

First Importance

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. We are looking this morning at the book of Colossians. That's page 924 in the Pew Bible. As we launch out into a new academic year as a church, today we want to talk a little bit about what Trinity is all about.

Next week, we're going to start our kind of regular fall sermon series in the book of Ecclesiastes, where we'll talk about finding lasting joy in a fleeting world.

But today, we want to talk about what's at the center of everything we do as a church. Maybe you're new, or maybe you've been coming to Trinity for a couple weeks or months this summer, or maybe you've been coming for some time.

Either way, today we want to come back to what's at the heart of our ministry and our life together as a church. I've been told that when you're sailing, if your bearings are just a few degrees off when you leave the harbor, eventually you can end up very far from where you want it to be.

So, it's good to come back to the compass, to come back to the center and make sure that we're charting our course according to the right direction, to make sure we're keeping the main thing the main thing.

[1 : 13] And to do that, we want to look at the book of Colossians today. Chapter 1, verses 3 through 20. So, as we look at Colossians 1, let me pray, and then I'll read our passage for us.

Father, we do long to praise You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three in one. As we come to Your written Word, God, reveal to us again afresh the incarnate Word, Jesus, who lived, died, rose again, and ascended for us and for our salvation.

Spirit, come, help us to understand the things that we consider. And as we go forth today out into the world that You've made and that You love, would we not just understand these things, but would we live these things to Your glory?

We pray this in Jesus' mighty name. Amen. All right, Paul writes this in Colossians 1, starting in verse 3. 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 the hope laid up for You in heaven. Of this You have heard before in the word of 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.

[2 : 42] 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. And so, from the day we heard, we've not ceased to pray for You, asking that You may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified You to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through Him and for Him.

And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent.

For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

[4 : 31] So I wonder if you've ever considered that everyone really lives with what we might call a center, with a center of some kind.

It's sort of the thing that makes your life tick. It's the thing that holds everything else together and kind of gives it meaning. For some people, family is their center. That's what gives their life meaning and purpose.

It's why they do what they do. It fuels them for what they do. For other people, public service is their center, we might say, whether through their work or through their volunteer involvement.

Trying to make the world a better place is what centers them and gives their life meaning and energy and direction. We could list a lot of other things. And if that's true for individuals, it's also true for communities too.

Communities often have something that centers them, that unites them, and energizes them, and defines them. And this is true of churches as well. Churches will often have what we're calling a center, something that unites and energizes and defines them.

[5 : 42] It's the thing that they tend to always talk about. It's the thing they get excited about. It's the thing they think is most worth pursuing and proclaiming. Now, when we turn to the New Testament, especially when we turn to the New Testament epistles, we start to see that for the apostles and for the early churches, that they had a center.

And they were quite clear about the thing that united and energized and defined them. There is something that they talk about all the time, and there's something that they get excited about, and there's something that they think is worth pursuing and proclaiming.

What is it? Well, it's what Paul calls in verse 5 of our passage, the gospel, which literally means good news.

At the heart of the church is good news. And the challenge to every generation of Christians, the invitation for every generation of Christians, is to keep the church a place where it is this message of good news that unites and energizes and defines us.

And on the other hand, there's a temptation before every generation of Christians, a temptation before every local church, is to put something else in the center.

[7 : 12] Because often we're tempted to think that something else and something more is needed to energize the church and to impact our communities and to change people's lives. And most of the time, the other things that we're tempted to kind of make central, oftentimes they're good things.

Things like social concern, things like spiritual formation, things like heartfelt worship, things like authentic community. The church always faces the temptation to take any one of those good things and push it to the center of their life, to make it the main thing.

But the same thing always happens when we take a good thing and make it the main thing. And what happens is the whole thing starts to shake and get off balance.

Community actually starts to fracture and worship starts to become performative and hollow. And spiritual formation starts to become a burdensome task of self-improvement.

And social concern starts to become a power game where the ends justify the means. And suddenly, the church doesn't look like the church at all.

[8 : 32] And the church doesn't certainly sound or look like the bearer of good news. So let's look at what Paul says here about the gospel in Colossians chapter 1.

And let's see how this gospel, this good news, is worthy to be the center, not just of our church, but of our lives. And we're going to see two things here in Colossians 1.

First, we're going to see what the gospel does. And second, we're going to see what the gospel declares. So let's go deeper into that first point, which is this. Keep the gospel central in your life because of what the gospel alone can do, because of what the gospel alone does.

And what exactly does the gospel do? Well, look with me again at verses 3 through 6. And pay particular attention to verse 6 as I read this paragraph again. Paul says, 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'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 and increasing, as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

[10 : 02] Did you see there? What does the gospel do, according to verse 6? Not just in the whole world, but among you. Paul says it's bearing fruit and it's increasing.

