

The Growing and Fruiting Gospel

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[0 : 00] Well, there are just some people in this world that know how to make things grow. There are amazing gardeners, people with a green thumb. I got into trouble this morning saying this, but a case in point is my wife, Alyssa.

She didn't want to be mentioned, but a winter has just finished. But all winter, she'd been growing things in her veggie garden. This was a picture I took on Monday.

It was bright and sunny, but it was cold. She even had fennel. I was amazed that she could... Baby fennel, which is even more precious than fennel.

And a few years ago, this was her crop. And every year, she's sort of had a crop like this and more. Me, on the other hand, I kill things. One time, many years ago, I healthfully decided to weed my mum's flowerbed.

Only to discover, to her heartbreak, that it wasn't weeds I was pulling out, but her newly planted carpet plants. That was the end of my weeding career.

[1 : 09] Well, today we begin a new series in Colossians. And in the opening chapter, we find that God is in the business of growing things. Specifically, the gospel and his people, those who are in Christ.

And in the first section, we find today how Paul tells us how God goes about it. But first, Paul opens the letter, as he normally does, by addressing those who are in Colossae.

So he says, Notice that in addition to being in Colossae, God's holy people are also in Christ.

Faithful brothers and sisters to Paul and Timothy. Because when you're in Christ, you share the same Father, that is, God.

But how does Paul know that they're in Christ? Well, he goes on in his opening prayer of thanksgiving to tell us. So we read, So two things here serve as evidence.

[2 : 37] I wonder whether you've picked up on them. Does anyone know? It's what Paul and Timothy have heard. What's the first thing? Anyone to shout out? Faith.

That's right. So the Colossians' faith in Christ Jesus, which we read later, is their faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. And what's the second thing? It's love.

That's right. Their love for all God's people. And that applies to us as well, those who are in Christ. Those two things apply to us. Now, Paul specifically focuses on their love for God's people, not just all people.

Not to say that we shouldn't be loving all people as Christians, but because this love, in particular for God's people, is motivated by our common destiny in Christ.

What Paul calls the hope stored up for you in heaven. That is, for us, when we love, our care and concern for God's people shouldn't just be restricted to physical needs, but rather it extends to nurturing and caring for each other's faith.

[3 : 50] So it would include encouraging one another to persevere, to endure, not to lose sight of the goal to which we are all headed to. So perhaps it's similar to climbing Mount Everest or running a marathon, neither of which I will ever do.

But imagining if I did and have set myself that goal, and if I see someone wanting to achieve that same goal, but flagging and wanting to give up, I'll encourage them to keep going, wouldn't I?

Because I see how important that goal is for me, myself, and therefore I understand how it is for them as well. So I might say, come on, we can do this together. Or let me help you carry your bag.

Or let's do it. Let's not give up. We can do this. And so that's part of the love that we are to show for God's people.

Not just looking up after our physical needs of each other, but urging each other to keep strong in the faith. And notice too that Paul says that they are to love all God's people.

[4 : 57] Not just a select few that they like or can get along with. Now of course, with that many millions of Christians in the world, it's impossible literally to love all people.

So the idea here is not so much to love everyone, but to love anyone that God has put in our path that are Christians. That is, we're not to be exclusive.

And in a church like this, where it's quite big, it's probably only natural that we will be closer to some brothers and sisters than others. And so that's okay.

And we might end up spending more time caring for certain people than others. And yet, part of loving all God's people means that whenever we interact with anyone who is in Christ, we should be asking, how can I love them even if in a small way?

How can I help them to remain in Christ, to be faithful to the Lord? And so it may just be asking them after church how they're going, how they've been encouraged by God's Word.

[6 : 10] It may be hearing how their week has been and volunteering to pray for them. So yes, there's a chance to come forward to pray, but there's nothing stopping people praying for each other where they are as well.

Or you may share something helpful to the person you're talking to say, hey, this is what God has been doing in my life this week, or this is how I've been encouraged today by the songs of the words or by the prayers or by what was being preached.

But any way we can, we should be thinking, this is a brother in Christ or sister in Christ that's headed to the same hope as I am. How can I be helping them to take that next step to keep persevering in the Lord?

Now for those Christians that are further a few, perhaps the persecuted church in other parts of the world, let's say, well, we can keep praying for them, can't we? We should. Or we can be giving financially to support other people to do the same.

