

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
May 21 & 22, 2016  
John Crosby  
Established in Faith  
Colossians 1:1-8**

We are starting something new today and for the next month. As Laura explained to the kids, we will be talking about a part of the Bible that is called the Epistles, the letters. We're going to pick out one particular letter called Colossians and read it through over the next month. So I ask you to pull out the pew Bibles that are in front of you and turn to Colossians, Chapter 1. It should be on page 1753. And more than that, for the next month, starting next week, I'd ask you to bring your Bibles to church. Bring your Bibles because I would like you to underline and write notes, circle things and put question marks in your Bibles so that this letter might come alive for you.

So, less than thirty years have passed since Jesus died. Because there were claims that He came back from the dead—twenty four, twenty seven, thirty years max after His death and resurrection—groups of all sizes had sprung up all around the Roman empire, usually meeting in houses or nearby synagogues. And they were almost totally disconnected from one another—so that the church in Alexandria never even knew about the church in Ephesus, and the church in Ephesus had no idea what was going on back at the mother ship, in Jerusalem. And that lack of connection was because there were no trains, there were no cars, no airplanes. Beyond that there was no TV so that everybody saw the same thing. No radio, no phones, much less cell phones...much less smart phones. No internet. No post office...no post office to get a letter. If you wanted to send a letter in ancient days, as Laura tried to tell the children, it was a big deal. You had to find somebody going toward that far off city and ask them to carry it as close as they can. You'd give them a little money so that when they got to the city, they either delivered it themselves or they would give a little less money to the next person who would bring it all the way to the intended recipient. It was a big deal. That meant that letters were a little different than they are today. Without a post office, they didn't have the pile of letters that often sits on my desk...different kinds of letters that you get, right? Now how many would say that most of the mail that you get today is junk mail? Absolutely for me...don't even open it. Pitch it. But, today there are letters that we get from people that we do not know. That's the case with the Colossians letter. Paul did not know the people in Colossians, but some of those letters can still be important, right? It's an important letter for acceptance to a college, or a solicitation that says *Vote for me! Give to my cause.* We don't know the people who send the rejection letters for jobs or articles. Sometimes you don't know anybody and it's a letter of introduction. Sometimes it's a ticket or a bill that you haven't paid. You don't know them; it is impersonal but important. Others letters though, are personal. They are love letters and

Dear John letters, and I miss you letters from college or camp or war, they are baby and wedding announcement letters, they are thank you notes, and letters that keep us in touch.

We're going to study Colossians because I believe that God is sending you, each of you, letters every day. I believe that God is sending you a letter today and the question is: are you going to open the letter, leave it on your desk, or pitch it out with the junk mail? I'm just going to keep on saying this all through the coming year, especially for those who say to me, *You know, I never hear from God the way you talk about.* Do you want to hear from God? When we open the Bible, God opens His mouth. When we open the Bible, God opens His mouth. I believe God is sending you a letter today. So, let's read the letter that God sent you today.

Let me orient you to Colossians since this is the first week. We'll put a map up and you will see those red dots. Those red dots are all in an area that was called Asia back then, mostly Turkey, mostly modern Turkey today. Many of these churches were started by the apostle Paul himself. You'll see one of them is Ephesus...see where Ephesus is there on the coast. Paul goes and spends probably 18 months in Ephesus...gets jailed there. Has a powerful church and out of that church in Ephesus, rich people who travel through this port city come to hear about Jesus and go back to the various towns to tell other people about Jesus. One of the places they go is about 100 miles away inland in Turkey called Colossae. Colossae, the Colossians. Paul didn't go to Colossae. Somebody became a follower of Jesus, his name was probably Philemon, a rich guy, coming as a merchant into Ephesus, and he sends Epaphras, one of Paul's assistants, out to Colossae and they start this church together, Philemon and Epaphras. Paul wants to keep in touch with them, but he is far away. At this point in his life, Paul is probably in Rome.

So, when the letter came to the church in Colossae, if it had had a return address, the return address would have said: from Paul, Royal Prison, City of Rome. Some of you have had the privilege of reading Martin Luther King's *Letters from a Birmingham Jail*, saying why his faith had led him into jail. Paul is writing from a Birmingham jail two thousand years earlier. What's the apostle Paul writing that's so important that the Colossians needed to hear it? That we need to hear it?

Just a quick overview. First, he wants to make them feel that they are not alone. He wants to connect this little, tiny house church in Colossae to the church in Rome and Jerusalem and Ephesus, in Corinth and Laodicia, and say *we are all in this together, following the same Lord God.* He wants to connect them to the body of God around the world, saying *if you do it yourself, you're in trouble.* That's the first thing to you: if you do it yourself, you're in trouble.

