

The Core

Grateful for Growth and Grace

Mark Vroegop

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 (Col. 1:3-8).

One of the many joys that come with serving a church for almost seventeen years is the fact that I get to see what Eugene Peterson calls “a long obedience in the same direction.” Through the highs and lows of life, I get to see how people embrace the application of Scripture in their lives. It’s a beautiful thing.

It’s one of the many things that I love about church ministry—seeing the spiritual growth of individual people as well as an entire body of believers.

Now, that’s true for an entire body of believers because it’s true in our personal lives. Since a church is comprised of individual people, our growth is connected to my growth. You may know that I’m an avid journaler. I have stacks of journals from the last thirty years. Every December, I go back and read through the highs and lows of my spiritual growth for the year. It’s always a remarkable journey because I can trace the hand of God in my life, especially in the hard and challenging moments.

In many respects, hardship and difficulties create prime growth seasons. John Piper said this in a sermon on Romans 5:3:

When you go through tribulation, and your faith is tested, and it perseveres, what you get is a wonderful sense of authenticity. You feel that your faith is real. It has been tested. It has stood the test with perseverance. And it is therefore real, authentic, proven, genuine.¹

I happened to find my journal from 2004, which was when I wrote about our stillbirth. And I had forgotten that, after we checked into the hospital for Sarah to deliver our full-term daughter, I asked her how she was doing. She said, “I sense the Lord helping me, and I feel so loved in this moment.” Now, there were highs and deep lows. But we learned to live on the promise: “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Heb. 13:5).

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/we-exult-in-our-tribulations>

Jesus helped us. We had to fight to keep him central, trusting him in the darkest night and believing that he was going to give us grace.

When you know Jesus is the core, that makes you believe that what you believe is true.

In other words, getting Jesus at the core of your life will produce some things that people will look at and say, “There’s no way that would come out of your life except for God.” And when they say that, using your life as a conduit of gratitude, God is supremely glorified. It leads to gratitude, growth, and a reinforcement of the gospel.

Make Jesus the core and watch how much gratitude will spring out of and through your life!

Gratitude (v. 3)

Paul begins this letter by expressing his love to the Colossians, letting them know that he often thinks of them and prays for them. And when he prays for them, his heart begins to overflow with gratitude to God for what has happened in their lives.

The letter begins with a typical form of affirmation and gratitude, like what we see in 1 Corinthians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; Philippians 1:3, Philemon 4, and Romans 1:8. However, this one stands out for two reasons: (1) It is plural (“We always thank God . . .”) and (2) it is focused on “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul was with a group of men during his Roman imprisonment who had received a report from Epaphras about the church at Colossae. Further, we have learned that the overarching theme of the book is learning how to live with Jesus at the center. So, it just makes sense that Paul would say, “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .” as he introduces his letter.

You can probably imagine that Paul and the men who are with him regularly gather for prayer, and as they survey the landscape of churches, they focus on the work at Colossae. The word for prayer here simply means communication with God, and these men are simply talking to God about what they know is happening at Colossae. And the product of their communication with God is that they are very grateful for what God was doing.

Notice that Paul is not commending them per se for what they’ve done. Rather, his heart is filled with gratitude because he knows that their lives have become a testimony of how great God is. In other words, they became conduits of gratitude to God. They were growing, changing, and maturing, and Paul sees all of this as a product of God’s work in their midst.

The word for “thank” is the Greek word *eucharisteo*. It means “good grace.” In other words, it is something from God (grace) and it is good. He sees God at work, and he clearly sees how good it is. I wonder how much gratitude marked your life this week?

From time to time, we’ve used a whiteboard on our fridge as a gratitude wall to express thankfulness to God. I received a very kind note this week from the family of a staff member, and I was so blessed when they said that they make a habit of expressing thankfulness on Thursdays (their “Thankful Thursdays”)

by sending cards to people. I happened to be the recipient of their kindness, and I can only imagine how many other people have been touched by this practice as well.

Gratitude is an important theme in the book of Colossians, as it should be. I mean, after all, if the focus is on Christ as the core, then you would think that gratitude would be close by.

Listen to the three other places that gratitude surfaces in Colossians:

- “Therefore, as you 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” (Col. 2:6-7).
- “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful” (Col. 3:15).
- “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2).

I want to suggest to you that people who truly understand the centrality of Jesus are really grateful people. They are grateful for what has happened to them, and they are grateful for what God is doing in them. They are thankful for what they see God doing in others. They are so transfixed with Christ and the gospel that everywhere they look, they see grace.

Do any of you remember the ad in the late '70s or early '80s for Tootsie Rolls? The words went like this:

“Tootsie Roll, how I love your chocolatey chew. Tootsie Roll, I think I'm in love with you. Whatever it is I think I see becomes a Tootsie Roll to me. The world looks mighty good to me 'cause Tootsie Rolls are all I see. Whatever it is I think I see becomes a Tootsie Roll to me.”

That is what happens when your heart becomes captivated by Christ and what Christ does: Whatever you see becomes a conduit of God's grace. In other words, gratitude and the centrality of Jesus go hand in hand.

Putting Jesus at the core can create (should create) a new level of gratitude. But unfortunately, that doesn't always happen. The reverse is also true. People who move their focus off of Christ can easily become ungrateful and driven by circumstances.