In other words, the gospel is changing you and it's changing others. It's changing you. You're bearing fruit. And it's changing others.

It's increasing. You see, for Paul and for the rest of the New Testament, the gospel, it's like a seed that goes down into the soil and it starts growing.

It starts a dynamic of change that's unstoppable. It's like a depth charge dropped into the ocean that explodes and sends its reverberations out in every direction.

It starts to change your life and it starts to change the life of others around you. Many years ago, some friends of ours planted a strawberry patch in their backyard.

[11 : 09] And at first, the kind of plants sprang up. It was sort of cool and they produced these beautiful red berries. They started bearing fruit. But then they discovered something kind of troublesome for their garden and for their backyard.

It was that these strawberries had actually sent out these runners, these shoots, and they just went in every direction out from the garden into the yard. And suddenly, they had strawberries growing in every direction.

And you see, that's true of the gospel, friends. We often think of the gospel as merely just kind of the starting point of the Christian life. We think of it as sort of like the thing that gets you in the door.

And then we start to mistakenly think that there are all these other things that are really going to change us and really going to change the communities that we're a part of. We think the gospel is what beginners need, but the mature need something else.

And in fact, that's actually what the book of Colossians is all about. Paul is saying, no, the gospel of Jesus Christ is completely sufficient.

[12 : 15] Don't think you have to move beyond the gospel to deeper things, that there's some supplement out there that's just waiting for you to find that's really going to unlock the key.

No, Paul says, what is the thing that keeps bearing fruit in the life of this church in Colossae? Paul says, since the day you heard it, since the day you heard it, the gospel's been bearing fruit in your life.

It's kept on being that catalyst of growth. It's been said that the gospel's not just the ABCs of the Christian life, that you eventually have to graduate and move on to bigger and better things.

No, the gospel's the A to Z of the Christian life. It's the beginning and middle and end. Is it simple enough that a child can understand it?

Yes! But is it profound enough that the human heart will never reach its bottom? Also, yes.

[13 : 29] It's like the ocean. You know, even a child can splash in the waves as those waves come up onto the sand. And even a child can thrill in the beauty and power of the ocean.

But ask the most brilliant marine biologist or ask the most accomplished big wave surfer if they have plumbed the depths of the ocean's beauty and power and what will they say?

No! There's so much more to discover. There's so much more to unfold. Friends, that is the good news of Christianity.

The good news will never grow old or lose its power. since the day you hear it and every day onward for eternity it will be the power and beauty that bears fruit and increases that changes you changes everything.

Consider the changes that Paul talks about right here in verses 4 and 5. He talks about faith in Christ. They have a new trust. He talks about love for the saints.

[14 : 35] They have a new mission. He talks about hope in heaven. They have a new future. Can you think of a more complete description of the Christian life and faith and hope and love?

That is what the gospel produces and grows. And look at Paul's prayer in verses 9 through 14. What does he ask for? In essence, he's asking that these things would continue to increase.

That what they heard would fill them. That the Holy Spirit would allow them to start plumbing the depths of the gospel and what it means in their lives. And so, when it comes to love, Paul prays that they would bear fruit in every good work and increase in the knowledge of God.

And when it comes to faith, he prays that they would be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for all endurance and patience with joy. Because what do we need in our faith in this life?

We need endurance patience and patience with joy. And when it comes to hope, Paul prays that they would give thanks to the Father who's qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints of light.

[15 : 49] You see, friends, in the gospel, they had received the whole thing. Everything God wanted to say, everything God wanted to impart was right there.

Now the rest of the Christian life is unpacking that great gift. It's a bit like a child in the womb, you know.

From the moment of conception, all of that child's genetic makeup is present in that single cell. Nothing more needs to be added. They're fully alive. But oh, how that child in the womb will grow and change and give rise to beautiful, wonderful life in the womb and out of the womb.

Through the infant and toddler years, through elementary school, through the teenage years and into adulthood, it was all right there, right from the beginning. Everything needed to become a mature man or woman biologically, the whole message was right there in that single fertilized embryo.

It didn't look like much, but it was teeming with life. The gospel's the same way. It's all there. Everything that will bring you to full maturity, to the full glory that God intends for you, it's all in the gospel message.

[17 : 11] And oh, how profound the gospel is. The entire Bible unpacks and unfolds this message, and we will spend eternity plumbing the depths of its wonder.

The apostle Peter says in his first letter that the things of the gospel are so wonderful and so profound that they are things into which even angels long to look.

So we must keep the gospel central in our lives, friends. We must keep the gospel central in our church because of what the gospel alone can do. It is the thing that bears fruit and increases.

It changes us, and it changes everything. But of course, that brings us to our second point, right? We must keep the gospel central in our lives because of what the gospel declares.

