

Gospel-centered Prayers - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Colossians 1:1-14** (#509)

Introduction: Imagination time... Let's say a friend has written you and asked for advice. They live in a place where being a Christian is hard. Some folks in their city have ideas that sound kind of Biblical, but the ways that they say to live just don't ring true. The advice is legalistic – “just do this,” “try harder;” or maybe the applications are separated from the Scriptures quite a bit “well, the Bible may say xyz, but what's really important is abc.” Another group in this city really doesn't care for the Bible much at all. They are “spiritual, but not religious.” Instead, what excites them most is new philosophies of life. New ideas. Some vague god or force or power or self-improvement, but definitely not the God of the Bible.

Some folks in your friend's church seem to be combining both of these streams of thought into how they live. They think that “truth” is found somewhere in the middle, by blending “the best of both worlds.” Your friend is confused and concerned and is looking to you for advice and wisdom. What will you write?

Paul was in a situation that wasn't too different. This morning, we'll begin a study of Colossians, which was a letter written to a Roman town with a significant population of Jews who had very skewed ideas of the Old Testament. A town with a Gentile majority who believed in all kinds of pagan philosophies and man-made religions. And it was a town with a church who desperately needed a clear guide to faithfulness. That church is the church of Colossae. And the letter that we have before us, written by Paul around 60 AD give or take, is his inspired response. So, let's pray, and then let's open up Colossians, and learn wisdom for ourselves...

1:1-2 *A Heartfelt Greeting.* From these first two verses, we read a number of details that help to set the scene and establish some of the context for this letter. Paul is the primary author – the same Paul who has been specifically called out and sent on a mission by Jesus Christ. That mission was to be a part of taking the Gospel out from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. This letter to Colossae, then, ends up being part of the outworking of that mission.

Timothy, a frequent coauthor with Paul, is also mentioned here. We know Timothy perhaps best from the letters that Paul would write to him, likely only a few years after this one, when Timothy was a pastor in Ephesus.

Any letter needs to be written to somebody, otherwise it's just a memoir or a journal entry. This letter is written to Christians in Colossae. We know they are Christians because of how Paul addresses them: "saints" – literally those who are "holy," that is, set apart from the world. This is one of the customary ways that Paul greets believers, which we also see in the early verses of **Ephesians** and **Philippians**. "Brothers," is – again – how Paul often speaks of the people of God. This particular word in Greek can mean either "men" or "men and women" depending upon the context, sort of like how we used to speak of "mankind" in prior decades in English. Since the whole church seems to be addressed, "brothers and sisters" is probably most appropriate here. Take particular note, however, of what this means: Paul sees the church as a family. He sees fellow Christians – even ones that he probably never met – as family members. One of the ways that we here at First E-Free need to grow is to see one another as family in the best and most spiritual sense possible. Take time to greet somebody after church who you don't know well. Send a letter or an email. Go through the church directory and pray for folks – and if you don't know how to pray for them, ask!

Lastly, Paul's greeting – "Grace to you and peace from God our Father" – is one that seems fairly common, given his other letters. But it is precisely because Paul has been so changed by God's grace and the peace that he now has in Christ, that Paul's desire – his personal mission, you might say – is to express and extend that grace and peace from the Lord to those he has an influence on.

First things first, then: in a letter that will address all manner of very timely and crucial – and yes, even difficult and uncomfortable – issues, notice that Paul still begins with this heartfelt warmth. Relationships matter. That's something we are in danger of losing in the U.S. People are more important than checking things off a "to do" list; they are image-bearers of God. Paul, even when he is teaching and

correcting, never treats people only as problems to be solved, or gotten around, or as cogs in some sort of evangelistic machine. We shouldn't either.

A heartfelt greeting. Now: *why* Paul gives thanks in prayer...

1:3-8 One of the most helpful books I've read was written by D A Carson and titled "Praying With Paul." It's not the easiest read, but it is profound. The entire point of the book is to go through Paul's prayers in the Scriptures and ask "why did Paul pray what he did? What do his words reveal?" Let's do a bit of that here...

Think of your own prayers over the last week – both for yourself and for others. What sorts of things did you pray about? Perhaps problems or difficulties that you needed wisdom on, or maybe a certain situation that you weren't sure how to respond to. If your prayers are anything like most people's, you likely spent a lot of time praying for various health issues. Some of you might have brought political concerns before the Lord. From the start, then, I want to commend you – we are to take each of these things to the Lord. That is good! Well done.

And yet... we should also be challenged. Because if our prayers only consist of those kinds of things week after week, we'll rapidly find ourselves with priorities that are not the same as the examples we see in the Bible. Notice that there are no requests for health here, no prayers for political change or against the pagan influence of the Roman Empire. Instead, Paul's prayer begins with thanks.

What kind of thanks? Thanks to the Lord. And why? Paul gives two major reasons. The first is because of the faith of these Colossians in Christ Jesus. Given the setting we described just a few minutes ago, it's something of a miracle that there are any folks who are even somewhat faithful! That's worth thanking the Lord over. But what's more, Paul also thanks the Lord for how these Colossian Christians are loving one another. Which is to say, these Christians aren't just feeding themselves, growing in their own personal knowledge of the things of God; no, they are putting that knowledge to work. They are caring for one another. They are looking out for each other's needs rather than thinking in

individualistic, “what’s in it for me?” terms. Note that: though in some ways young and immature in the faith, these Christians are marked by the very thing that Jesus has called out again and again: those who trust Him are to follow Him, are to pattern their thinking and their actions after His. How are you doing that?

