

Thankfulness: A Holy Act

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- [0 : 0 0] Our scripture reading this morning is from the book of Colossians, chapter 1. Now, if you're using your Pew Bible, Colossians is one of those letters that's hard to find.
- In your Pew Bible, it's page 1168. The way that I remember it is, for the books at least, is Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, General Electric Power Company.
- Because all those are about two pages each, three pages, and they're hard to find, but I will keep that with me. So we're doing a new series called Rooted in Christ, and actually that language comes from the book of Colossians, in chapter 2.
- Paul says, As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted, and built up in Him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.
- So maybe Paul's main message in this book, in the midst of all kinds of things that the Colossians are struggling with, is, guys, stay rooted in Christ. There's so many distractions, but stay rooted in Christ.
- [1 : 0 7] Now, just before we read, you know, there's whole books, many, many books written about what's going on in Colossians. Who are these people? What's this book about? Let me just tell you just two or three sentences about what's going on here.
- The book of Colossians, it's written by a guy named Paul. Paul's an apostle, you know. And Paul is sitting in prison. We call this one of his prison epistles because he's sitting in prison, probably in Rome.
- This is probably about 25 years after the death and the resurrection of Christ. So all the churches at this time period are young. They're all figuring out what it means to live in the light of the gospel.
- And Paul's writing to this church in Colossae, which is a town in the middle of what's modern-day Turkey. Just another place where the gospel's hit.
- And Paul has never been there himself, but he'll reference a guy, as we're reading, a guy named Epaphras. And Epaphras brought the gospel to Colossae. So Paul's writing from prison to people he's never met before.
- [2 : 0 8] But he's writing about the things that he's heard about this place. So there's so much more we could say, but that's a good place to start. And this morning we're going to read Colossians 1, verses 1 to 8. So hear now God's word.
- Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae, grace to you and peace from God our Father.
- 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.
- Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing, as it also does among you.
- Since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant, he is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

[3 : 16] Okay? Amen. This is God's word. Now, we call this the letter to the Colossians. My Bible says the letter of Paul to the Colossians. And so one of the questions you have to ask when you open a book like this is, why then are we reading it?

Why does it matter? Is this just a historical document? And the answer is, yes, it's a historical document. Paul really did write a letter to the people in Colossae. But it's more than that, because what we believe as Christians is, you know, Paul was writing to a specific people, but even as he was writing it in God's sovereignty, God knew that this letter was going to end up in our Bibles.

And so Paul's writing to a very specific people, but God always intended for this letter to be read throughout time. So you can think about it like this this morning. When Paul was writing down this letter, God knew that 2,000 years later, you were going to open this passage on this day.

And he wanted you to consider what Paul wrote, because God is writing this book through Paul. Okay. So this is a letter to the Colossians, but it's also to you and me.

And that's why when you look at your bulletin, on the bottom of the bulletin now, we're going to start putting next week's passage. And that's just a little, a gentle nudge to look at the passage, if you can remember, before next week.

[4 : 41] And maybe two questions you can ask yourself every week when you're reading this passage by yourself. The first one is, what does this passage tell me about God? You know, if you read the Bible, every single chapter in this Bible is going to tell you something about God.

If you sit there and think about it, what does this tell you about God? And then secondly, you can always ask whenever you're reading your Bible, what does this tell me about myself? Not that I'm the center of the world, but if God really wants me to have this, he's telling me something about myself.

Okay. All right. But now to the passage at hand. Okay. For the next few moments, there's one simple idea that I want to get across today that I think the passage gets across. And it's this.

Thankfulness is a holy act. Thankfulness is a holy act. And I think that's worth saying. And it's worth thinking about for a few minutes, because when we think about what holiness is, you know, if I were to ask you, what is holiness?

Where do you see it in somebody's life? You might say prayer. You might say the Lord's Supper, which we're going to do here in a few minutes. You might say reading your Bible, go into a small group. These are things that when you think about them, they've got weight to them.

