

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Only the Gospel Changes Everything"

Speaker: Rev. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/14/2009

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Chapter Theme: Christ is the Way – His Preeminence Declared

Outline Main Point: 1 — Christ is Preeminent in the Gospel

Outline Sub-point: C. Only the Gospel brings about genuine change

Message Text: Colossians 1:3-8

In our last message we finished our consideration of Colossians chapter one, verses one and two. Today we move on to the verses that form the next sentence in the text, beginning at verse 3 and extending through verse 8. I want to read that passage for you as we begin, and I'll start at verse one to give us the context:

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints; because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth; as you also learned from Epaphras, our

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**dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf,
who also declared to us your love in the Spirit.**

Last time I mentioned three particular reasons why Paul wrote this letter to the Colossian believers, and I think it would be well for us to remind ourselves of them as we begin our study of these verses today. The Colossian church was facing three particular challenges to the faith.

First of all, Colosse was located in a region where the people practiced a particularly fanatical form of paganism. The Colossian culture was saturated with this.

Secondly, in the region where Galatia and Colosse were located, there were Jewish legalizers who professed to believe in Jesus Christ, but they said that you had to add the keeping of the Jewish law to the Gospel in order to be saved.

And thirdly, there were the influences of various kinds of worldly philosophies in this part of the Roman world. And we're going to look at them in more detail when we get to chapter two.

It is with these three things in mind – paganism, legalism, and worldly philosophies – that Paul now begins his letter to the Colossians with words of thanksgiving – but they are words that also form a reminder to the Colossian church of what they are and what they have, in Jesus Christ.

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Thanksgiving, With a Reminder

In verses 3 through 8, Paul expresses his thanks to God for the Colossian believers. But he does this in a very purposeful way. He wants to build them up in the faith in the face of these challenges. He wants to remind them of the preeminence of Christ – and that, as we have said, is the theme of the book. And he wants to remind them that it is the Gospel of Christ, and the Gospel alone, that has changed everything for them.

And here in chapter one, Paul is going to first of all remind them that Christ is preeminent in the Gospel. And so he uses very encouraging words that remind them of the most vital things about the nature of the Gospel. What Paul is doing is laying a foundation. He is reminding them of the doctrine that they already know, so that he can then establish them more deeply in sound doctrine. And then, building on that doctrinal foundation, in chapters 3 and 4 he can address some vital matters of Christian living and conduct.

He reminds them, in chapter one verse four, that their faith is in Christ Jesus. We – Timothy and I – have been giving thanks to God the Father continually ever since we heard of your faith, your belief, in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin. He is reminding them that Christ is the sole object of saving faith.

And, he says in verse four, we've also been giving thanks because we heard about something else. We heard about the evidence of saving faith in your lives. We have heard about the love which you have for all the saints. We have heard about

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your *agape* love, your self-sacrificial, brotherly love, not only for believers in Colosse, but for *all* the saints. And the idea in the original is that this love is for all the saints both individually and collectively.

And Paul reminds them, in verse five, of why they have this love for all the saints. It is, he says, on account of the hope which is laid up for you in Heaven. The idea in the original language is, "the hope that is reserved and awaiting you when you get to Heaven."

And what is that hope? Paul gets more specific in chapter one, verse 27. He calls it, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Because of Christ, you have the hope – not just a hopeful feeling, but the confident, reasoned expectation – of an eternal inheritance. And he will repeat this when we get to verse 12: "Giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins." You have the right to the benefits of salvation because you are in Christ, and Christ is in you.

And Paul reminds them, beginning in verse five, that this confident expectation in Christ is based on hearing and knowing – "since the day that you heard and knew the grace of God in truth." In other words, Paul is saying, I am thankful for you because there came a point in time when you not only heard the Gospel, but you gave heed to it, you knew it accurately, and you recognized and accepted the grace

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of God – His unmerited favor toward you because of Christ – in a true and genuine way. And at that point in time a change took place, and the Gospel began to bear fruit among you, and it continues to do so.

And Paul reminds them, in the face of those who would try to lead them into error, that their faith in Christ was based on a faithful, accurate proclamation of the truth. Notice verse seven: "as you also learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf."

I want to point out a couple of things here. The first is that word "also". The indication here is that when the Colossians learned these things from Epaphras, they were not hearing them for the first time. They "*also* learned from Epaphras." This is another reason why I am inclined to believe that Paul and Timothy had visited Colosse at a previous time and planted the seeds of the Gospel which later bore fruit. Or, as we said last time, the Gospel may have come to that part of Asia in other ways, or in a combination of ways. But by whatever means, these people at Colosse heard the truth of the Gospel, they took it to heart and received it as the truth, and they believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and were saved from their sins, and were brought into newness of life. And then they had these things confirmed to them through the ministry of Epaphras.

The second thing I want to point out from this verse is that there was faithful, accurate proclamation of the truth. What they received, Paul is reminding them, was

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genuine, not a counterfeit. It was not what he calls in Galatians another gospel, which is really no gospel at all. It has no power to save.

How much we need the faithful, accurate proclamation of the truth of the Gospel in our time. There are so many counterfeits in our day. One of the key marks of a Scripture-driven church is that it preaches the one true Gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, apart from anything or anyone else. And that is what Paul is reminding the Colossian believers of in these verses. That is the Gospel you believed. Don't depart from it.