The second thing that Paul is trying to do is what he does in all his other epistles: they are a form of teaching. He wants to teach them the Christian message, and warn them that wrong teachers can kill their faith. One of his big themes in Colossians is that good teaching helps Christians grow, bad teaching kills faith. And then, in this case to the

Colossians, he has sent along a personal letter to one of the Colossian leaders; he's going to ask for a personal favor – that's at the end.

So we're going to look just at the very beginning today, because the way Paul starts the letter to the Colossians is part of what I believe God is saying to you today. Paul says two things in this letter thousands of years ago that is so important that you should do it today. Paul **encourages** them and Paul **prays** for them. Now, the letter starts out the way every letter in the Greek world or the Roman world would start. They all had the same way of beginning the letter:

<sup>1</sup>Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, <sup>2</sup>To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ

Grace and peace to you from the gods—that's the way a Roman would say it—grace and peace to you from the gods. Paul tweaks that, doesn't he?

Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

Then he gets to it:

<sup>3</sup>We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup>because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—<sup>5</sup>the faith and love that spring from the hope

We've heard that before, haven't we? Faith and hope and love...

stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel <sup>6</sup>that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.

If that is not underlined in your Bible or your pew Bible, would you just underline or circle "truly understood God's grace"? That may be the most important phrase that he sends to the Colossians—*you need to truly understand the grace of God.*

<sup>7</sup>You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, <sup>8</sup>and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. <sup>9</sup>For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, <sup>10</sup>so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, <sup>11</sup>being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, <sup>12</sup>and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.  
[Colossians 1:1-12]

Paul often starts his letters with this kind of format, but in Colossians he says two powerful things that you—I believe God is saying to you today—that you should do for someone today: you should encourage them and you should pray for them. I don't know if it's a note you need to write, a call you need to make, an email or a conversation.

Do you think people change? Think anybody really changes or do they just sort of stay who they are? Some days I think people change and some days I don't. I'm not sure about that, but what I am sure of is that I am sure God can change people. I'm sure that God can change even people who can't change on their own. So, Paul encourages these new followers of Jesus by pointing to changes in their life. If it's not already underlined in your Bible, there are two references that I want you to underline. Paul thanks God two different times for the fruits of their faith. First he said the **first fruits** of your faith and then he said this same gospel is **bearing fruit**. That is: *you're changing. Your community is changing. People notice.* What's a life that pleases God? What's a life the way it's supposed to be lived? What does fruit look like? If you want to know what fruit looks like, look at verses four and five. Here are the three major fruits of those who follow and trust in Jesus. "We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus"—that is *that you trust Him*—"and the love you have for all God's people." *We have heard that you have become more loving people...the faith and love that spring from the hope...no matter how bad things are, we know you have hope stored up for you in heaven. This is bearing fruit, throughout the world, just as among you.*

Now I learned something new about growing fruit...it changes over time. I got this in a very special way. Our house, we've been living in this current house for about eight years, and when we moved in, one of the best things about the house was a tree in the backyard—a big maple tree. Laura loves this maple tree. It's a beautiful tree. It gives shade to our patio; it's just a gorgeous tree. Over the last couple of years, I have walked out more and more often and turned to Laura and said, "Honey, I think it's going to fall on the garage." And Laura would say things like, "Small price to pay, John. It's beautiful. It's just fine." But, finally we consulted experts and...I'm in so much trouble because we cut the tree down this winter. Yeah, we cut it down and without the tree, the yard looked nude, and so this last week while Laura and I were in London at a board meeting, a company came and they planted a brand new tree. It looks just like the old one...I said *honey you'll never notice the difference!* (Audience laughs) But look, it's already got leaves on it. This is our passage...some people who have followed Christ forever, they look like that beautiful old maple tree. Some of us are just starting out—we're scrawny, we're tiny; we're not sure we're going to make it. But if we are encouraged, if we are able to sink our roots down, we will grow...**if we are encouraged**. Encouragement is a powerful tool. You should send someone a note today encouraging them. Paul encourages the Colossians that he has never met.

I have a little stack here of letters. These are about a third of the letters that I have kept over the years, at home and in my office, when somebody says something that encourages me. And I knew that I wanted to share with you this one particular letter, and so yesterday morning, I wasted the whole morning—while I should have been

