

Eighth Sunday of Pentecost
July 22, 2007
Colossians 1:1-14

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

The Never-Ending Prayer for Fellow Believers

1. For faith
2. For love
3. For hope

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,² To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,⁴ because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints--⁵ 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 gospel⁶ that has come to you. 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.⁷ You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf,⁸ and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.¹⁰ And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

In the name of Jesus, dear Christian friends.

When Paul wrote this letter to believers in the city of Colosse in Asia Minor, he was under house arrest in Rome, awaiting a hearing before Caesar. But the apostle made good use of the time he spent waiting. He wrote letters, like this one to the Colossians, as well as letters to believers in Philippi and Ephesus. And he prayed. He writes here to the Colossians, "*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you...*" and he says a bit later, "*We have not stopped praying for you.*" So the apostle not only advised the Colossians, "*Devote yourselves to prayer*" (4:2), he also demonstrated what it means to be devoted to prayer with a never-ending intercession for the young church in Colosse.

Here in Colossians 1 we find out what Paul was asking when he prayed for the Colossians. It was three things, really. He was praying that their faith would grow. He was praying that their love would increase and bear abundant fruit. And he was praying that they live in constant hope of their inheritance in heaven. And when you

stop to think about it, growing in faith and love and hope are goals toward which every one of us will want to work. Let's look more closely at Paul's never-ending prayer.

1. For faith

Paul had never met most of the Christians in Colosse. It was not one of the cities of Asia Minor in which he had done mission work. Instead, his information about the church in Colosse came from a co-worker named Epaphras, who had carried the gospel to that city. That's why Paul says here, "*We have heard about your faith in Christ Jesus.*" The gospel, as Paul says, was "bearing fruit" in Colosse. People were hearing the good news about Jesus and coming to faith in him as God's Son and their Savior. This was encouraging news and reason for giving thanks to God, like when we hear that people in India or Africa or Nepal or Las Vegas or Lodi are hearing the gospel and confessing their faith in Jesus. In one of our hymns we ask God, "***Give to your Word impressive power.***" God has done that—and he still does.

But faith is not a matter of "once and done." Faith can grow or it can shrink. Faith can grow to burn as brightly as a roaring fire or it can shrink until it disappears completely and not a trace of it is left. What lies in the background here in Colossians is that false teaching was posing a real threat to the faith of these people. It was false teaching that questioned the supremacy of Jesus Christ and the sufficiency of faith in him. Paul never names this heresy. Instead he seeks to overwhelm it with a letter filled with clear and emphatic teaching about the person and work of Jesus. And he prays that the faith of the Colossians will grow as they hear this gospel message. He writes, "*We have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*"

It was Paul who wrote in his letter to the Romans, "**Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.**" (10:17) In the final verse of this opening section, Paul writes a beautiful statement that is intended both to produce and increase faith. He says, "*For (God) has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us in the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*" The salvation story is a God-comes-to-the-rescue story. The Prince of darkness, by his tricks and temptations, had brought it about that we were living in the darkness of unbelief and were slated to be cast forever into the outer darkness of hell. But God in grace determined that he would rescue us. He sent Jesus to be the Light of this dark world. He sent his Spirit to shine the light of the knowledge of Jesus into our hearts as he brought us to faith. We know now that we are God's redeemed people, set free from sin and death. Our sins have all been forgiven, breaking the hold that sin and death had on us. Through the gospel, life and immortality have been brought to light and we have come to faith.

This is our faith. Paul prays for the faith of the Colossians to grow. We pray that our faith will grow. But recognizing that faith comes from hearing the gospel message, we must also—if we're serious about growing in faith—be in the Word, gladly hearing and learning God's Word, eagerly and frequently receiving Holy Communion, and returning regularly to the pledge of forgiveness God gave us when we were baptized. It's the gospel that holds the answer to the prayer for greater faith.