But the point is, this kind of love is just as important than all the other practical acts of kindness that we show to one another. We should show those acts of kindness.

[7 : 20] It's not either or. But this kind of love which encourages faith is the one that is important because it springs from the hope that is stored up in heaven.

Next, Paul tells us that this faith, love and hope doesn't just arise out of nowhere nor is it self-generated but rather, verse 5, it comes about because the Colossians heard it.

They heard it in the true message of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.

Paul elsewhere in Romans chapter 10 verse 17 which I've got on the side says, faith comes from hearing the word and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

Now, Paul doesn't spell out the gospel here in full but we know what it is, don't we? It is the good news of Jesus that he's come to this world to die for sinners to save those who are unable to do so themselves.

[8 : 30] whether by their own efforts or good works. That's why Paul says they understood God's grace because it's only when they realize that they themselves cannot do what it takes to save but only God can and God saves not because of who we are or what we've done but purely by grace the free gift of his son's death for us.

That's when they respond to the gospel in faith and love. This same gospel Paul also says is bearing fruit and growing throughout the world and that's because it's God's universal method it's the way that he uses for calling people to Christ.

He's used it throughout the Roman world and he's still using it today around the world. And so friends, do you want to share in the hope that is laid up for God's people in heaven?

Well, if you've not responded to gospel as yet then this is your way to be in Christ to put your faith in his son trusting him in his death for your salvation.

But for the rest of us, Paul now continues by saying that the reason the Colossians were able to hear this message is because of messengers like Epaphras whom God has raised to be his servants.

[10 : 00] So verse 7 he says, you learnt it from Epaphras our dear fellow servant who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf who also taught us of your love in the spirit.

You know, there's been a lot of talk in recent years and maybe even decades about how the church in the West is declining. People are stopping coming to church.

People are losing their faith. And some people ask, how do we reach them? How do we reach the next generation? How do we reach all the people that actually have come from different cultures for Christ?

Do we need to be more tech savvy? Better users of social media? Do we need to do more attention grabbing stuff to get people to sit up and listen?

So for example, in England, in Norwich Cathedral, they've just installed a helter-skelter in the cathedral, which we've got a picture of it. Someone asked me this morning, is it sort of photoshopped?

[11 : 02] You can Google it. There are multiple angles of this thing. And they've done this to, I quote, give people the chance to experience the cathedral in an entirely new way and open up conversations about faith.

Likewise, a church in Texas, I don't have the picture, unfortunately, last year set up a service to be like a wrestling match. They invited a few famous professional wrestlers.

I don't know if you know, it's like Sting or a few of these names. Some of you might know. Reason? Because they thought their members could then better understand how to fight the good fight of faith.

Now, I'm not saying that we have to only do church this way, sit in pews like these and sing our four songs and listen to my 30-minute sermon each week. There are many churches that have done this and still have died out.

It's not the format or the style, but the message. God's shown us that His universal method to grow His church, one that is used across the ages and across the world, is to preach the gospel.

[12 : 12] And that's something that we need to be faithful to. So we can use mass media or high-tech communication, but what is critical is that we remain faithful messengers like Epaphras, committed to the true message of the gospel.

And there's always the temptation, isn't there, that when we do that, but people still reject us or criticize us, we want to water down the message, don't we?

Just say what people want to hear or else just be quiet on the gospel, just focus on doing good work among the community. But the fact is, without the gospel, God says, faith and love, just like a fruit which you've plucked from the plant and then just left in the sun, will wither and rot.

It will no longer be fueled by the gospel, by the hope stored up in heaven. And so the answer really, if things are not working, it's not to try new but futile things, but to go back to God's tried and proven way of proclaiming the gospel.

Keep doing it because it's God's work. Keep doing it so that people can hear it and put their faith in it. And this gospel message is not about saying that God wants you to try harder or the gospel of be the best you can be, but it's the gospel and the message of God's grace which they understood.

[13 : 47] And that's the only thing that saves us, saves our hearers through faith in Jesus. I know some of you are still young, but if you're ever going to be parents one day, and some of you may already be, and you want your children to have that same faith, then that's the message that they need to hear as well.

Don't assume that they just grow up in a Christian home and they'll follow the faith just as you did. Don't assume that if they go to a Christian school, they'll hear it and become Christians, or they may not hear it and not be Christians.

No, they need to hear it from us as parents and hear it and see it lived out in us as well. See both our faith and love that springs from hope in what is stored up in heaven.

