

A Growth Industry

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[0 : 00] The message is actually in the machine. I just do lip sync. Yeah, you, well, that brochure, you don't have it in front of you, so you don't, that, one of faith in the city, one of the things I'm not advocating is faith in the city.

So be careful how you read it. The other thing is that when the picture was taken, I had fairly acute indigestion, but I felt better soon afterwards.

There was, in the Globe and Mail, you know, the year 1994 in Prospect, and they put out this glossy magazine with, I guess, just before the New Year.

And they had a picture of a father in the bathtub. His wife, dressed in jeans and a blouse, was handing him their one-year-old baby to join him in the bathtub.

Behind her was a four-year-old wrapped in a towel who had just been in the bathtub. And that was the picture that was there.

[1 : 40] What I'd like you to do is guess whose advertisement it was. Any suggestions? The Institute of Chartered Accountants.

Now, John, you can explain that tomorrow. That must be the most advanced advertising in the whole of Canada.

But there it was. Anyway, they were trying to encourage family life, and so I'm glad that they're in the business. But it was unusual.

Well, the thing I want to talk about today, which is Colossians 1, verses 1 to 8, and you have the text in front of you.

Our usual channel for getting them wasn't there, so I actually did this myself. I mean, I typed it out, so that's what accounts for the mistakes in it. It really is an amazing kind of statement.

[2 : 52] I mean, it's one of the letters that Paul wrote, presumably from in prison in Rome. It was to a city called Colossae, which was a day's journey by car, I understand, from Ephesus, which was on the coast in Turkey, in modern-day Turkey.

It was one of a three-city area, which included Hierapolis, Colossae, and Laodicea.

It is featured as the object of which one of the New Testament letters was written and says some very interesting things about it. It was a church that was started by the man who's spoken of here, Epaphras.

It was presumably the result of Paul's daily lectures in the Hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus, where people heard him and then took the news of the gospel out to the outback.

And Colossae was one of the cities that heard the gospel through somebody who heard the gospel through listening to Paul when he preached in Ephesus.

[4 : 04] So that's how it got to be there. Paul never visited them. He perhaps didn't know many of the people by face to whom the letter is addressed. But it's a very warm and wonderful letter, and Paul is trying to help them cope.

Now, what he's trying to help them cope with is how they can receive the gospel in the complex kind of society that they lived in.

And my increasing care and concern for us is the question, how is it even remotely possible for Vancouver to hear the gospel?

I think it's an extremely difficult thing to do. Seems that one of the results of not knowing who God is is that you soon discover that you don't know who you are.

And so you're not sure who it is that's listening to the story. You have lost your identity. That's one of the characteristics of our society.

[5 : 21] You put your identity on with the group of people that you happen to be with. You put your identity on with the business you belong to. You put your identity on with the clothes you wear.

But if something is addressed to your heart, it isn't there, so you can't hear it because you don't know who you are. That was the kind of, I think, is something of the problem that we have in Vancouver.

And that it really is difficult for us to identify ourselves because all of us call on one another to be something in a given situation. And so survival in our city depends on being able to be whoever it is that you're with or whatever sort of profile you want to adopt under the particular circumstances. I mean, you see it again in politics where you know that nobody would ever elect such and such a person. And so the media put up a person here who has little or no bearing to the person who's running.

And you vote for that picture up there. And then he has to try and pretend that he isn't himself, but he's that for the rest of his career in politics. Well, that kind of thing means that I think that pretty basic to our life is the problem of not really knowing who we are.

[6 : 55] I have a granddaughter who was nine yesterday. And she, you know, when I'm with her, I have to be her grandfather.

Now, that's, you know, that has certain dignity and certain honor attached to it. But I don't really feel like a grandfather. And she has no question about who I am.

And so I have to abandon any disguise of being youthful and athletic and with it. And she points out the increasing fat that's accumulating on my face and various other personal things, which are somewhat humbling.

But anyway, it's that problem is that if you don't know who you are, it's unlikely that you're going to discover that the gospel is addressed to you or that it has any relevance for you because you don't happen to be the person it seems to be addressed to.

In so far as you don't know who you are. So let me look at it and give you first, from this text, the hallmarks of Christian faith.

[8 : 10] A hallmark. Apparently, the name was derived from, most of you probably know this, but let me tell you, the goldsmith's hall in London, which put their mark on anything that was genuine gold.

So it was the mark of the goldsmith's hall, which we have called the hallmark. So the hallmarks of Christian faith, if you look at the text, you will see in the first line, is that it is apostolic.

And apostolic means simply that it is that faith which has been granted to us or given to us through the firsthand testimony of the apostles who were the witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And that's what the faith is. It's the faith of the apostolic community.

The apostolic witness to the world is called the New Testament. And so one of the primary hallmarks of Christianity is that it is apostolic.