Because at this point, we have to ask, how does the gospel do what it does? If it is this wonderful, productive, explosive thing, how does it do that? Why is the gospel alone the thing that will bear fruit in our lives and increase?

[18 : 16] Well, let's return to verse 6. Again, Paul says, the gospel has come to you as indeed in the whole world it's bearing fruit and increasing as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood.

Understood what? What is it that the Colossians heard and finally understood in the gospel? What was the message? What was the good news that produced such radical, ongoing change?

Since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth. The grace of God in truth.

That's what the gospel and the gospel alone declares. The grace of God in truth. Brothers and sisters, at the end of the day, do you know what produces authentic community?

Do you want to know what ignites passionate worship? Do you know what motivates and energizes social concern and creative long-term love for neighbors and communities and cities?

[19 : 29] Do you know what the heartbeat of real spiritual formation is? It's the grace of God in truth.

Friends, the good news at the heart of Christianity brings you face-to-face with the grace of God in truth. And how does it do that?

It does that because the good news at the heart of Christianity brings you face-to-face with the person and work of Jesus Christ. who is this Jesus?

Read the Gospels for yourself. Do you see Him there calming storms and healing the sick and giving sight to the blind? What are we to make of these historical accounts about Jesus, these miraculous things that the historical records testify to?

What are we to make of all that? simply this, that in Jesus the Creator has entered His creation.

[20 : 43] And when it seemed like the waves of brokenness and sin and darkness had all but overcome God's good creation, when it seemed like the curse of sin had won and that creation was a lost project destined for failure and destruction, salvation, God stepped in to rescue the creation He loved, to heal it, to restore it, to put things right.

Who else could calm the storms other than the One who had created the seas? Who else could restore sight to the blind but the One who separated light from darkness in the beginning and called it good?

Who else could bring the dead back to life but the One who was the author of life itself? In verse 15 of our passage, Paul says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

For by Him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through Him and for Him.

And He's before all things and in Him all things hold together. now we can often trip over that word firstborn, can't we?

[22 : 19] But what did this rightful owner of everything do when He came to earth? Imagine you had made the world, you know, and the whole thing was being totally messed up and going to smash because of the people you had made in the middle of it.

What would you do when you came back to earth? What did Jesus do? Did He calm storms and heal the sick and raise the dead and then seize power and crush His enemies?

Did He hit the reset button and just blank it out like we used to do on our old Nintendos when things were going bad? You just hit the reset button. Boop, you're right back at the beginning. Great. Is that what Jesus does?

No. Even though Jesus Christ has the right to judge all of creation because it's His and because in Him it all holds together, He doesn't come in judgment.

He comes to save. He came to reconcile us to God. He comes to save us to God.

[23 : 40] You see, Jesus, friends, is not just supreme in creation. Jesus also is supreme in redemption. Paul goes on to say, He is the head of the body, the church.

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. for in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether in earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

You stand now, friends, staring at the heart of the good news. God in Jesus has reconciled sinners to Himself.

We were dead in our trespasses and sin, but Jesus Christ entered into death for us so that we could be made alive.

The firstborn, the ruler over all creation, became the firstborn from the dead. In other words, the very source of life has now become the source of new life for all who believe.

[25 : 03] the creator of life went down into death so that those destined to die might live. In our sin, we were enemies of God who deserved His wrath, but through Jesus, God was pleased to reconcile to Himself all things, how, making peace by the blood of His cross.

forgiveness. In Him, we have redemption, verse 14 says, the forgiveness of sins. This is the grace of God.

In truth, in truth, you see, what God did in Jesus, He did in truth, in history, in reality, not just in a realm of ideas or thoughts, but here, as real as the blood flowing through your veins, as real as the stars and the sky, and as real as the dust of the earth, God dwelt fully in Jesus Christ and accomplished in history, in creation, the redemption of creation, and the rescue of history.

What God did in Jesus, He did in truth. And what God did in Jesus, He did in grace. There's a reason you know that the message of Christianity was called good news from the very beginning.

Just think of all the words that the apostles could have used to describe this message of what God had done and revealed and accomplished in Jesus.

[26 : 52] And they called it news. They called it a euangelion, a good message that's meant to be herald and announced. And it's news because it's something that's been done.

When the apostles proclaimed the death and resurrection of Jesus, they didn't come to city after city after city and say, listen, we've come to tell you good advice.

We're going to start a podcast to give you ten tips on how to live happier, healthier, and longer if you just do it. No. They said we've come to tell you good news.

Advice is something you have to do. News is something that's already been done. Christianity is not a message about what you have to do to reconcile yourself to God, to get right.

Christianity is a message about what Jesus has done to reconcile you to God, to put you right. It's not a message of works that you have to perform, but of grace freely offered and received.

[28 : 12] Grace that was incredibly costly for Jesus, His own blood was shed, but grace that is utterly free of charge to you and to me. Just imagine with me, friends, if you really understood the grace of God and truth.

