

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Pastor's Prayer

Colossians 1:3-14

About fourteen and a half years ago, shortly after beginning my ministry here at Grace Baptist Church, I wrote a newsletter article emphasizing the role of prayer in a pastor's work. I highlighted the fact that in my covenant with you, I intended to be a praying pastor. But when the newsletter was actually printed, the "a" in praying was accidentally left out. So rather than being a "praying pastor," it appeared that I intended to be a "prying pastor." At that point, some of you may have been wondering how I planned to nose my way into your life and your business.

The good news is that for the most part, that hasn't been necessary. Throughout our nearly one and a half decades together, I haven't had to do much prying. You've opened your doors, your hearts, and your lives to me and welcomed the ministry of Christ that I can share with you. I know that you join me in giving thanks for how the Lord has worked, in a multitude of ways, to weave us together as pastor and people, and to strengthen our bond with Christ and with each other.

This bond in Christ is evident in today's Scripture passage from Colossians, where we hear Paul reporting on his gratitude and prayers. One of the first things we should note is that the Colossians' primary connection is with Epaphrus, not Paul. Epaphrus, Paul's colleague, is the one who actually founded the church. That's why Paul says he has heard about the faith, love, and hope of the Colossian believers. Epaphrus has passed the word on to Paul about the spiritual fruitfulness of this particular fellowship of Christians. The truth of the gospel has been evident in their lives, individually and together. So Paul tells them that he is grateful to learn about the ways that God is working in them and among them.

Though Paul isn't the one who first brought the good news of Christ to the Colossians, the letter he writes is a crucial way of developing his connection with them. As with all of Paul's correspondence, his letter to the church in Colossae is a substitute for his personal presence. That is, Paul writes not just to communicate theological information to the Colossian Christians, but to be with them, and to have them be with him. In this way, the letter becomes a means of strengthening his ties with the Colossians, and expressing his concern and care for them. In other words, Paul may not have been the Colossians' first pastor, but writing this letter to them is a pastoral thing to do, and helps cultivate a pastoral bond between him and them.

That's why I believe we ourselves can learn by listening in on the communication between Paul and the Colossians. As they get to know one another better, and move deeper into their union with Christ and with one another, their fellowship becomes a living witness to us about the nature of the relationship between pastor and people.

Right off the bat, Paul's correspondence with the Colossians reminds us that the relationship between the pastor and the congregation is grounded in gratitude. Paul opens this letter the way he opens most of his letters, by giving thanks to God for the folks in the church. And more precisely, in this case, he reports on his gratitude for their faith and their love.

Back when Epaphrus showed up in Colossae, and started preaching the gospel, God began creating something in the lives of the hearers. That something is called faith. It means trust that Jesus Christ is Lord. In fact, if you jump all the way to the end of today's text, you hear Paul summarizing what God has accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God "has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (vv. 13-14).

When the Colossians first heard and received the good news, a remarkable change began to take hold in their lives. They began to see how God had mounted a divine rescue operation and had taken them out from under the power of sin and evil, and had moved them into a new world, a new reality where Jesus Christ holds sway. By divine mercy, the Colossians had been reconciled and restored to a right relationship with God, and had now been placed under the sovereignty of the beloved Son. They believed this news, and began to live out its implications. That was faith. And without this faith, there would be no Christians in Colossae, no church to speak of, or write to. No wonder Paul gives thanks to God for their faith.

He also gives thanks for their love. Faith in Jesus Christ, the kind of faith created by the preaching of the gospel, takes concrete form in lives of love and service. People who are living under the lordship of Jesus will show care and concern for one another, and for the larger world, in specific and practical ways. The love of God, revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ, will become visible and evident in the ways that believers sacrificially give themselves to one another. So when Paul prays, he gives thanks to God for the love that's taking shape in the church at Colossae.

And then Paul does something interesting. He says that the Colossians' faith and love are dependent on something else, namely, hope. When Paul says hope, he doesn't mean wishful thinking about the future. He means a solid sense of assurance and confidence that the rescue operation God has begun in Christ will be brought to completion when, at the end, Christ is fully revealed and the effects of his sovereignty are complete. Until then, the hope that the Colossians possess will keep on generating the faith that becomes visible in love.

