

Our text this evening is Colossians 1:3-8. In these verses Paul tells the Colossians of his prayers of thanksgiving for the fruit of the gospel in their lives and reminds them of how they had come to hear that gospel from a man named Epaphras. As always in these letters of Paul this language is full of ideas and terms related to the gospel and the Christian life. One of the most helpful aspects of these opening sections of Paul's letters to the churches is that they give us insight into how this inspired apostle thought about the churches he was writing to. These opening sections of Paul's letters help us to know how we ought to be thinking about churches in general and our own church in particular.

Paul is thankful to God for what he has heard about the church in Colossae. He had heard about their faith in Jesus and of their love for the saints and he is thankful to God for these things. He is very thankful. He says that he is always thanking God for their faith and love. The term "always" means regularly. Obviously Paul did other things besides thanking God for the Colossians. He also wrote letters. But he had a regular pattern of prayer and in those prayers he was frequently thanking God for the faith and love of the Colossians.

One of the things that this shows is that Paul cared a lot about the churches. He is so very thankful for what God was working in the churches that his gratitude was constantly coming up in his prayers. And that gives us an insight into how passionate he was about the flourishing of the churches. He cared very deeply about how the churches were faring. If there were problems, those problems troubled him. But he was also deeply thankful whenever he heard of the evidences of faith and love in the churches. He cared deeply about the churches and they were constantly in his prayers.

This deep love for and care about the church is something that should be reflected in our prayers and in our passions. Of course, Paul had a special calling as a missionary and a church planter and an apostle. But while we are not apostles, we are certainly called to care deeply about the wellbeing of the church. The church is tied up with the glory of God and the wellbeing of people. Jesus loved the church and gave himself for her. Paul was reflecting the character of Christ in his passion for the church and so should we. The church is obviously very important to God and it should be important to us.

And if it is that will show in our prayers and in our attendance of church meetings and in our thoughts and in our giving. It will show in our interactions with other church members. If we care deeply about the church we are being like Paul who was being like Jesus and that is a wonderful evidence of spiritual maturity. But if the church is at the periphery of our lives, something is off – we should be concerned. Love for God and love for his church go together and if the church is not important to you, God is not important to you. John in 1 John says that if we do not love our brothers we do not love God. We can properly extend that love for the church.

We should notice how positive Paul was about the church at Colossae. He wants them to know that he is full of thanksgiving to God for their faith and their love. The only letter among his letters in the NT that has a significantly different tone is his letter to the Galatians where that church was in great danger of forsaking the gospel all together. Mostly Paul is very positive about the churches to whom he wrote. He is grateful for them.

And he highlights the good things that God has worked in them. And he tells them of his thankfulness for them in his letters to them.

Now they all had problems and Paul does get around to addressing those problems. Most often the things that he emphasizes in his letters are areas of weakness in the church to whom he is writing. We will consider some of those things as we move through the letter to the Colossians. But he does not overlook the positive things that he has heard of or seen. He delights in every indication of fruit in the life of the congregation. He tells them how thankful he is for what God is doing in them. And here too he is an important example for us.

Like Paul we should care deeply about the church and we should overflow with thanksgiving for whatever faith and love is in evidence in the church. Every church has its problems and weaknesses. The church is made up of people who are saved by grace, but who still struggle with their sinful natures. And it is true that some churches are churches in name only. But we should be as positive as possible and thank God for whatever faith and the love is in evidence in the congregation.

We are, after all, people of the gospel. If we are trusting in Jesus and seeking to live for him, we are sinners saved by grace. We should have a pretty good idea of how sinful we were and how sinful we still are. We can rejoice in God's love for us even though there are many things in our lives that are plain shameful. We delight in being God's beloved children even though that status is only and completely of grace. What a blessing it is to know that we are so thoroughly unworthy of God's favor and yet to know that God's face is shining upon us because of what Jesus has accomplished for us by his life and his death.

That ought to determine how we think of the church with all her weaknesses and short-comings. We are gospel people. We live by the gospel. Our joy and our peace are rooted in God's grace to us – undeserved favor for Jesus' sake. And we must reflect that grace in our attitude towards the church in general and our church in particular. And that will cause us to celebrate every manifestation of the power of the gospel in the lives of our brothers and sisters. And so our dominant attitude can be one of thanksgiving like we see in the apostle Paul in this letter. "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints."

There are actually three things that he mentions in this sentence that together summarize what Paul has heard about and what he is thankful for. They are faith, love and hope. These three words are used more often in the NT to summarize the fruit of the gospel in the lives of believers – faith, love and hope. These are three very important words in the biblical description of the life that flows from the gospel.

Faith is mentioned first. It is usually mentioned first, although not always. There are a few times when love is mentioned first. But it is significant that faith is usually mentioned first because faith is what unites believers to Christ and love is the result of our union with Christ. This is related to the nature of the gospel. Love is a

work and we are saved by Christ through faith and not by works. Works of love flow from the transforming power of the gospel and the gospel is received by faith.