What would a church be like that really understood, as Paul says here, the grace of God and truth? Would we not be a people of great faith in Christ?

Would the grace of God and truth not draw us forth to trust Him more deeply and to place our lives into His hand? If that is how much God loves us, can we not entrust our whole lives to Him?

If we really understood the grace of God and truth, would we not be just a people of great faith, but also a people of great hope?

In Christ, we are heirs of the new creation. We will be raised with Him in glory. And that means our works in this life are not in vain, that they too will be swept up in the resurrection work of God.

[29 : 39] Our works are not in vain in this life because Jesus has conquered death. And no matter how dark or difficult the days become, the future God has in store for creation and for His church is radiant.

We have an anchor of hope that holds us fast in the fiercest storms. Nothing can shake us. But if we really understood the grace of God in truth, we wouldn't just be a people of great faith and great hope, but we would be a people of great love.

Having been shown such incredible love by God in Christ, how could we not turn and love others? How could we not now go and live a life worthy of this gospel of grace?

Friends, for Christians, love ought to be the defining mark of our lives. Why? Because God demonstrated His love toward us in this, that Christ died for us and He's poured His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Just think of how the gospel of grace frees you to love. Consider, what is it that keeps us from genuine love of neighbor?

[30 : 59] So many things, right? Sometimes we're worried about what other people think of us. We're so worried about what other people think of us that we stop thinking about how we might actually do some good to them.

But you see, the gospel comes and it frees us from the need for human approval because it says, in Christ, you are now a beloved son or daughter of God.

It says that we are accepted by the creator of all things. We've been reconciled to the one that holds all things together. other. No human approval could compare to that.

So we're free. We're free from what others think of us. And now we're free to think of them and to think of how we might really love them.

You see, we don't need people anymore for their approval. We don't need them so now we can love them. sometimes what keeps us from genuine love of neighbor are the hurts and the wounds of the past.

[32 : 03] You know, we remember how someone ignored us or how someone spoke an unkind word about us and our hearts grow hard and bitter and then we stop trusting not just that person but other people too.

But the gospel comes and tells us a forgiveness forgiveness. That our sins were actually infinitely greater than our neighbor's sins against us. And rather than hold our sins against us, infinitely great though they were, God forgave all of our sins in Christ and reconciled us to Himself.

And this forgiveness we've received from God begins to soften our hearts towards our neighbors, even those who've wronged us. Begins to soften our hearts towards them.

And we start to do the costly work of forgiveness because God has done that costly work for us. You know, sometimes what keeps us from genuine love of neighbor is simply the idol of our own achievements or our own pleasures.

We're consumed with our own projects and plans and prestige, wanting to make a name for ourselves in the world, or we're consumed with our own pleasures and preoccupations, not caring or bothering with what might bless other people.

[33 : 19] we're just so caught up in ourself. But the gospel of grace is the thing that opens our eyes to our neighbors.

It wakes us up to the truth that real, lasting life isn't found in the fleeting accolades or pleasures of this world. This world could never satisfy the human soul.

God's put eternity into your heart. do you think the things of this life could fill what God has placed there? No. Only the grace of God in Christ can reach to the depths of our humanity and make it whole and make it satisfied.

And when we've tasted and seen that the Lord is good, those accolades and those pleasures of the world, they've lost their power over us.

They don't want to enthrall us anymore. We're not captivated by their spell. We see life differently now. We consider all people through Christ. We see everyone through the lens of God's grace.

[34 : 29] And our desire now isn't to kind of get out of this world what we want. Our desire now is to see God's grace glorified for what it is and to see others come to hear and understand this grace for themselves so that they too can know the only real satisfaction and joy in this life.

So, friends, we wrap up. At the center of everything we do as a church must be the good news of the gospel, the grace of God and truth, the message of who Jesus is and what He's done.

This is what must energize and unite and define us. And the more we hear it and the more we explore its depths and the more we work out its implications, the more it will bear fruit and increase, not just here in our church among us, but through us out in the world.

That seed that begins in us will start to grow and it will go out and even though it starts small like a mustard seed, it will begin a movement that pushes down deep roots that can't be shaken, that sends branches out to the sky and soon even the birds of the air are resting in its shade, as Jesus says in his parables.

And at the center of it all is Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom all glory belongs. Friends, Jesus is the good news.

[36 : 05] He's the center. In him all things hold together and if he holds you together, then you'll be secure in life and in death and in the life to come.

Let's pray. Father, our prayer as we begin a new school year is that you would captivate us again by the wonder of your grace in Christ.

Jesus, by your Spirit, help us to see and treasure you in fresh and new ways this year. Would the heartbeat of our community be this grace in truth that is you, Jesus.

Exalt yourself through us. We pray this in your mighty name. Amen.