[9 : 36] Paul is an apostle of Christ Jesus, a witness. And he has with him in company Timothy, who's a sort of second rank there of the early church leaders.

But it's important because Paul was very careful, and nobody really ever does this for him. Nobody, I don't think, worships Paul.

Women generally dislike him fairly heartily. But I'm sure that doesn't bother him because he was concerned with what he said, and you had to look at what he said, not at him.

Now, most religious leaders today are able to compromise and say, well, you may not know God, but it'll help if you know me. And they sell themselves on that basis.

And it doesn't work. Paul is an apostle of Christ Jesus, and he has somebody with him to back him up in writing this letter, and that's Timothy. So the first hallmark is that it's apostolic.

[10 : 42] The second is that it's marked by grace, which is the Greek word. And it means that your life is marked by something which is way beyond what you deserve.

Most people think in their religious life that it's you get what you deserve. Well, the first hallmark of the gospel is you get way more than you deserve.

And that is a fundamental characteristic. If you want to talk about your deserving, you should look at some other religion. Grace means that you get far more than you deserve.

And peace is the Hebrew word. I mean, grace is a Greek word. Peace is a Hebrew word. Grace and peace go together. And peace means that a victory has been won, that something has been done to affect the basic reality of your life, which is not a continual state of conflict, but peace with God and through what God has done in Christ.

The hallmarks are apostolic grace and peace. Then if you look at the text, you'll see what Paul does in the first line when he says, We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints.

[12 : 24] Now, at this time of year, if you know, I don't know which congregation you belong to, but if you have met your budget for last year, isn't that wonderful?

If you have crowds of church, isn't that wonderful? If you have saints and missionaries going all over the world, isn't that wonderful? And you can go on and on and on looking at wonderful things about the church.

But Paul says, The thing I'm grateful for is the reality of a faith which is focused in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and finds expression in your love for one another.

That's what's at the heart. A faith that is focused in Jesus Christ, which gives expression through love one for another.

And on the back page of that inestimable newspaper, the province, there's a picture of the Canadian junior hockey team looking like they're in a rucker scrum.

[13 : 38] They've all jumped in on one another. And I think that's a good picture because they have just shared an amazing victory.

As I understand, the score was tie with Sweden. I just picked this up as I was driving through a red light or something. But I, the tie was, the score was tie.

There was ten seconds to play. Pressure was on. The Swedes took their goalie out. Well, maybe they, I don't know. I guess they were going to get a goal, weren't they?

Anyway. The Swedes took their goalie out and Canada scored with four seconds to play. And they won the tournament. And so what they'd done is that they had had a tremendous experience of training and working and playing together and traveling together and being companions.

And now they shared this great thing, which was winning the championship. And it was a wonderful experience. And so they were trying to embrace the goalie, all of them at once.

[14 : 53] I gather he was at the center of the pile somewhere. But their love for one another, expressed in that very enthusiastic picture, was because they had shared a wonderful experience together.

And the love which Christians are to have for one another is because they have shared the good news of the gospel. And that is the most important thing in their lives.

Because immediately you start talking about Christians loving one another. You say, well, by and large, they're not very nice people, are they?

And some of them aren't very well-dressed, and some of them aren't well-behaved, and some of them talk too much. And you can go on with a list that goes from here to the door, if you want.

Of reasons why you can't love them. But the reason you can love them is because you have shared a wonderful reality together, and that is the victory that God has won for us in Christ on the cross.

[16 : 03] And that's what gives us the basis of our relationship to one another. So I don't care what kind of a slob you are. We are sharing in this wonderful reality, which is God's grace to us in Jesus Christ, the victory that he's won.

So that it becomes for Paul, and I think this is terribly important, it becomes for him, the reality of Christian faith is the faith which is focused in Jesus Christ, and the love you have for one another.

Then it goes on to talk about the fourth hallmark. Maybe it's the fifth. Where are we? Apostolic grace, peace, faith, love, hope.

That's the next one. You see that in verse 5? The faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven. Now one of the distinguished members of this group, not very long ago, spoke with some scorn of Christians talking about hope.

And I can well understand that because most of us come to that point in our life where most of our hopes have been dashed by the grim facts of reality.

[17 : 37] And so hope isn't something we can easily excite as a response. It didn't work before. It's not working now. It won't work in the future.

Now that's not hope. But that's what most of us have experienced is the failure of our hopes in the course of our lives.

But this hope is different. What we share in the world is thinly disguised despair.

You know, you don't have to scratch people very deeply or to look at circumstances very closely to find that you can get through to the kind of persistent chronic reality of despair, which is the opposite of hope.

But the hope that we have here and that is spoken of here is hope that is stored up for us in heaven. It's something that gives meaning to our lives.

[18 : 43] It is stronger than death. It is a permanent possession. And so that's the kind of hope that is revealed by the gospel.

I spoke to what seemed to me a young man with terminal cancer who said as he faced the end of his life, all I know is that when it happens, when death comes, nothing I think about it is going to change it.