In his most systematic presentation of the gospel, which is his letter to the Romans, Paul first speaks about sin, then about justification by faith and then about the life that flows from having been united to Christ by faith. It is key to our understanding of the gospel that we come to Christ as sinners who have nothing in ourselves to make us right with God. Paul puts it like this in Romans 3:23-25, “[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” The glory of the gospel is that it is offered to sinners who have nothing in themselves to offer to appease the wrath of God against their sin. The offer of forgiveness and reconciliation is made to sinners to be received by faith and by faith alone.

Paul goes on in Romans 3 to make the point that this way of salvation excludes boasting. We have nothing to boast about because there is nothing we can do to turn away God’s wrath. It comes as a gift – an undeserved gift and the fact that it comes through faith and not through works emphasizes that fact. The gospel is a summons for sinners to receive reconciliation with God as a gift through faith on the basis of what Jesus has done for us and emphatically not on the basis of anything that we have done. All we can do is increase our debt. The fact that salvation is received by faith means that it is received as a free gift. Faith is rooted in the acknowledgement that we do not have what it takes to make up for our sins. Faith is receiving forgiveness and reconciliation with God as a free gift. Faith is saying yes to an offer. It is trusting in a promise. It is resting in the word and the character of God in Christ.

This is why the gospel is such good news. It is designed for people who are helplessly lost because of their sins. That is why faith is the first thing from our side in terms of the response. The good news comes to us as an offer – as a promise – “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Believing is believing that promise and trusting the word of the one who gives it. It is receiving the gift as a helpless sinner – as one who has nothing to contribute to his or her salvation. That is why it is such good news – because it addresses the reality of our utter inability to make ourselves acceptable to God. Faith simply receives what God in Christ has done for us. All the giving comes from his side. All the receiving comes from our side.

Now all of this involves believing in the claims of God in the Bible. The good news is understood in the context of the truth claims of the Bible – about God – about Jesus Christ as the Son of God – about God’s authority over us - about sin and our predicament. Faith involves believing **that** as well as believing **in**. It involves believing that our situation is as the Bible describes it and then also trusting in the good will and truthfulness of the God who makes the offer. And all of this is one of the defining characteristics of a Christian.

And that is why Paul says that he is grateful to God for the faith of the Colossians. He is grateful to God because they had heard the message of the gospel from Epaphras and had responded to it in faith. They had believed in Jesus Christ and had received the salvation that Jesus accomplished for those who believe in him.

It is very significant that Paul is thankful to God for the faith of the Colossians. He is not thankful to the Colossians for believing. He is not saying to them, "Thank you for believing my message that you heard through Epaphras." He is telling the Colossians that he is thankful to God because of their faith. That is because we can't even believe without the prior work of God in our hearts. Paul makes this point in Ephesians 2:8 when he says to the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." This is why Paul thanked God for the faith of the Colossians and not the Colossians themselves. Their faith was not their own doing. The only reason that they had believed was because God had given them the gift of faith. From the point of view of their own experience, they had heard the message and responded to it in faith. But from the point of view of what was going on deep within their hearts, that faith had been given to them by God. And so Paul is thankful to God for the faith of the Colossians.

And certainly there is reason for us to be thankful to God for faith wherever we find it – whether in ourselves or in other believers. This is a glorious thing. Hell-worthy sinners reconciled to God through a God-given faith in Jesus. Rebels against God - justly under his wrath - made righteous in God's sight through a God-giving faith in Jesus. This is the most wonderful thing that can happen to anyone and it is the greatest reason we have for being profoundly thankful to God both for our own salvation and that of others. There is nothing more precious than this and it comes from God through Christ as an undeserved and unmerited gift. No wonder thanksgiving is such a significant part of the Christian life.

Next Paul mentions that he is thankful for the love of the Colossians for all the saints. Paul had not only heard of their faith. He had also heard of their love for all the saints and he was thankful for that as well. One of the reasons that Paul was thankful for the love of the Colossians is that it was evidence of the reality of their faith. If there is true faith, there will also be love. If love is absent so is faith.

It is very important to get this straight. The message of the gospel is not - love one another and you will be saved. Love is a work and the good news is that we are saved through faith and not by works. The message - love one another and you will be saved - would not be good news because whatever love we have before believing is so mixed with selfishness that our imperfect love is enough to condemn us. Love is the result of salvation. It is only when we believe that God begins his work of transformation in us that enables us to begin to love one another in a way that reflects the love of God. Love flows from the salvation that is received by faith. If God gives faith, he also gives love. And if there is no love there is no faith.

So Paul was thankful for the love of the Colossians for all the saints. He had heard that the Colossians were loving one another and that they had a love for all the saints. Perhaps Paul had heard about their love for

saints in nearby churches. Perhaps he had heard about their prayers for saints in far away places. It is significant that Paul mentions that the love of the Colossians included all the saints.

