

July 11, 2010  
Colossians 1:1-14  
The Gospel in Reverse  
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The past three weeks, we spent time encountering Jesus in the book of Luke. We experienced Jesus being scary, when he heals the man who had been demon-possessed. We heard Jesus' radical call to discipleship, and how it costs our very lives. Last week, we heard Jesus say, "Don't rejoice in your success; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

This week, we encounter Jesus in the book of Colossians. We'll be spending time with him here for the next four weeks or so. And we'll encounter Jesus through the words of the apostle Paul in a letter he wrote to a church in the city of Colosse.

In these next four weeks, we're going to be learning about the identity of Jesus Christ...and how *his* identity shapes *our* identity.

First, some background:

Colossians is a letter -- written from Paul to the church in Colosse. He wrote it about 30 years after Christ died and resurrected. Paul himself didn't start the church there, and in fact he never even visited there. But a friend of his planted this church -- and just about everybody who joined became Christians for the first time.

And Paul's not writing this letter as some information, like a pamphlet you hand out to everyone. He's personally writing to a particular church. And he's addressing a specific situation there. We'll learn more about that situation as the weeks go on, but for now it's enough to say, This church was going through a hard time. It was a church, in fact, that felt like it wasn't 'good enough.' For a lot of reasons.

Part of it had to do with their location - the city they were in. A couple hundred years before Paul wrote to the Colossian church, Colosse had been an awesome city. One of the most important city around, in fact. It had a *booming* textile industry: they made cloth, and wool, and economically, it was really good. Colosse was famous for producing a dark red wool that was very popular -- it was called "Colossian Wool." And in its heyday, Colosse had been located right at the intersection of two major highways: one going east-west, and the other going north-south. So you couldn't get through anywhere, really, unless you passed through Colosse. It was the happenin' place.

But by the time Paul wrote this letter, that had all changed. One of the major roads was relocated a number of miles away, so it went through other cities instead of Colosse. Jobs suffered, people moved away. And right around the time this letter was written (maybe a year or so before or after) an earthquake totaled the city, and it never really recovered. So the church was located in a 'has-been' town.

But the Colossian church also felt like they weren't good enough...because of the situation that was going on *in the church*.

A bunch of other churches in the region had been started by these big-name apostles - even the apostle Paul himself. But Paul didn't plant the church in Colosse -- a guy named Epaphras did. (Have you

ever heard of Epaphras? Not a big name!) And not only had Paul not planted this church, but he had never even come to visit.

But the biggest reason the church felt like they weren't good enough was because of what was going on *right inside the congregation*. There were a bunch of people who started coming in - and they called themselves Christians - but for our purposes, we're going to call them false *teachers*. And they presented themselves as really smart. *Really smart*. And they made the people in the Colossian church feel like they were *really stupid*. And basically they taught the church that they weren't doing enough to be pleasing to God.

These false teachers told the church that their worship, and prayer, and small acts of faithfulness weren't enough to please God. And it wasn't enough to get 'results' in the church, either. They basically taught the church that they had to do more and be more to be acceptable to God, and to be effective in their ministry. And by 'more' I mean: piling on tons of extra rituals and rules...which involved, in many different ways, beating themselves up. (We'll talk more about specifics as we move through the letter.)

No wonder the church in Colosse didn't feel good enough. They heard about these other churches around the world that were thriving and clearly getting things right...but what about them?

This letter is written to a very discouraged church.

And you know, even though this letter was written over two thousand years ago, we're people who know what that's like to not feel good enough.

We've heard it from *people*, who have said: "You're not smart enough," or, "You're not attractive enough," or, "You're not athletic enough," or, "You're not *whatever* enough."

We do it to ourselves.

We hear it from the enemy, who always holds our faults in front our faces. ('Satan' after all, means accuser.)

And if you put a bunch of people together who don't feel good enough, and put them into a church, no wonder there are so many churches that struggle to feel 'good enough.'

And then add on top of all of that regrets about the past. And add on top of that uncertainty about the future. And the situation in Colosse can make a lot of sense to us. We wonder if God is - truly - at work in us, too.

Paul knew the church in Colosse was wondering if God was really at work in them.

But he had heard about their faith in Jesus Christ. And he had heard about their love for brothers and sisters in the congregations and further away. (*Their love for all the saints*.) And he had heard about their hope - *that at least in the future, God would fulfill his promises*.

Those are good signs. Those are signs of life.

