

**+ Colossians 1:3-8 + Servants of Christ Carry Out Fruitful Service +
+ Fourth Sunday After Pentecost: Confirmation Sunday + 28 June 2009 +**

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you...” Why give thanks? Why would Paul give thanks for the Colossian Christians every time he prayed for them? Why do we give thanks today? Why give thanks for our congregation? Why give thanks?

So much about the Christians in Colossae could've kept Paul from giving thanks. There was a grave error growing in their congregation. It was becoming popular to think Christ as the Savior from sin was inadequate, not enough. At the same time, human wisdom and tradition were considered far more important than Christ's work and teaching. So much about the Colossian Christians could've kept Paul from giving thanks, but yet he did.

Gunnar, I have to tell you there's a big reason to keep us from giving thanks for you as you are confirmed today. Now you're probably wondering, "What is so big, so awful to keep us from giving thanks today?" The reason is actually quite simple, but it's a big problem. It's the problem of sin. Gunnar, as you and your family well know, you are a sinful human being, sinful from the moment your life began in your mother's womb. Because you are a sinful human being, by nature you are an enemy of God. You deserve his wrath and condemnation in hell.

...But sadly, you're not alone. The same is true of every single person sitting out here or standing behind this pulpit. That sin causes strife. It causes arguments. It can lead to false belief or error. It can lead to worry and fear and arrogance and envy and will lead to death.

Not much reason to give thanks, huh? But yet we do. Today we do give thanks to our gracious God. In fact, every day we can praise our gracious God for fruit—not of the grocery-store variety, but of the God's-grace-in-Christ-Jesus variety, fruits of God's grace that lead us as servants of Christ to carry out fruitful service. So let's pause to listen to Paul and give thanks.

St. Paul had been under house arrest for some time in the city of Rome. Several years of imprisonment, trials, shipwrecks, and challenges had brought him to that house, where he sat chained to a Roman guard. Paul had come to Rome to appeal a case before the Roman emperor. In the meantime, while under house arrest, Paul used the opportunity to share the Gospel, to receive visits from friends, and to write letters to dear congregations he had served and to others he didn't know so well. Colossians is one of those letters addressed to Christians Paul didn't know.

Their faithful shepherd, Epaphras, had come to Rome to talk to Paul about the serious error growing in the congregation. At the same time, Epaphras had also shared good news about the Colossians. He had spoken of their fruitful service in the Lord, which showed itself in their ***“faith in Christ Jesus and of the love [they had] for all the saints...”***, their fellow believers made holy in the blood of Christ.

...But where did all that love, all that faith, all those fruits come from? It certainly didn't come from within. Most had been pagans worshiping a variety of gods before Epaphras came along and shared Jesus with them. It didn't come from carrying out a certain set of ceremonies or keeping in lockstep with tradition trying to generate some holiness from within as others Colossians had tried through the Old Testament ceremonial laws. On their own, whether trying to appease many gods or the one true God, all were sinners who deserved God's condemnation.

So where did all that love and faith and fruitful service come from? Why could Paul give thanks? ***“...Because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you.”*** There was a familiar source for their fruitful service—the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

Yes, they had been faithful pagans, faithful Jews in the past, but until Epaphras came along, they were all without hope. Then everything changed. When Epaphras came along, he shared with them what he had learned firsthand from Paul. Jesus Christ is unlike all those false gods. Jesus is the only Way to eternal life, the only Truth in a world filled with so-called “truth”, and the only source of Life. Jesus Christ is the Messiah, God's Anointed promised in the Old Testament. Jesus doesn't require you to earn anything to gain his favor. Jesus has done it all for you. Jesus put himself in your place in life and in death. Jesus as true God put on human flesh and lived a perfect life from conception to adulthood. Jesus reconciled you with the holy God by offering himself as the perfect sacrifice once for all on the cross. Jesus is the Savior from all the guilt you couldn't work

away. Jesus guaranteed your forgiveness and your salvation and delivered you from death by rising from the dead. Jesus gives you the hope of heaven. Oh, and it's all free in Christ.

So what do you expect happened when they heard that good news? Did they shrug their shoulders and go back to being hopeless? Did they loudly deny it? No, the Lord in his grace caused them to believe and understand what they had heard from the lips of faithful Epaphras. That good news changed their lives. Soon their lives weren't filled with the emptiness of appeasing gods or meticulously obeying every last command of kosher law. No, they were filled with fruits of faith—things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, contentedness and self-control. Their focus switched from being on how good they were to how they could show love to others, especially in sharing the Gospel so others could enjoy God's grace as well. In fact, that was another reason Paul gave thanks. He wrote, ***“All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.”***

Can the same be said about you or your congregation? Can the same words of thanks be used to describe you? We have heard the same Gospel, but has it led to such an outpouring of love and faith and fruitful service? Look at your own life. Do you find fruits of faith growing and ripening regularly nourished with the good news of Jesus Christ or do you find fruit that is dying on the branch because of lack of nourishment from the Word or the rot of faithlessness? Or do you find the branches empty because of guilt or laziness or self-centeredness? For such a crop, we deserve God's wrath...so it's time for us to go back and learn about God's grace again.

Remember the good news that Epaphras shared—the good news of Jesus? Jesus was the perfect servant you could never be. For you he ***“made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness”***. Jesus became the object of God's wrath for you, so he could become the source of God's grace for you. He joyfully and perfectly obeyed his Father's holy will because you could not. For you he ***“humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”*** Then he opened heaven for you by rising from the dead. Now that's good news!

So how do you respond to that? Do you shrug your shoulders and go back to a life of hopeless complacency? Do you turn your back on it in denial or do you believe it? The Lord in his grace through that good news transforms your heart by putting faith in Jesus there. That changes your life forever. Your heart is filled not with faithlessness, but ***“faith in Christ Jesus”***. Where once was a me-first desire to serve your self, now by God's grace through faith there dwells a desire to show others the love of Christ, especially your fellow saints made holy in the blood of Christ. Where once was hellish hopelessness, now dwells the hope of eternal life in heaven. Where once was a life barren of fruit, now dwells abundant fruit in service to Christ.

As he did for the Colossians, Christ completely changes how you look at life. Your time, which once was so precious in serving yourself and your wants and your needs, now becomes a precious opportunity to serve your Lord by serving your neighbor with the same gracious love God has shown you through Christ in your God-given vocations, as a husband or wife, parent or child, employer or employee, retiree or student or as a church member. Your talents, which once were used in self-service or maybe even left unused, now become valuable tools used in service to the Lord to bring him glory and to help the spread of his kingdom through the spread of the Gospel. Your treasures, which once were stored up and spent to satisfy your wants and desires, now become wonderful means so others here at home, across our country, or even on the other side of the world can hear that life-changing message of the Gospel and bear abundant fruit. The way we look at life completely changes because of Christ Jesus our Savior.

Servants of Christ, today is a day to give thanks. It is a day to give thanks for the public confession of faith of another servant of Christ. It is a day to give thanks because the Lord has enabled us to fruitfully and faithfully serve him through faith in Christ. It is a day to give thanks because God in his grace has given us his Gospel message to strengthen us and for us to share. It is a day to give thanks because God in his grace has placed us here as a congregation to serve him the Syracuse area and in the North Country. It is a day to give thanks as we look forward with hope to heaven where we will one day enjoy in full the fruits of our salvation. Until that time, then, we pray, ***“Almighty Father, bless the Word which through your grace we now have heard. Oh, may the precious seed take root, spring up, and bear abundant fruit.”*** Amen.