[5 : 51] You know, it's a beautiful image of a man kneeling down to pray. There's something weighty to that. And, but when we think about thankfulness, oftentimes I think we think about it more like good manners than we do something that has to do with the gospel.

You know, so how often do you hear this? Let's say thanks so we can eat. Right? And when you put it like that, you're kind of saying prayer is the one thing that's getting between me and these pork ribs.

Right? It's an obstacle. But thankfulness, thankfulness is a holy act. And, um, Paul, what you see in this letter is that Paul has this, he's got a habit of thankfulness.

Um, part of who he is, part of his holiness is that he takes time to be thankful. And that's what we're going to see this morning. And what I want to look at is the, the two, there's two layers to Paul's thankfulness.

So we're going to look at those two layers. And then for just a moment, talk about habits of thankfulness. How can we, how can we stir up this, this in our lives? Okay. So there's two layers to Paul's thankfulness that teaches us about thankfulness.

[6 : 54] And the first layer is this. It's simple. It's Paul's thankful for what he hears. You know, I would say he's thankful for what he sees, but he's never met the Colossians. And so everything that he hears is through his ears.

So the first layer of Paul's thankfulness is what he hears. And you see that there at the very beginning in verse four. Well, it starts in verse three. He says, we always thank God.

And then the reason that he gives for it is in verse four. We always thank God. 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.

So that, that, that, that's the reason for his thankfulness. And if you, if you break that down, there's actually kind of a familiar pattern that you've probably heard before. What is he thankful for? Three things.

Faith, hope, and love, right? That people call that, those are the cardinal virtues of the Christian life. That's what they've been called. And, and you've heard Paul use that before, probably at almost every single wedding you've ever been to, you know, that, that in, in first Corinthians, what is it?

[7 : 57] First Corinthians 13, that great passage about love where Paul says, if I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I'm a noisy clanging gong. And if I, if I can profit, if I have the gift of prophecy, but I have not love, I'm nothing.

Or if I give my body over to be burned by fire, but I don't have love, I'm nothing. And you see what, what Paul really values in Christian community is not what you might call the miraculous gifts, the things that everybody looks at and is impressed with.

He says, what really, what really wows Paul, or you might say in this passage, what makes him thankful is three things, faith, hope, and love. Right.

And what do those three things have in common? Well, they're all, they're all, you could say that they summarize the whole Christian life. If you think about it, where, where does faith look?

Faith looks to the past. It looks back to what Jesus has done. And where does hope look? It looks to the, to the future. And the, what, what is in store for a believer one day.

[9 : 00] And then what, where is love? Love is always in the present. It's always what we're doing right now. And Paul looks at these Colossians or he hears about them. And he says, I hear that you've got faith and you've got faith and you've got hope and you've got love.

In every direction of your life, the gospel is taking root. And that's what makes him thankful. Okay. And why I think this, you know, sure.

Why not be thankful? But I think what makes us, what makes us thankfulness impressive. And what, where I think it really challenges us is Paul. What is, what Paul is not thankful for is a perfect church.

Paul writes this letter. Most people think that Paul writes this letter because of what he calls, what they call the Colossian heresy. You never want to hear someone talking about your church and saying there's a heresy there, but there's, there's supposedly a heresy in Colossae that we'll talk about in the next few weeks.

But the point is Paul's writing a letter because something is not going well. And yet he opens it by saying, I'm thankful. I'm thankful for each one of you. And I'm thankful for what I hear about you.

[10 : 07] And I think that, that resonates with me because it's, isn't it so easy sometimes to say, I've got so many problems. I've got so many things in my life that, maybe aren't even going wrong right now, but I suspect they may go wrong pretty soon.

And how can I be thankful when I've got so much to be stressed out about? How can I possibly be thankful? And Paul could have said the same thing. Paul could have said, you know, there's, this church is in danger of heresy.

There are things in this church already, Paul, Paul is saying that could sink this church. And even in the midst of that, he looks at these people and he says, you know, right now, I'm looking at you and I see faith.

