

This evening we will begin a new series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Colossians. It's been a while since we worked our way through a NT epistle and so I thought it was time to tackle another one. So two new series – Revelation in the morning and Colossians in the afternoon. That should keep us busy for a while.

Just a couple of facts about this letter as we begin. The city of Colossae was located in what today is southwest Turkey. The church there was established during Paul's third missionary journey, but Paul himself was not directly involved. While Paul was ministering in Ephesus, which was about 100 miles from Colossae, a man from Colossae, named Epaphras was converted during a visit to Ephesus and he was instrumental in starting the church at Colossae. So Paul had never met the people of the church at Colossae directly. It appears that the occasion for the letter was the danger of a certain false teaching that was threatening the Colossian congregation. That false teaching is addressed in the letter, but it does not dominate the letter. The letter as a whole gives a wonderfully rich account of the gospel and the life that flows from the gospel.

This evening we will consider the first two verses – the opening greeting of the letter. It is a formal greeting, very similar to the greetings that open most of Paul's other letters. And since it is a formal stylized greeting, it is tempting to pass over it quickly, not pay much attention to it, to consider it unimportant. But that would be a mistake.

Just because something is formal and stylized does not mean that it is unimportant. The Christian life is not all about spontaneity. There are formal aspects like worship services and the sacraments. There are words and phrases that are repeated again and again in Christian worship and in the Christian life in general. Certainly there is a place for spontaneity in our relationship with the Lord, but there is also an important place for formality and repetition. Repeated actions and words shape us more than we think. There is discipline involved because it is easy to move through formalities mindlessly. We must exercise self-discipline to pay attention. But it is worth the effort. Formality is an important part of life including the Christian life and we see aspects of this in the Bible including the way in which Paul addresses the congregations in his letters to them.

Now the first thing that Paul does in this letter is identify himself along with Timothy as the writers of the letter. Apparently it was a joint effort. Timothy was Paul's closest associate in ministry. He may have had some involvement with the Colossian congregation. But the authority behind the letter comes from Paul. Timothy's authority was similar to the authority of a pastor or elder today. He had authority to teach and preach the word of God, but he was not an apostle and so the authority of the letter comes from Paul.

And Paul stresses that in his opening words. "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother." Paul presents himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." As an apostle Paul had a unique authority so that what he taught and wrote came with divine authority.

Paul expresses this point in more detail in his letter to the Galatians. In Galatians 1:11-12 he writes, "For I would have you know brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not

receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” He conveys the same idea in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 where he writes, “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

So when Paul, in the opening words of his letter to the Colossians, identifies himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,” he is making the point that what is coming in the rest of the letter comes with divine authority. It is as if Jesus himself had written the letter. What we have in the letter to the Colossians as well as the rest of the Bible is the authoritative word of God. God himself is speaking to us in the Bible. Jesus Christ himself is speaking to us in the Bible.

This is a very important point. This is at the heart of biblical Christianity. What the Bible says, God says. It comes through humans, but it is not a human word ultimately. It is a divine word. It comes with divine authority. What we have in our Bibles comes with the authority of God. There is no word in heaven or on earth that can contradict it. Think of all the words that have been spoken or written from the beginning of the world until now. This word has a higher authority than them all. Think of all the thoughts and pronouncements and claims of all human authorities. This word is above them all. That is why Paul wrote in Galatians 1:8, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” To contradict Paul’s gospel places one under a curse.

But that is to put the matter negatively. The fact that we have an authoritative word from God is the most precious thing in the world. For in the word of God we have Truth - and the message is gospel – good news of salvation for those who believe and obey.

One thing that the history of thought shows us is that on our own human beings have no access to the truth about the nature of things. The claim of postmodernism that human beings do not have access to ultimate truth is true in a sense. Postmodernism is correct when it says that human beings do not have access to ultimate truth. Where postmodernism is wrong is that it denies that God has spoken to humanity in his word to give us Truth that we can know no other way. The only way that we can know the truth about reality is by means of God speaking to us. And that is what we have in the Bible.

This truth applies to each of us personally. Our convictions about reality – about God and man – about right and wrong – about salvation and the Christian life – all of it must conform to what is written in the Bible. What the Bible teaches we must believe. What the Bible says is sin we must avoid. What the Bible says we must do, we must do. To contradict the Bible is to contradict God himself. This is why the Bible is so central in our worship and in the Christian life. It is the Truth. It is the ultimate authority. And it is this that Paul is emphasizing at the beginning of his letter to the Colossians when he refers to himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” He has been sent by Jesus and he speaks with the authority of Jesus himself.

Next Paul identifies the people to whom this letter is addressed. Verse 2, “To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:” These words teach us a great deal about how God views the church.