Faith and love, grounded in hope. Paul says he never stops thanking God for how these virtues are evident in the church at Colossae. This morning, I want to echo Paul by saying how grateful I am for how these same characteristics are present in your lives as believers, individually and together. I say that, not as someone who is just getting to know you, but as someone who has been with you and among you for a long time. I say that as your pastor.

I give thanks to the Father for your faith. Many of you heard the "word of truth" (v. 5) and came to believe that Jesus Christ is Lord long before I arrived here, perhaps even in another congregation or in another branch of the Christian faith. Some of you have come to faith in Christ during my ministry here, and I had the blessing of baptizing you. At whatever point you confessed Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you have since grown in the knowledge of God, in the likeness of Christ, and in your place within the community of the Lord's people. You've matured in Christ, and have made major progress in learning how to learn under his reign.

I also give thanks to the Father for how you live out your faith through love. You give yourselves to one another, showing compassion and concern for one another in ways that embody the self-emptying love of Christ. What's more, your love extends beyond the fellowship of believers. You care for each other while also keeping your hearts continually

turned outward toward the world for which the Son gave himself in order to show the Father's love.

Along with my gratitude for your faith and your love, I also give thanks to the Father for the hope you display in your lives. I know that while you remember God's faithfulness in the past, your attitudes and actions here in the present are shaped primarily by your expectation of what is to come when Jesus returns and the kingdom of God is fully revealed and implemented. I've seen how you face suffering, sorrow, and our greatest enemy of all, death itself, with confidence in God's unfailing love. I know from my experience with you that you live your lives forward, with Christ-centered assurance that God will make good on his promises and finish his saving purposes in the world.

As your pastor, I prayerfully give thanks to God for the faith, the love, and the hope, the fruit of the gospel, that continues to emerge in your lives, individually and together. And in keeping with what Paul says, I not only pray with gratitude about you, but also pray for you. Indeed, one of the primary responsibilities of my daily ministry is to intercede for you. I recall hearing a story about a pastor who was praying in his church office one morning and a prominent member of the congregation called. The secretary told the gentleman that the pastor was busy praying right now. "Praying!" said the church member. "Shouldn't he be working?"

For me, one of the crucial parts of my daily work for the kingdom is to pray for you. And especially to pray for the kinds of things reflected in today's Scripture passage. I ask God "to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (v. 9). That's a very rich and eloquent summary of what you and I need each day in order to live according to the truth of the gospel. Basically, it means that I pray that God will fill you with a perception of his will, a daily understanding of what is spiritually important. I pray that God will enable you to discern what he wants in all the moment by moment experiences, opportunities, challenges, and choices that you face. Whether in your home, on the road, at your workplace, in the marketplace, at the doctor's office, at your school, in the public square, or at the church, you and I need spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that we can know how to follow Jesus where we are, in our particular context.

In particular, I pray that in all the events, experiences, relationships, and tasks of your daily lives, you'll be able, by God's grace and guidance, to discern what is consistent with the good news of Jesus Christ and what isn't consistent with the good news of Jesus Christ. In other words, to be able to tell what is gospel from what isn't gospel. To be able to recognize what's faithful to the way of Jesus and what isn't faithful to the way of Jesus. To be able to spot what is in keeping with the will of God revealed in Jesus and what isn't in keeping with the will of God revealed in Jesus. As your pastor, I pray that your lives will be governed and guided, shaped and steered, by the truth of the gospel.

And I, like Paul, pray all these things "in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way" (v. 10a). My prayer is that your spiritual wisdom will take the form of spiritual living. That in itself might seem to be enough to pray for. But Paul goes on to spell that out further. Therefore, my prayer, like his, is that you will be "bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light" (vv. 10b-12). That's a mouthful, isn't it? I can't guarantee you that I'll be praying it as fully and eloquently as Paul puts it, but I can guarantee you that day in and day out, I your pastor will be praying the essence of it, namely, that God will give you both a knowledge of his will and the power to do it.