Hope and love. And that makes me thankful. So often we can be in an imperfect situation. And we say, how can I be thankful?

And what does Paul do? You kind of see two things here that Paul does. He looks for the good. You know, someone put it like this. Paul, Paul seems like the kind of guy who's anxious to give praise where praise can be given.

[11 : 14] He looks for something to be thankful for, even in the midst of a bad situation. And then when he finds it, what does he do? He dwells on it. He says, how does he open in verse three? He says, we always thank God.

There's this, there's this consistency to Paul's thankfulness where he doesn't just open and say, you know, thank you guys in order to critique them. He says, I'm always thanking God for you.

There's a consistency to his praise. And I mean, I don't know how to put this, but it's just, it's hard to be thankful sometimes, isn't it? And then you turn around years later and you say to yourself, you know, during that season, it was hard.

But when I look back, I see I had so much to be thankful for. There's a comedy show that Carly and I watch. I'm not going to tell you the name of it, but it's silly. But at the end of the comment, at the end of the whole series, there's this moment where this really endearing character, all the character, all the people are saying goodbye to one another.

And this endearing character who has never said a smart thing in the whole series, he looks up at the camera and he says, you know, he's reflecting on all the past years that he's now saying goodbye to.

[12 : 21] And he says, I wish there was a way to know that you're in the good old days before you've actually left them. Right. You know, we always look back and say, those were the good old days, but I bet during those good old days, nobody was saying, this is it.

We're in the good old days right now. And, you know, Paul's not saying here, nostalgia is a great thing because sometimes nostalgia can mislead you and it can make you think that things used to be better when they really weren't that much better than they are today.

But, there is a lesson there in saying, in every season, there is something to be thankful for. I think that's what Paul would say. And he does say that later in Thessalonians.

We'll talk about that in a minute. Paul always finds something to be thankful for, even in the midst of a really difficult situation. And, so, all of that, everything that I've just said, all that only makes sense if you see the second layer of Paul's thankfulness, which we're going to look at here for a moment, the second layer of Paul's thankfulness is what he understood with his heart.

So, the first layer is what he can see or what he hears. He hears that there's faith, hope, and love in this church. But, the second layer is what he knows with his heart, which is this.

[13 : 34] Paul knows all these good things he's hearing about this church, these great people. He knows that everything he's hearing about this church that is good is not because these people are naturally good.

people. It's because God has been doing something in this place. It's because God has been faithful. And, you see that at the very beginning. I mean, he says it in verse three. He says, we always thank God.

You know, when you thank someone for something, you're implying that they have done something. And so, when he thanks God for the Colossians, faith, hope, and love, he's implying that God is the one that is giving them faith, hope, and love.

That God's the one to thank for their faith. Right? And, what Paul sees in the Colossians is the power of the gospel when it takes root in a community. And, and you know that starting there in verse five, what does he say?

He says, I'm thankful for your faith, hope, and love. And then halfway through verse five, he says, of this, of this, of this hope laid up in heaven, you've heard before in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you as indeed in the whole world, it is bearing fruit.

[14 : 45] So, what, what Paul sees is really going on here. What makes him really thankful is that God has come into this community and the gospel has taken root.

So, again, it's not like these people are, you know, he's found the really good ones. It's that God has come and done something that only God could do. And that's why Paul is thanking God for it.

Okay. The gospel takes root. And then he says, it bears fruit. It's bearing fruit in you. As he says, just as it does across the whole world. And, you know, there's a really interesting side note here that I won't dwell on, but it's worth thinking about.

you know, when Paul says the gospel is bearing fruit and increasing as it does, what does he say? He says, bearing fruit increasing as it also does among you, as it does in the whole world.

He's implying that the same thing that's happening in Colossae is happening in other places all across the world, which is to say, there's nothing special about Colossae.