And it's interesting because when Paul says, "I've heard about your faith, and your hope, and your love," Paul doesn't *congratulate* the church for doing those things. He doesn't thank them for living their faith the way they should. He thanks and praises *God the Father* because that's *his* work. Paul's saying to the church in Colosse, "That doesn't come from you. That comes from *the Father*. It's nothing that you have to build up in yourself. The Gospel is *already* been at work in you, and I'm just thanking God that he's doing it.

He says (verse 3): "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard about your faith in Christ Jesus and 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."

That's the Gospel in reverse.

Usually, when we hear the Gospel presented, we're first told what to believe, and then, secondly, how we should live. Here, Paul first shows evidence of the fruits of faith, and then says, "Believe that this Gospel is true."

And maybe Paul is anticipating what the response of the Colossian church would be. Maybe he expects the Christians who read his letter to say, "But Paul, you don't understand. You don't know our situation. You don't know the ways we struggle. You don't know all the ways that we're not good enough."

So in verse 6, Paul says this: "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." And then he goes on to say, "You learned it from somebody who loves the Lord and taught you the Gospel right."

Here's what's going on here:

It's the Gospel in reverse.

Paul is writing: "Church of Colosse, the Gospel is bearing fruit and growing in you, too. Since the very beginning - the day you heard it and believed it - it's been alive in you. Whether you feel it or not."

And Paul tells them, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ is powerful. If you want evidence - look around and see what it's doing all around the world. You see how the Gospel is transforming lives everywhere it goes. And it's doing the same thing in you, too, Colosse, since the very first day you heard it and believed. Because the strength doesn't come from you. The power doesn't come from you. The power comes from the *Gospel*."

And if the Colossian church ever doubted that the Gospel was at work in them, Paul says: "You love God. You love each other. You believe God's going to fulfill his promises to you. That can't happen unless the Spirit of God is alive and at work in you."?

That's why Paul points out their faith, hope, and love here. None of the outward things matter: how the city's doing, or who planted the church, or what people are saying about them. Paul says, "What matters is the Gospel - and you have it. What matters is Jesus Christ alive in you - and he is."

And when Paul tells the church about his prayer for them, he's telling them: The Gospel doesn't grow

because of the qualifications of a church or the individuals within it. It doesn't depend on whether or not a church is 'good enough' (whatever that means). Paul tells the church this gospel is one of grace: it's not condemnatory, and it's not earned. It's God's amazing love that he came to this world to rescue sinners. And not only that, but he welcomes us into the kingdom of the Son he loves (v.13).

And he tells the church, "God has *already* rescued you through Christ. The Father has *already* qualified you to share in this amazing gift. God has *already* made you family with his beloved Son. And God has *already* forgiven and redeemed you. You are more than good enough, because the Gospel is at work in you too, Colosse."

The book of Colossians is a beautiful letter because it was written to a specific church in a specific situation, but God speaks through this letter to *us*, too. We know that experience of not feeling good enough. And the Spirit of God through his word says to us, too: "The Gospel is at work powerfully in you too. Right where you are."

You know, I may be biased, but I'm pretty sure that I have the best job in the world this summer. I get to spend time worshipping with you, and hearing your stories, and seeing ways that your faith is alive. God has made you a people who love to worship, and who love the Word of God. (Some of you ask for manuscripts of the sermon when you miss a Sunday!) So God has made you a people who love the Word.

The Holy Spirit has grounded your faith firmly in the Father who created us, and the Son who's redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit who lives in us and makes us alive. And that faith doesn't come except by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit has made you a hospitable people, and a generous people, and a loving people. It sounds a lot like what Paul thanks the Father for in the church in Colosse: these fruits of faith, hope, and love that are alive in them.

And people of God, the only way that those things can happen here is by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the gospel, which has taken root in you since the day that you first believed.

And people of God, the Lord doesn't look at a single church that worships him and says, "You're not good enough." He's not that kind of God. The Lord doesn't look at a single human being and say, "You're not good enough." He doesn't do it. The Lord looks at his people and he says, "In Christ, I have *already* made you good enough. I have *already* redeemed you; I have *already* brought you from darkness to light; I have *already* been at work *in* you and *through* you.

Sometimes we need help believing that.

So the Holy Spirit testifies to the truth of it through his Word.

The Spirit points to the truth through the inner testimony of our hearts.

God uses other people to point to the truth of it.

And God speaks this truth into our hearts through the sacraments...through the Lord's Supper here this morning.

The Lord says, I have not only made you good enough; I have made you *more* than good enough, because I am doing my work in the world through...*you, too*. And I am at work *in* you.

People of God, that is good news. And that is a good God, to whom we belong.

Thanks be to God.