Now, this is all well and good, but we should ask a question about the Colossians. Why are these folks still giving themselves to Christ’s teachings? Why are they doing the hard work of loving others when it would be easier not to? Paul answers: it is because of the hope that these brothers and sisters have in Christ and His promises. It’s a hope that they haven’t fully tasted of yet – none will until either Christ returns or calls a believer home – but it is a hope that they’ve had a glimpse of, an appetizer of. That hope has come from the Gospel, from the Good News that sinners can be saved in spite of ourselves.

In **verse 6**, part of Paul’s prayer of thanks is for how the Gospel is spreading. This is just the sort of thing that he has written about elsewhere, and it is exactly what Christ has commissioned His followers to do. First E-Free: we don’t have to make the fruit grow. Only God can do that. Our responsibility is simply to spread the Good News, and then to praise God for how He grows the fruit. Again and again in the Scriptures, we find that God isn’t stingy about growth. He is happy to produce fruit in the hearts of those who hear the Good News. This is what Paul is so thankful for – that the Good News has produced spiritual growth in the Colossians because they have heard the Word and understood it.

Let me make two points before we move on. The first is this: are you excited by how the Lord is growing you? Can you point to where you were a year ago versus where you are now and give the same kind of thanks to God? If you can, then who are you sharing that with, who are you encouraging? If you can’t, then why is that? Are you asking Him to grow you? Are you regularly reading His Word to know what your life should increasingly look like? Are you doing what it says?

Second: notice that this church was not planted by Paul. Instead, it seems that Epaphras was first on the scene, or – if not him – then at least he has been used

by God to give them a solid foundation in the faith. Understand: the Lord uses many servants in the life of each Christian. Your role is important, but only one part. Be faithful. And trust the Lord that He will use your work alongside the work of others. Your role is only to be faithful. The Lord is the One who ultimately uses you and many others to produce fruit. Are you useful to Him? If you aren't, what needs to change? If you don't have time because of your hobbies, your preferences, even your job, how can you make time? What needs to be different? If you don't care enough to pour into somebody else, if you are too scared to do so, then how are you praying for the Lord to strengthen you? If you are more interested in talking about politics or the news rather than the Gospel, what needs to change so that you will have truth and hope to share with others?

A heartfelt greeting; Paul's thankful prayer. Now finally: what Paul is praying for...

1:9-14 Paul gives thanks first, which is a fitting challenge for you and I. But that doesn't mean that he doesn't have requests. He does, and we find them in these verses. But again: note how his prayers are often different from yours and mine...

First, Paul prays that these Colossian believers would be filled with the knowledge of God's will and that they would have spiritual wisdom and understanding. I suspect that many of us have prayed to know God's will at some point or another. Yet I don't think Paul is pointing to what we might think. Paul seems to be pointing backwards, to something that is already known – or at least accessible – to the Colossians. God needs to do the work of getting knowledge into the Colossians. And He has done that. How? By the teachings that they've already received from Epaphras. Dear church: do you want to know God's will? Do you want to understand – as much as possible – why He does what He does? What He wants from you? Then you already have the answer if you would look to the Scriptures. I realize that we all live in the time of "Google," where we think that quick, easy answers are best. But God calls us to something different. Christians are people of the book. Is it any wonder that Jesus-followers throughout the centuries have been people who read? Surely there is something important in the

fact that God gave His message to us in a form that we have to read it? If you want to know, if you want to grow, you must become a reader of God's Word.

Second – pay attention to the reason why Paul prays for knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. It is not just for individual growth. Instead, it is for action. Paul's prayer in **verse 10**, is that the Colossians might grow in these ways "so as to" live in a way that is distinctively Christian. Beware of settling for knowledge alone. The Pharisees had a lot of knowledge, but precious little application. Friends, we must be a people who know what we believe, but also a people who graciously put into practice what we are learning. That is precisely what Paul prays for here.

No wonder then that what Paul continues in – bearing fruit – is exactly how the Colossians began. That is to say, Paul is praying for the continued growth and depth of faith in the Colossians that the Lord has already begun. No Christian is ever done growing this side of heaven. It doesn't matter how long you've served at church or how many books you've read or ministries you've served in. Christians should be – must be – the very definition of "life-long learners."

Yet the point of all this growth isn't to have an easy life with no unanswered questions. Instead, it is to be strengthened by God Himself for endurance and patience. The sort of endurance and patience that produces joy. Paul wants the Colossians to give thanks to the Father even in spite of all the ups and downs and hardships of life. Why? Because of who is producing the fruit: Jesus Christ. It is He who has already been at work to save them, it is Jesus who has changed their destination from the condemnation that they deserve to the grace that they don't. To be forgiven of sins means the entire weight has been taken off their shoulders, just as it has from yours and mine if you are a Christian. Which brings up the last point: look to Jesus. Don't look at all the problems in the world or in your life, but instead look to Him. Trust Him. Cry out to Him. The call isn't to ignore reality, but instead to trust that what Christ has called Christians to do, this growing in the Gospel and spreading the Good News, is exactly what is necessary. "Life" is how the Lord produces fruit in you and me. Let's ask Him to make us bear even more fruit for His glory and the good of others in the days ahead. Amen.