[15 : 46] What's special is what the gospel can do. You know, the gospel, if it's really the gospel, you know, if our church has the gospel, if it's, if it's setting down roots in our community, then by definition, it is the same thing that's also setting roots in a church, in a village in Africa, or in a, in an underground church in China, that what we all share, the part, what we all share is the same thing, you know, and the heresy that Paul talks about, what often happens in churches is, we make something besides the gospel, the gospel, we make a tradition, or we make a rule that the Bible doesn't really talk about, we make that the gospel, or the judge of whether you're really in or out.

And what Paul is saying here is the gospel, when it's really the gospel, you'll know it because it has this incredible transferability. The same thing that I rejoice in is the same thing that some, you know, 80 year old person in a village in Africa rejoices in.

And I've never met, we have nothing in common except for the gospel. Okay. And why, why does that matter in this context? And I think what you see that we're hinting at something that you'll see later on, but Paul, when he looks at them and he says, I'm so thankful because of what I've heard about your faith and your faith in the gospel.

And you see, he emphasizes this, this gospel that you've heard about before and that, you know, what he's kind of doing is he's reminding them that where your hope should be is in what I, what Epaphras told you months ago, because what we know about the Colossians is that people came into that church and they began to add things to the gospel.

They began to say, you know, if you're really a Christian, you're really a Jesus follower, then you're also going to do this, or you're also going to believe this. And it was things that, that Paul never taught the church and that Epaphras never taught the church, but these people were coming in and saying, you know, you're not really a Christian until you've, until you've taken this extra step.

[17 : 51] And that's why Paul keeps emphasizing the gospel, which you heard, because he's saying, don't, don't believe these people who come in and tell you that you're not really a Christian because you haven't done this extra thing.

Right? Paul is always at, he's always at pains to say the gospel is simple. It's really all about Jesus. It's really all about placing your faith in Jesus.

And if someone comes along and tells you that first you place your faith in Jesus, and you also do this thing before you can really be a Christian, then you, you've lost the moment that happens, you've lost the gospel.

You know, the gospel does change us. It changes. It makes us do things that we would have never done without Jesus, but that's always our response to the fact that we've already been saved. It's not the thing that makes us saved.

Okay. So Paul's reminding them, even as he's being thankful for them, he's reminding them, don't forget what the gospel really is, what you heard all those years or months ago. Okay.

[18 : 48] And you know, there's a freedom in this. You know, if you're a thankful person, you get a freedom that you could not have without it. Because to be thankful is to say, there are things in my life that I could not have accomplished myself.

To be thankful for the gospel is to say the gospel is something I could have never secured for myself. It's something that was done for me. And you know, how many of us spend so much of our lives kind of white knuckling our lives, trying to control every part of it, maybe trying to control things that are good, but, but control things that we, if we're honest with ourselves, we can never control.

You know, for instance, this is a scary thought I was thinking about this week as I was kind of thinking through what was going on in Colossians. You think about it. Every, every type of sin that could destroy this church is, is already in this room.

Pride, lust, envy, jealousy, greed, all the things that, you know, take down churches and that could take down this church. It's already in this room.

It's in my heart. It's in your hearts. And the temptation can be to say, well, we've, you know, nip it in the bud. We're going to, we're going to, I'm going to change people's hearts.

[20 : 05] I'm going to change my own heart. And what Paul would tell us is, if you think that you can change other people's hearts with your words, you've got another thing coming. If you think you can change your own heart with words, you've got another thing coming.

Because the only thing that can really change a heart, you know, we just told those kids, the only thing that can bring a rebirth is not my words. It's the power of the gospel.

Now the gospel can work through words. The Holy Spirit can work through a preacher's words, or it can work through your, your words. But my words alone can accomplish nothing.

I can't change a person's heart, but the gospel can. Right? And there's a freedom in knowing that to say, well, then I realized it doesn't, it doesn't depend on me.

The, the fruitfulness of the gospel doesn't depend on me. And it doesn't depend on you. It depends on the power of the Holy Spirit. It depends on what God can do. And it puts us in a posture of, of thankfulness and a dependence, rather than saying, I'm going to figure this out myself.

[21 : 06] I'm going to fix everything that's wrong with this world. Okay. It makes us look to God and say, I'm already thankful for what you've done. And I'm dependent on you for anything that you're yet to do.