He refers to the members of the church at Colossae as saints. The literal meaning of the Greek word for saints is “holy ones.” It is very important that we understand what he means by this term. And what it does not mean. It does not mean that the members of the Colossian church were exceptionally holy in their lives. It does not mean what we mean by the expression – “that person is a saint.” Probably we do not actually use that expression, but we know what it means. If someone in our culture says, “that person is saint” it means that the person stands out as a good person. A saint in English usage refers to a person who is exceptional in serving other people or forgiving those who have wronged them or in some other way. The background of this usage is the Roman Catholic idea of a saint as someone whose life is exceptionally holy.

That is not what Paul is speaking about here. Holiness can refer to holiness of life as when God says that we are to be holy as God is holy, but the idea of holiness when it is used to refer to the whole church has to do with being set apart for God. The background is the OT way of referring to the people of Israel as a holy people. In Exodus 19 God refers to the people of Israel as a “holy nation.” The history of Israel shows that they were sadly lacking when it came to holiness of life, but they were set apart for God. God had set them apart to be his people.

And that is what Paul is talking about when he refers to the church at Colossae as saints. It means that they were God’s people – that God had set them apart for himself. From the rest of the letter it appears that the church at Colossae was a relatively healthy church. But like every Christian and every church they were far from perfect. There was still sin in their lives. Later on in the letter Paul exhorts them to put away things like anger, wrath, malice, slander and obscene talk. No doubt there would have been people at many different levels of personal holiness and spiritual maturity. But they were all saints. Every single one of them who was believing in Jesus and trying to grow in obedience to God. We get a sense of what Paul means by calling them saints when later in the epistle he refers to them as “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved” (Colossians 3:12)

Next he refers to them as “faithful brothers.” Both of these terms is important. By calling them “faithful” Paul means that they were serious about living the Christian life. This term does refer to their manner of life, but it must be understood in the light of the gospel. Faithful does not mean perfect. 1 John 1:8 says to Christians, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” James 3:2 says “For we all stumble in many ways.” Believers can be faithful even though they still struggle with sin in their life.

Faithfulness means trusting in Jesus for forgiveness. Faithfulness means being serious about obedience. Faithfulness means fighting against sin instead of just living in sin. Faithfulness means submitting to the Word of the Lord and seeking to please God in one’s life. As believers in Jesus our standing with God is Jesus’ righteousness and not our own. And everyone who truly believes in Jesus will be seeking to please him. That is faithfulness. And there will be many different levels in any congregation. Faithfulness is a broad category. It

includes the weak and the strong. It includes the babies in the faith, and it includes those who are mature in the faith. It is more about the direction you are going than how far you have come.

Paul also refers to the Colossians as brothers. They are faithful brothers. The ESV helpfully translates the Greek word accurately and explains in a footnote that in this kind of context brothers refers to both brothers and sisters. The Bible often addresses both sexes by using the male term. The term “man” often means humanity. The term “sons of God” refers to all the people of God, male and female. The term “brothers” usually refers to brothers and sisters. This may sound sexist in our day and age, but it is not, and we must be very aware of the shaping influence of our culture. There is no question that men and women are equal in worth and dignity in the eyes of God. And the biblical habit of referring to both men and women by using the male term ought not to offend us. This is part of submitting to the word of God and resisting the rebellious influence of our culture.

The point is that the church is a family. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. This is a wonderful truth. The church is made up of people who are different in many ways. There are differences in ethnicity. There are differences in giftedness. There are differences in social status in society. But in the church we are family. We are brothers. Everyone belongs. The ideal is that we are there for one another. Everyone matters. There is no difference in status.

Jesus even taught that the church family is more important than our biological or adopted family. Remember the story told in Mark 3:31-35. Jesus was surrounded by a crowd. He was told that his mother and mothers were outside seeking him. And Jesus said, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And then we read in Mark 3:34, “And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.’” This is not to say that our biological or adopted family is not important and should not be precious to us. It is a wonderful gift of God. But our relationship to Christ is more fundamental than our relationships with our family members. And that means that our relationships with other believers are more fundamental than our biological family as well.

And that is involved when Paul calls the members of the church of Colossae his brothers. It means that we are part of the family of God and that all who belong are to be loved and embraced and cherished and supported and cared for.

So the members of the church are saints and faithful brothers. They are also “in Christ.” “To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.” This is a key part of the biblical teaching about salvation. Believers are “in Christ.” It is a phrase that is used many, many times in the NT. It is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. We are in Christ.

Now this may sound strange. How can we be in Christ? Well it means that we are united to Christ – that we are one with Christ in a very profound way. We see something similar in marriage when we say that the two become one. The two are still individuals and yet a husband and wife are one in a very profound way.