What is love? A good starting point is Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-6. "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

This is obviously a central text in the Bible about love. What Paul writes here is vital, but it is not complete. 1 Corinthians 13:4-6 is mostly about what love does not do. Love here is mostly about getting along with other people. Patience. Not being boastful. Not insisting on your own way. Bearing all things. Enduring all things. Love as Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 13 is necessary for there to be harmony in the church and in relationships in general. We need to be patient with one another. We need to bear with one another. This is an absolutely necessary form of love.

But it is not complete. We see that in that love is often defined in reference to God giving up Christ as a sacrifice for our sins. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son." Love is giving. Its greatest manifestation is in God giving his son for our salvation. Love is giving for the wellbeing of the other. Love is sacrifice for the good of the other. Love is looking "not only to [our] own interests, but also to the interests of others" as Paul puts it in Philippians 2. Love is having the mind of Christ who became a servant in order to bring salvation to the lost. So love is both bearing with one another and serving one another.

Love is the opposite of selfishness. Selfishness is what comes naturally to us in our sinful condition. But when God gives us faith he also gives us love so that we begin the lifelong process of learning to be more like Jesus in how we relate to other people. Love is a wonderful thing. There is a lot of suffering in the world and much of it is the result of hatred and selfishness. Many people long for a world in which people love and care for one another, but it is an elusive goal.

But it is the purpose of God in the gospel to produce a people of love. In John 13:34-35, Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." Where there is love people are cared for. Where there is love people are embraced. Where there is love people are sensitive to one another's needs and hurts. Where there is love people seek the true wellbeing of others. And so there is belonging. There is encouragement. There is caring. There is generosity. As well as patience and longsuffering.

This is what Paul was speaking about when he said he was thankful for the love that the Colossians had for all the saints. The phrase "all the saints" is important because it indicates that the Colossians loved not just the saints that were like them, but also the saints that were different. One of the key truths about the church is that it is composed of people who are very different from one another. There were Jews and Gentiles.

Historically they hated one another, but in the church they loved one another. People tend to love those whom they find lovable. But in the church, the love to which we are called is to embrace everyone – the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, different nationalities, different character types – people who are not naturally attracted to one another. As Paul emphasizes in Colossians 3:11 “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all and in all.”

There was something of this love in among the Colossians and when Paul heard of it, he rejoiced and thanked God for what he was doing in that congregation. And we can do the same whenever we see this love and just thinking about it can motivate us to seek to grow in our contribution to the love of our congregation and for all the saints.

Finally Paul mentions hope and he does so in a very interesting way. He makes a connection between hope and faith and love. Listen to the way that he puts it. “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.” The NIV translation of this verse is helpful. It says that the faith and love “spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven.” Faith and love spring from hope.

Now the hope that Paul is talking about here is the wonderful future that God has promised to his people. Hope in this verse is not the subjective attitude of hope but the objective reality that God has promised to his people in Christ. It is the hope that is laid up for us in heaven. Douglas Moo puts like this in his commentary, “the Colossians need to be reminded that their present experience of faith and love rests on the solid foundation of what God has committed to do for them in the future” (p. 85). The hope is what is promised. The hope is the future reality that God has promised to his people. Eternal life. The fullness of the kingdom of God. Seeing Jesus face to face. The end of suffering. A sinless life in the presence of God. The new heavens and the new earth where righteousness dwells.

That hope – the objective promises of God is what gives rise to both faith and love and sustains faith and love. The Colossians have faith in Jesus and love for the saints because of the hope that is laid up for them in heaven. Our faith is rooted in hope. God promises a glorious future and faith is rooted in that promise. God promises a glorious future and love is rooted in that promise. Another NT scholar writes “[T]he formulation here serves to underline the eschatological and forward looking character of the gospel message that called for the Colossians faith and stimulated their love for their fellow saints.” (Dunn on 1:5)

This all underscores how pivotal the promised wonderful future is in the NT description of the Christian life. Because Jesus has conquered death by his death and resurrection, we who believe look forward to eternal life in the presence of God. Death is not the end. The end is life in a renewed creation. That hope strengthens our faith. It strengthens our faith because it is certain – based on the sure promises of God. And it nurtures our love because living lives of love is a foretaste of what we will enjoy in perfection in the new creation. The hope of a world of love is a strong motivation for us to live lives of love in the present. The life of love in the church

is intended to be a witness to the world of the world of love that we will know in perfection in the renewal of all things.

Anticipation is a huge part of the Christian life as the Bible describes it. The whole Bible looks forward to the future that God has promised, and believers live in anticipation of the blessedness that awaits them beyond this present age. That means that we should think of this often. God would have us live with hope because of the hope that is laid up for us in heaven. And that hope is a powerful encouragement for living the Christian life of faith and love because we want to experience as much as possible in the here and now the blessedness that we will know in its fullness in the hereafter.

What a glorious gospel! What a wonderful thing it is to live in the light of such a marvelous future! May that hope be a powerful force in our lives to strengthen and sustain our faith and our love.