Okay. So that's what makes Paul thankful in this passage, that he can see that even in the midst of a hard time, God is at work.

That our college ministry for our denomination is called RUF. And the RUF minister at USM is going to speak here in two weeks. And their, their tagline that I always hear them saying again and again is God is at work because maybe that's a reminder to them either.

When they're tempted to take control and take things into their own hands, or when they're tempted to think that nothing good is actually happening. God is at work. God that we're dependent on. Okay. Now, briefly for just a moment, the habit of thankfulness.

I said at the beginning, thankfulness is a holy act. It's a holy habit. So what do you, how do you, how do you find it? Or what do you, how do you, how do you make it grow?

[22 : 13] And you see two things in this passage that we've already seen. One is you've got to stop and take time to be thankful. It requires slowing down, slowing down enough to think about what there is to be thankful for.

Paul in first Thessalonians five, he says, rejoice, always pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances. And here's the great line for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

I love that. What's God's will for your life for you to be thankful for, because it's really saying for you to know what, what you have in Jesus Christ. But, but it's hard to slow down enough, especially in our world to say, what do I have to be thankful for?

In the midst of this season, especially if you're going through a hard time, what is there to be thankful for? There's the gospel. Okay. So the first thing is slow down. But the second thing is be consistently thankful.

So slow down to see what there is to be thankful, but then be, be consistently thankful. That's why Paul says here, what we are always, we always thank God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.

[23 : 25] Paul, Paul says, I'm consistently thankful for what I hear about you guys. And, and that's a, if thankfulness is a holy act, then what that must mean is that it doesn't come to you and me naturally.

You know, we often think, you know, some people are born optimists, some are born pessimists, some people are born thankful and some aren't. But if it's really, if it's really something holy, if it's something that God calls us to, it's something that you and I are always going to struggle with.

And we've got to practice, maybe set aside time in your day to say, what am I really thankful for? And, and sometimes the hardest thing I remember in college, one of the hardest things for, for a young man to do was to look at one of his friends and say, I'm thankful for you because the guy would just blow them off or say, Hey, quit, quit being weird.

Stop talking about how thankful you are. Right. And sometimes it's hard to look at someone, you know, someone that you may have known for years and to look at them in the eyes and say, you know, I'm really thankful for you. I remember, I still remember when I was a little boy, there was an old man at my church.

And one day he came up to me and he shook my hand and he said, he said, Hunter, God bless you. And I remember I was, I said, thanks. And then I was, I was walking away. He grabbed my hand and pulled me back to himself.

[24 : 45] And he said, no Hunter. And he looked at me in the eyes and he said, God bless you. And he was trying to get me to slow down to see that he meant it. He really wanted God to bless my life.

It's hard for us to slow down sometimes and look at each other in the eyes and say, you know, I'm really thankful for you. I'm really thankful for who you've been to me or who I see you are out in the world.

There's a great GK Chesterton line. GK Chesterton was one of C.S. Lewis's big heroes. He lived in the 1800s. And he talks about how, what it means to be consistently faithful.

And he says this, he says, kind of tongue in cheek, but very serious at the same time. He says, you guys, he's writing to a group of people. He says, you say grace before meals. All right.

I say grace before the concert and the opera and grace before the play and the pantomime and grace before I open a book and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing, and grace before I dip the pen and the ink.

[25 : 50] And what he's saying is we've got to be thankful. Every one of those things he just mentioned are gifts from God that we have in this life. And the more you grow in grace, you know, the, the holy man is not the uptight man.

It's not the man who says I'm happy. It's the man who says every single day of his life, I'm so thankful. I'm so thankful for what Jesus Christ has done. And for all the good things he gives us in this life.

So that's the question to leave you with is, are you thankful? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we praise you for your gospel. we praise you for the good news of Jesus Christ.

And we pray that as your gospel settles, settles into our hearts more and more day by day, we will grow in thankfulness. In your son's name we pray. Amen.