time to be clear on the authentic content of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We live in a time and place similar to what those early Christians in Colossae faced, with a host of competing claims to what is truth. Jesus still says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Let us still proclaim Him and look for the fruit of His spirit in the lives of believers.

Thanksgiving (Col. 1:3-8)

I have a little book entitled *What Church Members Wish Ministers Knew*¹ it’s a companion to a book, by the same author, *What Ministers Wish Church Members*

¹Jan G. Linn, *What Church Members Wish Ministers Knew*, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1995).

Knew.² In the first book there is a chapter entitled, “Encouragement goes both ways.” Think about how important words of encouragement can be. When the leader gives people encouragement they feel strengthened to forge ahead; to not grow weary in doing what is right. It also says that the leader cares about the people and believes that, with God’s help, they can do great things. This is what Paul is doing here in this letter. By letting those Christians of Colossae know that he thanks God for them and for their faith he is lifting them up.

Years ago I read a number of books on business leadership and I recall the advice one gave me: one important job of the leader is to say, “Thank you.” Fortunately, at this congregation there is much I can be thankful for – for what God has done for us and for all the people here through whom God is working.

Paul knew that those Christians in Colossae faced challenges to their faith every day, and so he called them “faithful” brothers and sisters in Christ – emphasizing their fidelity and steadfastness to Christ. He assured them of his affection for them and his appreciation of their faithfulness – because they are qualities that come from God, not simply their own efforts or hard work.

What can keep us going in difficult times? What can help us remain faithful to Christ when other things seek to pull us away? Hope; that’s what keeps us going even in troubled times. Here’s another lesson from Paul: He speaks of a hope laid up for us in heaven. Faith and love are dependent on that hope (see Gal. 5:5). This hope is not a subjective virtue, but the content of our salvation. Christ died for our sins and brought us into God’s holy family. What will be manifested at the end of time, at the consummation of salvation, is already present in heaven. The hope of their and our salvation is already secured in heaven and nothing can alter that. When things get tough or murky here, we can still have hope because we know there is a place for us with God.

Paul’s Intercessory Prayer (Col. 1:9-12)

Paul and Timothy reported how they prayed for these Colossians; that the wisdom and knowledge of God would continue to increase in them. Paul calls rival teachings “philosophies” with only the appearance of wisdom. In the O. T. wisdom often involves practical knowledge and an ability to choose right conduct.³ In the same way Paul is says that the wisdom and insight of the Holy Spirit will produce moral behavior. The Colossians are meant to “walk” in a manner consistent with their confession of Christ as Lord and fully pleasing to him. And so Paul (and Timothy) pray:

- 1. That they bear the fruit of good works (replacing “evil works” of their previous life)**

²Chalice Press, 1993.

³The following thoughts from Andrew T. Lincoln, “The Letter to the Colossians,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. XI*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 592-594.

- 2. That they grow in the knowledge of God.**
- 3. That they receive power necessary to living a life pleasing to God. Nothing less than God's divine power will enable them to live worthily of the their Lord. This power is not for their own glory but for them to endure everything with patience. Patience, or long-suffering, is one fruit of the Spirit.**
- 4. That their lives will be marked by thankfulness and joy. Joy is another fruit of the Spirit, and thankfulness is for what God has done for believers in Jesus Christ. This thankfulness is a most essential Christian quality. (Thankfulness and joy were mostly missing from those rival philosophies competing for the loyalty of Colossians.) The action of the Father is cause for thanksgiving:**

Like those ancient Christians, the grace of God the Father has qualified us "to share in the inheritance of the saints in light." This inheritance is not linked to a piece of ground (as with Israel in O. T.) but with the transcendent realm of heaven (vv. 12-13).

What's it got to do with us?

Living in an environment where going to church and being a faithful Christian isn't necessarily the thing to do, we would do well to take to heart the lessons of the Colossians. Things to remember:

- 1. Hope is stronger than memory. Our thanksgiving is a reminder of the security of our salvation that is centered in Christ. We can have assurance of salvation through Christ who has ascended to the heavenly realm with God the Father; and this assurance gives strength to carry on a godly life...**
- 2. The gospel of Jesus is sufficient for our salvation. We can be tempted to think that the basic gospel message is inadequate and needs to be supplemented with religious rites or disciplines, more sophisticated knowledge, some compelling experience. Our salvation is not dependent on our feelings or efforts, nor confined to the perspectives of this world. (Indeed, the gospel has riches yet to be fathomed and implications for life that we have not yet explored, but the basic message is still sufficient to lead to salvation, a life of faith, love, hope, and joy. I have seen among simply, lightly educated people, faith and godly living evidencing a spiritual wisdom beyond that of the sophisticated.)**
- 3. Pray for spiritual well-being and progress. So often we pray for one another's immediate physical needs or specific direction in life or problems in relationships. Maybe we wait to pray for someone only after they have a problem that requires attention, or because we see God as One to "fix" things. Do we doubt the dimensions of life such as growth in the knowledge of God, spiritual wisdom, or divine power for patience and joyful**

endurance? We can pray not only for physical needs, but for one another's whole relationship with God.

- 4. Confidence in the gospel. Paul expresses his confidence in the dynamic force and progress of the gospel. The gospel we proclaim has its own inherent power. Without this confidence there isn't much expectation that lives will be transformed by the gospel as a result of one's witness. (Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith." The gospel is able to reproduce itself in and shape the lives of believers, as it bears fruit and grows.)**
- 5. Spiritual wisdom bears good fruit. This reminds us that bearing good fruit – works of mercy and justice, and all godly living – are the result of increasing knowledge and wisdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁴**

Living with integrity means living what you profess to believe. I pray and hope that all of us here will know what we believe. More precisely, that we will know in whom we have believed – Jesus Christ our Savior – and that our living will show the fruit of His spirit growing in us. The hope found in the gospel is a motivation for such living. Anything less will leave us short of our heavenly goal.

⁴ Ibid, 594-595.