There are two very important ways that we are in Christ. One is that he represents us before God. God views believers as being in Christ so that our sin is counted to him and his righteousness is counted to us. Jesus represents us in his perfect life and by his death on the cross so that it is as if we lived a perfect life and died on the cross. This is at the heart of salvation and it is a very precious truth indeed.

But there is another way of thinking of being in Christ. Jesus speaks of this in John 15 where he speaks about his relationship with his people as like the relationship between a vine and its branches. The point is that the life of the vine flows into the branches and produces fruit. Because we are in Christ we are one with him and so his life is our life. The life that brought him from the dead brings us from the dead spiritually and will one day bring us from the dead physically as well. Because we are in Christ we take part in his life. We are alive in Christ and because of that life we are able to produce fruit – the fruit of obedience – the fruit of love – the fruit of Christ-likeness.

Now all of this that Paul packs into these few words in which he identifies the recipients of this letter is tremendously important and encouraging. If we are members of Christ's church by faith, we are saints. We are faithful brothers. We are part of the family of God. And we are in Christ. These are the most important things about us.

We all have ways of thinking about ourselves and how we think about ourselves is very important for our quality of life and for the way in which we live. I am talking about our self-identity – how we answer the question – “Who am I?” We answer that question according to our sex – whether we are male or female. We answer that question according to our ethnicity and our family and our work and our strengths and weakness. All these things together form our self-concept and our self-concept has a huge influence on how we view ourselves and how we live our lives.

The kinds of things that Paul mentions in these terms that we have been looking at belong to the most significant aspects of who we are as Christians and ought to be the most significant part of our self-identity. This is simply to say that the most important things about us is what God says about us. And these terms are at the core of what God says about his people. You are saints. You are faithful if you are serious about pleasing God. You belong to God's family. You are in Christ. These terms should be central concepts in our self-identity if we are faithful members of Christ's church.

Just think – you are a saint – you are set apart by God for God. That is who you are in you are a believer. God has chosen you to belong to himself. God has set you apart to receive salvation and to serve him through that salvation. That is who you are. That should be an important part of your self-concept and it should shape the entire focus of your life. You are a brother or a sister. You belong to God's family. That is key to your self-identity. You belong to a worldwide family of brothers and sisters who share the same heavenly Father and Elder brother.

And you are in Christ. That is who you are. He represents you before the Father. Christ and you are united. And his life is your life. And so you can say with Paul in Galatians 2:20, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." This is who you are. You are many things and they are all important. But these things are the most important. These things are incredibly comforting. God has set me apart for himself. I belong to God's family. I am in Christ. I matter to God. God is pleased with me because I am in Christ. I am a precious child of God.

But with the comfort comes a calling. Live out of these truths. Be who you are in Christ. That is a way of summarizing all the commands of the NT. Be who you are. Live as one set apart by God. Live as a member of God's family. Live as one who is in Christ. Be who you are in Christ. And rejoice in the great blessing that it is to be a saint and a faithful brother in Christ.

TABLE MEDITATION

Finally Paul pronounces God's greeting to the church at Colossae. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father." This is not a prayer. It is a pronouncement. This is what God says to his people – to his church – Grace to you – Peace to you. I give you my grace. I give you my peace.

Grace is favor for the undeserving. It comes to us in Christ. We live in God's favor because of Christ even though we are not deserving of that favor. God is reassuring you of his favor. He delights in you. He is pleased with you. He loves you. And his peace. The peace here is much more than the feeling of peace in our hearts although that is part of it. It is reconciliation. And it is physical and spiritual and every other kind of wellbeing. It is what we mean when we sing, "It is well with my soul" only it means more comprehensively, It is well – "If God is for us who can be against us. He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" "Grace to you and peace from God our Father." That is not a prayer or a wish. It is a reality. God is looking upon you favorably. God gives you peace in the most comprehensive meaning of the word. It is completely and absolutely well with you.

At the Lord's Supper we remember Jesus' death on the cross. That death is the reason for the grace and the peace. God's favor rests upon us because Jesus died for us. We have peace with God because Jesus died for us. And in the Lord's Supper Jesus is reminding us of this and assuring us through the words and actions – this is my body which is for you – my broken body and shed blood – they are for you. As surely as I give you the bread and the wine so surely do you receive what they represent if you receive them by faith.

This table is for God's people – for saints – for the family of God – for those who are in Christ. It is for believers. It is for those who confess their sins and follow Jesus. It is for those who are serious about obedience. Not for the perfect. Not for the righteous in themselves. But for the needy. For those who need – who depend upon Jesus and all that he is for us.

The Lord's Supper is a celebration of the church. It symbolizes the unity of the church as we all together feed upon the same Christ. That is why we require church membership – membership in a church that is faithful to the bible. Obedience to Christ requires church membership – being part of the body is a huge part of what salvation means.