working on this sermon—looking through just this one stack of letters because I know that it's in here. It's from Doris. It's from 1983. Doris sent me a note. I was the Assistant Pastor—I was really basically the Youth Pastor—and I had just come to this church, and I remember I was preaching one of my very first sermons and I preached out of the Beatitudes. We were going through the Beatitudes and I preached on “Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy”... *oh, please God, let it be me.* And as I left the sanctuary, Doris came up...she was in her upper 80s, a little hunched over lady...and she comes up and she just pats me. I'm probably the 50<sup>th</sup> youth minister that she's had, and she pats me on the shoulder and says, “The merciful, I'll try to remember that. Thank you.” And she goes off. Well, for some reason that stuck with me. I tell you so many stories about how I mess up...well, let me tell you one, just one, about how I didn't. It's like Tuesday or Wednesday of that week, and I'm thinking of Doris and I thought *that was so nice of her to encourage me.* And I was driving and I stopped the car. I just felt like God wanted me to thank her, so I looked her up in the phone directory—remember those—I looked her up and I drove to her house. I figured she would be there, she's 85...what else would she be doing? So I knocked and Doris came to the door, and she said, “Oh, are you alright?” And I said, “Oh, yeah, yeah. Doris, I just wanted to thank you for the nice things you said and I wanted to wish you well today. Just...I hope you are doing well...really, nothing else.” I wasn't even going to go in, but of course, she drags me into her kitchen and I talk about her house...I'm there five or six minutes total, pray with her at the door, and run off. It was just one of those little things that you learn to do because you listen to God. So I learned and I went and said *that was great.* That was on a Tuesday or Wednesday, and one or two days later, I hear that Doris has walked down the stairs to her basement and slipped and hit her head and died. And I thought the story was that I had encouraged her before she died...great little story. But between her death and her funeral, I get a handwritten note from Doris. I couldn't find it, but I didn't need to—I've memorized it. Doris said, very briefly, “Dear Pastor John, (I don't think anyone had ever called me that before) Blessed are the debonair (no one had ever called me that either) for they will brighten an old woman's day.” Yeah, thirty years later I'm still talking about Doris. **That is the power of encouragement. You can do that today.**

That's why Paul starts the letter not saying *you gotta get your act together, or, if you had just learned this, or, I've heard these bad things about you.* He starts by encouraging them, because people need courage. People need to be given courage. And then, after he has encouraged them, Paul shows them how to pray by praying for them. He shows us how to pray by praying for them. I believe today that God is sending you a letter and He wants to teach you how to pray for somebody in particular, somebody to encourage. And after you have encouraged them, pray for them.

Now, I want to tell you that next fall we are going to do a series about learning how to pray the way the apostle Paul prayed, but here is one example in verses 9-12. “Since the day we heard about you” he says, “We have not stopped praying for you.” I cannot even say that about my daughters. I love my daughters. I cannot tell you I've prayed for them every single day.

...since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives,<sup>10</sup> so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit...

There's that phrase again—bear fruit...

in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God

Do you pray for anybody like that? Left to myself, my prayers sound like our prayer cards—pray that she will have a safe trip, pray that he will recover from the surgery, pray that she will get the job, pray that this will happen or that will happen—all important prayers. We pray for them every day. That does not sound like the way the apostle Paul was praying. I need to learn to pray for my daughters that God would fill them with the knowledge of His will, that He would give them wisdom and understanding so they might live a life pleasing the Lord, and bear fruit. I want my children to bear fruit, being strengthened with the power of God. My children are strong and strong willed. They are not strong and strong willed enough to face this world alone. They need the power of God and so do you. So I pray that you will be strengthened with the power of God in order to have great patience and great endurance. Two of the fruits of people who follow Jesus are that they get knocked down just as much as ever before, but they don't stay down; they have endurance, and they are slightly more patient than they used to be. And then it says, I pray they are "giving joyful thanks to the Father." That instead of being worried, they are thanks filled people with joy in their hearts. The fruit of prayer is joy and thankfulness.

I was at the World Vision board meeting in London and I took a long walk with Peter, a friend of mine from New Zealand. And as we talked we shared and I told him I would pray for him. And because of this passage, all this week I have been praying that my friend Peter would be given joy instead of anxiety. That he would be thankful for what he has instead of worried about what he does not have. I'm learning to pray. I think God sent you a letter today that you would learn how to pray.

Paul begins the letter to the Colossians, the letter to you, by encouraging and by praying because he wants to give them hope. Hope is as vital as the air that we breathe. Hope is crucial, especially when you are first learning about Jesus...when you don't know right from left, when you don't know up from down about God. *How good do I have to be? I don't know. How much will God help me? I don't know. Will God answer my prayers? I don't know. I need hope. I need to be encouraged and prayed for.*

And maybe some of you are in the third quarter, in the thick of the battle. And you need hope too. Maybe some of you are in crisis, or you know somebody who's in crisis and you need to encourage them and pray for them. Maybe some of you know a graduate that you need to encourage and pray for because they need hope. Some of you are close to the end of your lives, and you need hope, hope that this is not the end. You are losing someone that you love, and you need to give them the hope that this is not the

end—from hope that you have yourself. My prayer is that God would speak to you out of this letter and that you would encourage and give hope.

This I believe, the table of Christ, is the table of hope. When people come to this table, they don't have to have the answers, they don't have to have faith, they don't have to have love, they don't have to have hope...because it is found here. [Communion is served.]

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*