So, my question for you on this point is twofold: First, do you see the world through a lens of Christ-centered gratitude? Second, would anyone or could anyone use your life as a conduit of gratitude to God? Are you marked by thankfulness and gratefulness? How much praise to God did your life create this week?

Part of understanding and embracing the centrality of Jesus is realizing that the more we understand about Christ as the core, the more grateful we become. And the more others become grateful to God for us.

Growth (vv. 4-5a)

The second thing we notice in the text is the specific things for which Paul expresses his gratitude, and they are laid out in a familiar triad of faith, hope, and love: “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.”

First, he lists their **faith in Jesus Christ**. No doubt this is mentioned first because it is the very means by which they came to saving grace. However, the focus here is not so much on Jesus as the object of their faith as it is that Jesus is the living environment in which their faith is lived out.² In other words, faith *in* Christ means a position from which a life of faith flows.³ It is a faith that is a product of a Christ-centered core.

The centrality of Christ eclipses every faith-robbing potential enemy. This is where some of us miss the power of the gospel. We hear the phrase “faith in Christ,” and we immediately think about the first time we came to faith in Christ; we only think in terms of salvation. However, Colossians is a book that celebrates a lifetime of faith in Christ—a faith that we live in every day.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me
(Gal. 2:20).

Second, we see his joy in their **love for all the saints**. There is a frequent connection between genuine faith and love.⁴ Galatians 5:6 says that faith works through love, and 1 Corinthians 13:2 says that if you have incredible faith, but you don’t have love, you have nothing. Christ, at the core, creates a faith-filled life of love. When Christ is truly central, the church overflows with love for one another. We just can’t help ourselves.

Third, Paul identifies that faith and love are directly connected to **the hope laid up in heaven**. When a person comes to Christ, they place their hope in Jesus’s death, burial, and resurrection as their own, and they place their hope in an unseen reconciliation between himself or herself and God. Therefore, believers in Christ constantly live in light of the hope laid up for them in heaven. And the result is that they view life differently and they live differently:

- They “set their minds on things above” (Col. 3:2).
- They know that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ” (Rom. 8:39).
- They see present sufferings as “not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).
- They know that no matter what the Devil, the world, or the flesh throws at them they have “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, and kept in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1:4).

² F.F. Bruce. The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, p. 41.

³ It is the difference between the Greek word *ev* in Col. 1:3 and *eis* in Col. 2:5.

⁴ See Eph. 1:15, 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:3, 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:14; 2 Tim. 1:13; Philem. 5; Rev. 2:19

- And because of this, they along with the entire creation groans (Rom. 8:22) and “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the Sons of God (Rom. 8:19).

Paul hears about this radical God-centeredness, and it leads him to offer praise to God. He sees what is coming out of their lives as a testimony of God’s grace. God was at work in them; that is where all this prayer and grace was coming from. God was doing it, and it was this work that created gratitude.

Gospel (vv. 5b-8)

We have gratitude to God because of the amazing growth and grace we see in others, but that leaves us with a question: Where does this come from? What is the cause of this growth leading to gratitude? The answer is so important: It comes from the gospel.

Notice the following in verses 5-8:

- The gospel is called the **word of truth**. The “good news” of the Bible is simply the truth about who God is and who man is. The gospel identifies that the only solution to man’s problem of sin and separation from God is Christ. That is the truth. That is the gospel.
- The gospel is **alive**. Verse 6 says that it came to them and that it is bearing fruit and growing among them and among people all over the world. So, this “good news” (gospel) is full of power (Rom. 1:16) and changes people.
- It involved **hearing** and **understanding**. They had heard the message, and like Lydia in Acts 16:14, God had opened their hearts to pay attention to what was said by Paul.
- The message came to them by **Epaphras** (v. 7), which is how the gospel usually comes to others—by another person.

This is the gospel. It is a message of truth and grace that changes people’s lives. The gospel is the simple, but powerful good news that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ can result in full and free deliverance from sin based on faith in Christ.⁵ It comes to us by people who declare it, and when it is heard and understood, it changes everything!

All of the change, all of the grace and growth we experience have their roots and foundation in the gospel. Now, when I say “gospel,” many of you may immediately think that I mean knowing that you are saved, going to heaven, or receiving Christ as your Savior. And I certainly mean that. But there is more here. Receiving Christ is deciding to turn from your sins (repent) and trusting Christ. But from that moment on, everything about your life is rooted in the gospel and is because of the gospel.

Christ provides the foundation. The Spirit empowers the fruit. And the Father receives gratitude and glory. And living with Jesus as the core means that we continually come back and preach the gospel to our hearts—even after we have received Christ.

⁵ Merrill Unger; R.K. Harrison, ed. “The Gospel”- The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1988.

Living with Jesus as the core becomes a life characterized by the amazing mystery of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 2:7).

When Christ is the core, we see life differently and we live differently. And the product of that amazing difference is the expression of gratitude to God. People see what God has done, and they praise him.

This morning, I want to call you to be the kind of people who create even more gratitude to God. I want our church to be so saturated by the centrality of Jesus that it leads to amazing spiritual growth. The kind of amazing, gospel-grounded, Spirit-empowered, Father-exalting growth that causes people to look at your life and say, “Wow, God did that!”

To be the kind of people who will say, “If Jesus is alive, then everything’s going to be okay.”

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** A version of this sermon and content were delivered on May 11, 2008 at College Park Church