If we're inconsistent in what we say and do, they will pick up on it. So I know for some of you it may be a few years down the track, but bear that in mind as well. Well, having thanked God for their faith and love, Paul now turns his thanksgiving to prayer in verses 9 to 14.

And if you read it, what is really happening is he's only really praying for what he's already just thanked God for. So it's like making fire on Survivor.

[15 : 05] Sorry, I know it's on TV so I have to keep using examples from it. I've got a picture of it. No spoilers this week. But when you've started a fire, you want to keep it growing, don't you?

You don't just start a fire and then turn away and hope the fire keeps going. No, you want to make it bigger. You keep adding wood, keep stoking it because you want to fan the fire into a huge flame.

And that's the same thing that Paul is desiring for the Colossians. Now that their faith is kindled, Paul prays that God will keep growing them in that same faith. So verse 9, for this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you.

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives. So in verse 6, they understood God's grace.

Now Paul prays that they will understand by the Spirit God's will for their lives, what they're to do, how they're to live. Why? So that they may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way.

[16 : 10] Notice the order in which it happens. We do not please him and then that's a requirement for being in Christ. No, we are firstly in Christ and the result of that by the work of the Spirit is that we live life worthy of the Lord, pleasing him in every way.

So what does this life look like? Well, Paul mentions four things which I've got on the outline from verse 10. First, is to bear fruit in every good work.

Secondly, to grow in the knowledge of God. God. So earlier we saw how the gospel was growing and bearing fruit in terms of calling more people to Christ.

But now Paul says that those who are called to Christ, those who are in Christ, also grow and bear fruit. I think it's just another way of him talking about their faith and love.

It should produce good work of every kind. It should result in them knowing God more. But third, Paul also prays that they may be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might.

[17 : 18] And this power is not like a superpower which you can use to do whatever you want with it, but it's an inner strength for endurance in faith, patience in love and hope. It's the strength to please the Lord even when times are tough, even when trials abound in our lives.

And all the while, verse 12, the fourth thing, giving thanks to the Father. Why? Well, we go back to the gospel. Because he has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. It's good, isn't it?

I mean, it's sort of the same thing that I was saying last week. It's good, isn't it, to often come back often to reminding ourselves and giving thanks for the wonderful salvation that we have.

Some of us may be people who have come, not grown up in the Christian family, and so we remember the time that we were before Christ. We remember the time where we are in the dominion of darkness, as Paul says.

[18 : 33] That is, we're not just in the dark, we're not just ignorant. Dominion means we are trapped and gripped by the power of darkness. We remember our sense of hopelessness and failure, the lack of joy and peace in life, the fact that we can't seem to not stop sinning and our struggle with it.

That was our old life that we've been rescued from into, now, the kingdom of the Son he loves. So that, yes, despite the fact that we may still be suffering, we may still not be fully there yet in terms of holiness and godliness, yet we have this great joy of a secure hope in heaven.

We have this glorious inheritance in the kingdom. There was a picture, isn't there, back in Daniel 7, which was our Old Testament reading, of the vision of this kingdom. Jesus is given, which I've got on the slide, authority, glory, and sovereign power.

All nations and peoples of every language worship him. And not the same language here as Paul. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away. And his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Friends, we belong to this kingdom now. Thank God for that because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. We have this place in this everlasting kingdom that will never be destroyed, that will not pass away.

[20 : 04] glory. Well, we'll be able to unpack some of this in greater detail in coming weeks. But for now, these four things in one sense make up a rather helpful list, doesn't it, as a bit of a spiritual check-up for us as Christians.

So we may look down at it and ask, are we growing in the fruit of good works? Bearing fruit in good works? Are we growing in our knowledge of God through His word?

Not just hate knowledge, but the knowledge that then allows us to please Him and serve Him. Are we growing by God's strength in endurance and patience? Are we thankful as we remember that we've been rescued from darkness into the light of Christ's kingdom?

And it may be that as you go through that checklist, you might figure, oh, no, I'm not where I should be. Well, the answer is not try harder, not at least at first, but actually to do as Paul did, to pray.

Pray for each other, but pray for ourselves and say, God, help me in these things. Help me by your Spirit. And then trust that God will answer that prayer as you live under His word and by His Spirit to grow in these things.