And Paul also reminds them that the one true Gospel produces results. It produces changed lives. Love for all the saints, verse four. Love in the Holy Spirit, verse eight. The truth of the Gospel bringing forth fruit, verse six. And I want to mention something interesting in verse six. The force of the language here is that the truth of the Gospel was bringing forth fruit of itself, independent of anything else. It is what is called in grammar the middle voice, which means the subject is acting upon itself, the subject is the cause of the result upon itself. What this means is that the clear indication in the Greek grammar is that the truth of the Gospel was the exclusive cause of the spiritual fruit that had become evident among the Colossian believers. Nothing else in the world can bring this kind of changed life about. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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So in expressing his thanks to God for them in verses 3 through 8, Paul declares and reminds them of the nature of the Gospel – that Christ is preeminent in the Gospel.

Relationships Among True Believers

And in these verses, Paul also shows us the nature of the kinds of spiritual relationships that God desires for believers to have with one another. And the keynote of those relationships is loving care for one another.

Paul tells the Colossians, first of all, that there can only be this kind of relationship among true believers – among those who have genuinely been brought to saving faith in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Gospel and the working of the Holy Spirit, through the accurate proclamation of the truth.

And secondly, Paul shows us that this is a relationship of two kinds. It is, first of all, a relationship of loving care and concern on the part of spiritual parents for their spiritual children. We – Timothy and I – Paul says, your fathers in the faith, so to speak – we give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you. We are continually in prayer for you as our spiritual offspring, as those who have come to faith in Christ because of our labors in the Gospel.

And the kind of relationship God desires for believers to have is also a relationship of *all* true believers to one another. Paul commends the Colossians for “the love which you have for *all* the saints” – all the holy ones of God, all those who have been set apart by God in Christ.

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And thirdly, in these verses Paul also shows us, by his own example and by reminding the Colossian believers of their godly example – he shows us that it is a relationship characterized by two things.

First of all, it is motivated by love. Paul repeats this thought in many places in his epistles:

“Owe no one anything except to love one another” (Romans 13:8).

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1, and so on through that entire chapter).

“Let all that you do be done with love” (1 Corinthians 16:14).

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,” and so on (Galatians 5:22).

And Paul says to the church at Philippi, “This I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:9-11).

And secondly, the relationship among true believers is one that is to be characterized by continual prayer for one another. “We give thanks to God...

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praying always for you" (verse 3). Paul also expresses this thought in many other places:

"God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers" (Romans 1:9).

Paul tells us that prayer for the saints is part of our spiritual warfare, in Ephesians 6:17-18 – "And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—"

So in expressing his thanks to God for them in verses 3 through 8, Paul declares and reminds them of the nature of the Gospel – that Christ is preeminent in the Gospel. And he has also reminded them of the nature of the kinds of spiritual relationships that God desires for believers to have with one another. And the keynote of those relationships is loving care for one another, and intercessory prayer for one another.

How Do You Measure Up?

How do you measure up to these things today? Are you thanking God the Father, through Christ, for other believers? Are you engaging in intercessory prayer for your fellow believers, both seen and unseen?

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Are you thanking God and praying for your fellow saints on account of your expectation of heaven and all its glories, our great inheritance in Christ, and the fact that we are going to be together for eternity in the presence of Christ?

Are you personally, and is your church, proclaiming the fact that Christ alone is the object of saving faith; that saving faith is believing "the word of the truth of the Gospel"? We must be proclaiming the fact that saving faith produces a changed life, just as surely as day follows night. And is your own life, and the life of your church as a body of believers, demonstrating that fact? Dear friends, if there isn't that kind of spiritual fruit, God's Word tells us that we have reason to question whether there is in fact spiritual life.

We must be proclaiming that the Gospel is the answer to every problem, every challenge, every evil – in the lives of individuals, in the life of the church as a body, and in the life of the nation. Jesus Christ is the only hope for this world. Politics cannot save this world. Economics cannot save this world. Social action cannot change this world. Jesus told us that this world and its system is passing away. Our only hope is to be prepared for the world to come. And the only way to be prepared for the world to come is to be washed and cleansed of your sins by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You know, today a lot of Christians are getting that backwards. Christians are trying to change the culture without proclaiming and standing upon the only thing that can change the culture – and that is what happens when people come to faith in

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the Lord Jesus Christ, and their changed lives exert a positive influence on those around them. You can't have the effect without the cause. You can't have changed lives, you can't have a changed church, you can't have a changed nation, unless the truth of the Gospel is fully and accurately proclaimed. You can't have changed lives, you can't have a changed church, you can't have a changed nation, unless people receive Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit, and their lives and their thinking are changed by the power of God's Word illuminated by His Spirit.

Today many Christians are busy in the kind of political and social activity that tries to bring about the fruit of the Spirit without first seeking after the saving work of the Spirit, through the Word of God and the power of the Gospel. It is only the Gospel, the Gospel alone, that changes everything.

An Invitation

Today, perhaps there is someone listening to this program who has never truly believed the Gospel. You may have heard it many times. You may even know, intellectually, that the facts of the Gospel are true. But you have never acted upon that knowledge. You have never believed on the Lord Jesus Christ as the only one who can save you from eternal damnation because of your sins. You have never received grace and peace from God. You have never admitted to God that you are a sinner, that you cannot save yourself. You have no claim upon the rich, eternal inheritance in the new heavens and new earth that is the right of every believer in Christ.

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If God is speaking to you through this message today, and you understand that you need to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin, and that you need to experience the changed life that God will bring about as you walk in newness of life in Him, I encourage you to stop where you are right now, let nothing stand in your way, do not delay, and call upon the Lord and ask Him to save you. And if you are taking that step today, we would love to hear from you, and we would be happy to provide you with a Bible and other free resources that will help you grow in your new-found faith.