You know, I can think what I like, but death is going to be death. And that's it. And I really respected him for saying that because I felt that was wonderfully true.

And that he knew that he couldn't write down and say this is what I want to happen when I die.

Or this is what I choose to believe in the hope that it will happen. He had divested himself of that kind of thinking. And he knew what was going to happen was what was going to happen.

[19 : 57] And he wasn't going to change it. Well, the relation of that to this is that the hope we have, which is not something we have achieved or something we have conceived, it is something which is laid up for us in heaven, it is something which God has done, and we're not going to change it.

And the circumstances of our lives are not going to change it. No matter what happens, that hope remains. It's there. Now that's, I think, the peculiar kind of hope that is spoken of consistently in the New Testament.

What we talk about consistently in our society generally is the hope that evaporates with the morning mist in the grim facts of reality.

So this hope is there. Now hope ultimately, remember, suffers a little in 1 Corinthians 13, which talks about love, you know, faith, hope, and love, these three.

But the greatest of them is love. And that is because hope ultimately is fulfilled, and love goes on and on and on.

[21 : 14] And so in that sense, I think it's greater. The only way you lose hope, then, is by it being fulfilled. Then it talks about the next hallmark, which if you want, which is the gospel, the word of truth.

Now, again, in that wonderful magazine of which I told you a little while ago, there was a picture of two boys in the back of a Chrysler magic van.

Is that the name of a Chrysler van? Do you know what I mean by a magic van? I've never heard of the term before, but I probably, anyway, I won't explain that.

I just haven't heard of it. The advertisement showed two boys who were, one was about two years old and one was about nine years old, and both were travel weary, sitting in the back seat of the van, going on and on and on.

And the advertisement said, four million magic wagons later, we are still asking ourselves the same question they often ask, referring to the boys.

[22 : 37] Are we there yet? You know. And that sounded a good advertisement. I only caught on after looking at it for about a month.

Are we there yet? Well, apparently the aspirations of the Chrysler Corporation is that though they have gone a long, long way, they're not there yet.

and greater things can be expected in terms of magic vans of the future. They have a strong, progressive philosophy. They have a determined research and development program.

And they are going to push until the magic van, I don't know, maybe takes off on a carpet. They could... I don't know what they'll do.

But the difference between that and the gospel is when it talks about the gospel of truth, it says it's not something we're striving for.

[23 : 44] It is something that has happened. The gospel of truth is here and is present and we know it. We're not waiting for something more.

And much of religion is that we're all waiting for further revelation. But what Paul says is there isn't anything more.

This is it. This is the gospel of truth. This is that circumstance in which you, by the hearing of the gospel, with the response of faith, have had a glimpse of the reality of God. And that's why it's called the gospel of truth. God's grace in all its truth you have seen in Jesus Christ.

There is nothing more. It's a gospel which is an all-over-the-world gospel. It says, if you look at it, it's an all-over-the-world gospel.

[24 : 48] It's a gospel that, unlike the magic van, it grows. And it, you see, it's producing fruit and growing.

This, in a sense, encounter with the gospel of truth is a kind of dynamic encounter which, when you experience it, it creates growth in you.

When you share it, it creates growth in others. That this is something which is happening as people encounter the gospel of truth.

So, I think my time's up. And I've got lots more to say. Come back next week. I mean, there are so many things more that I want to say about it.

Just that, basically this. Remember I started by saying that our culture cannot hear the gospel?

[26 : 04] You know, we have a Chrysler mentality. There's got to be something more and we're going to find it. There isn't anything more than that which is revealed.

The response is faith focused in Jesus Christ. Love for one another. Hope that is laid up as a kind of treasure in heaven.

And the gospel which is the word of truth, which is that reality at the center of of the faith, which is the revelation of the grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Revealing, as he does, the nature and character of God. And that is something for the whole world. Without apology, Paul says that. His world wasn't a world of jet planes and information highways and technological development.

But I think his world was still the whole world. As I think it is today. Our world is vastly more complex as we see it. And it's a much bigger thing.

[27 : 25] But I don't think Paul would back down from saying this gospel is for the whole world. And that this gospel, if it is clearly presented, will produce, will bear fruit, and grow in the lives of people.

And there's a kind of worldwide testimony to that. And that what we need to do is keep ourselves nose to nose with the reality of the gospel in our daily lives.

The reality of the truth which has been revealed in Jesus Christ. God, the issues of our times are so complex and the despair of our times is so pervasive.

And the meaninglessness and inability we have to even know who we are, let alone what we are or where we're going, is so much the encounter that we have with our lives.

And yet, Paul was confident and in this word, I think he shares his confidence with us.

[29 : 06] Give us hearts to share with him. The grace, the peace, the faith, the love, the hope in the gospel of truth.

which is the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. We ask this in his name. Amen.