[21 : 27] Now, I can imagine that sometimes, even as we hear all the stuff that's happening around in the world, and we're in the age of marketing, hyper-marketing, aren't we? We're always being marketed to with ever more sexy and fancy messages and messaging, even for some churches nowadays.

So it can be that sometimes we look at this and we go, compared to all that, this is just a bit ho-hum, isn't it? You mean the sign of a victorious Christian life is just to grow in patience and endurance?

Is that what it means? You mean we measure how well our church is going by how faithfully we're preaching the gospel? Is that it? No need for helter-skelters?

No need for miracles or signs and wonders as we gather each Sunday? Well, yes, that's right. It's a bit like our church vision statement which I've got on the front and I shared with some of you at the newcomers' tea.

It's not very sexy, is it? To go and gather in Christ, to go gather and grow in Christ by prayerfully proclaiming and promoting God's word in love.

[22 : 46] It doesn't really, I don't know, sometimes you can look at it and, well, is that it? Are we meant to do this week in, week out? Yes, Andrew, it is. It is powerful.

It is. But people can look at it and go, are we just meant to do this? There's nothing about taking on the world and changing the whole world. Not very sexy, is it?

But that's exactly what we're being asked to do. That's exactly what Colossians chapter 1 says today, isn't it? It actually ties in quite well to go and gather, proclaiming God's word, to grow, and that's what God is growing us in faith and love.

And so that's what we're actually meant to do, year in, year out, to stick to God's given plan. Be faithful to it. Encourage one another in it. Pray that God, by His Spirit, will do His work to produce the fruit of the gospel.

And we just keep doing it as each generation of people come through the church, whether it's new people, or whether it's our children. We just serve week in, week out. And sometimes we can look at it and go, I'm not sure anything is really happening.

[23 : 55] You know, I'm a kid's leader, and on the surface, it might just look like each week as I go, kids are mucking around, not wanting to be quiet. But you know what? As we do faithfully proclaim God's word, God's Spirit does its work.

Because over time, they grow up. They grow up to believe in the gospel, bear fruit, and grow in Christ. You know, there's a chart on the inside of my pantry door.

I've got a picture of it. It's actually a gardener's guide from the Diggers Club. Anyone a member of the Diggers Club? I know Jan is, yes? And it says, so what when?

Basically, it tells you when the best time is to sow what when, where, in what soil, indoors, outdoors. There's even a chart that tells you how far to space the seeds apart so that you get the best fennel.

And there's a hot and cold zone map at the bottom as well that tells you which region your city or town falls in so you know when and where you're supposed to grow what. Obviously, it's not my chart.

[25 : 03] It's my wife's chart. But it turns out I could make things grow too. I just need to follow this guide. My problem is I just like the patience for it.

And besides, when you've got such a great gun on your wife, why worry? Just let her do it. But if I did follow this guide, then the laws of nature do take over, don't they?

And things do grow. And that's the same way with God. He's told us how he makes his church grow. It's all God's work. It's his supernatural and miraculous work.

But he's graciously revealed the process by which it occurs. By the Spirit, through his word, the gospel, and with prayer. He reveals it to us because he's inviting us to be part of it, to be his faithful messengers, sowing and planting so that the good news of Jesus can spread.

God's work. For some of us, we do that as part of our work, me, week in, week out. That's what I'm called to do. But others, we're asked to go out wherever we are through the week to tell others as the opportunity arises of this great gospel.

[26 : 18] For others, it may be inviting them and bringing them here to Christianity Explored or to other ministries here so that they can hear the good news. But whatever the way we do it, the aim is the same, isn't it?

We are to bring the true message of the gospel in contact with the hearers so that together and by praying, the Spirit is then able to help them to understand God's grace.

That's the only way that they will come to faith and be in Christ. That's the only way they will then be rescued from darkness into the kingdom of God's light.

And share in that same hope that we have. So will you play your part in this? Will you continue to do so if you're already doing it? And would you ask God to show you how each and every day?

Well, let me pray that He will. Let's pray. Father, thank You for rescuing us from the dominion of darkness into the light of Your Son's kingdom. Thank You for our redemption by His blood.

[27 : 23] Help us to be like Epaphras, faithful servants of Christ and ministers of the gospel. Help us not to be afraid but to give us the strength to endure and do every good work You've called us.

Help us with our lives and our words to please You in every way so that the gospel will bear fruit and grow more and more here in Doncaster and in Blackburn and throughout the world.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.