As Paul writes here in the opening verses of Colossians, you notice that when he mentions faith, he mentions it in tandem with love. "*We have heard about of your*

faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints." It was not only reports of the faith of the Colossians that was reaching the ears of the apostle, but also reports of their love for their fellow believers. Paul thanks God, too, for their love and prays that it will continue to increase.

2. For love

There was a line in the Prayer of the Church that we prayed last Sunday that went like this: "Let us be known for the way we love each other." And it appears that these Colossians were known for their love. I don't know what specific examples of love Epaphras reported to Paul, but it made an impression on him. He thanks God that the Colossians have such love for the saints (fellow believers). Then he proceeds to pray that their love will grow. *"And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work..."* The fruit that faith bears can be summed up as love. Good works are love in action.

Jesus never left any doubt about where he stood on love. **"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."** (John 13:34-35) The Savior's self-sacrificing love for us is to be the motive and the model for our love. Love is essential. Without love, expressions of faith ring hollow. Without love, spiritual gifts are meaningless. Without love, even the greatest acts of self-sacrifice, like giving up one's possessions or even one's life, would have no profit.

I notice that just about everywhere the Bible encourages faith, it follows up by encouraging love. For six straight Sundays before today, we read from Galatians. You can't come away from reading Galatians without noticing how strongly Paul emphasizes faith. But in the last chapter of Galatians, Paul writes, **"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."** (6:2) The law of Christ is the law of love. That's why Paul goes on to urge us in Galatians, **"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."** (6:10) And earlier in that letter he had written, **"In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."** (5:6)

Just as we have room to grow in faith, we also have room to grow in love. Harsh and angry words are at odds with love. So are disobedience and disrespect. More than anything, our lack of love shows up in our sins of omission, our lack of concern for the needs of those around us—for the grieving, the sick, and the needy. As we hear and see the love of Jesus that comes to us in the gospel, our eyes and our hearts are opened to the many avenues for our love. Later in this epistle Paul will write, **"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."** (3:12-14)

So it's clear that Paul wants for the Colossians what he wants for all his fellow believers—stronger faith and greater love. But there's one more member of this famous Bible trio that we have mentioned yet—hope. Hope as Paul so often uses it in his epistles isn't merely a desire that something will come to pass; it's desire

accompanied by the expectation of fulfillment. Here in Colossians "hope" is specifically the desire for heaven and the expectation that we will be there. Paul prays for this, too.

3. For hope

Paul writes here of "*the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven.*" This is what makes the hope of a Christian more than just a desire for heaven. Our hope is stored up for us there in heaven. It's safe and secure. Nothing can take our hope away from us. Jesus gave us this hope when he rose from the dead. And now that he's ascended to heaven where he rules all things for our good, our hope is with him there. In fact, Jesus is our hope.

That's what Paul means when he says, "*(God) has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.*" As we were by nature, we didn't qualify. God, the righteous Judge, should have said to us, "I'm sorry—you're not even close to what I'm looking for." But instead he qualified us. His justice demanded payment for sin and Jesus made that payment. His justice required righteousness for admission to heaven and Jesus gave us his righteousness. It's ours by faith. With a gracious pronouncement that declared us not guilty, forgiven, and righteous, God gave us the qualifications we lacked. Now by faith we know where we're going when this life is over—to claim our inheritance in the kingdom of light.

Do you want to have this hope in greater measure? We all do. Do you want your children to live in hope? It goes without saying. Then know that it's what Paul calls "the word of truth," the gospel that produces this lively hope. The confidence that we have a home in heaven comes from knowing that through Jesus' death and resurrection, God has qualified for this heavenly inheritance.

When he finished writing this letter, Paul was still in Rome and still under house arrest. But this letter was going to travel to Colosse with a messenger and it was going to accomplish great things. As God worked through the gospel message of this letter, Paul's never-ending prayers would be answered: faith would be strengthened, love would increase, and hope would grow. Prayers for increased faith and hope and love should never end, because God is still answering those prayers as his gospel bears fruit all over the world. Amen.