

## Love in the Spirit

### Colossians 1:1-14

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, <sup>2</sup> To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

<sup>3</sup> In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>4</sup> for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup> because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup> that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. <sup>7</sup> This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, <sup>8</sup> and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

<sup>9</sup> For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, <sup>10</sup> so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. <sup>11</sup> May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully <sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. <sup>13</sup> He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

This gem of a letter, written by Paul and Timothy to a church founded by Paul's fellow worker Epaphras, reassures its recipients that in Jesus Christ they have all that they need for the spiritual life. Paul wrote because some teachers were telling the Colossians that they were falling short in spiritual matters and were judging them in regard to eating habits, religious rituals, ascetic practices, and visions or the lack thereof (2:16-23).

Paul taught that Christ is the universal, cosmic, and sovereign Lord who holds together and graciously reconciles all things. The letter emphasizes the overflowing abundance and sufficiency of God's grace in Jesus Christ, and the outflow of that grace in "love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (3:14).

As we study through this text, four themes catch our attention. First, immediately we learn that the source of the Colossians' love and faith is "the hope laid up for you in heaven" (1:5). In 1:12 we learn that the content of this hope is "the inheritance of the saints in the light." "Hope" links the present Christian walk (1:10, 22-23) with a

heavenly existence already established by God. In 1:27, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" grounds this expectation in the present action of the indwelling Christ. Most emphatically, 1:11-12a displays the connection between the hope of glory and hopeful endurance: "May you be empowered with all power according to the might of his glory, for all endurance and patience with joy giving thanks to the Father." We cannot generate such joyful hope by ourselves or from ourselves, but Christ working within us can and does create and sustain hope, which in turn gives us courage to love in the Spirit.

Paul told them they were rescued from the "power of darkness" and moved to the kingdom of the beloved Son. This is to be transferred from the hopelessness of ignorance toward becoming a community made alive in the truth of the Word. Paul's assertion is that hope in Jesus Christ produces the fruits of the Christian life that are the product of Christ's love. Through their union with the crucified and risen Christ, the Colossians participate in a hope for salvation that entails a form of living visible in Christian communities anywhere the gospel is faithfully proclaimed. Confidence in the hope of the gospel is a crucial gift of God given through faith. **Matthew Flemming**

Second, we encounter a close relationship between the actions of the Colossians themselves and the action of the gospel in both the world and the Colossian congregation. In 1:6, *the gospel* is "bearing fruit and growing" throughout the whole world, including among the Colossians themselves. In 1:10, Paul prayed that *his hearers* themselves will "bear fruit in every good work" and "grow in the knowledge of God." That is, God's universal reconciliation of the cosmos through Christ becomes visible and embodied in the daily life of the church as it is animated by the word of the gospel.

Third, the close link between "good works" and the "knowledge of God" ensures that we will not confuse claims of mysterious wisdom with the true knowledge of God, which always issues in practical love of one's neighbor. The gospel is "the word of truth" (1:5-6), in which the Colossians had "heard" and "truly comprehended" God's grace. Paul prayed for their "knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and

understanding" (1:9), that they may "grow in the knowledge of God" (1:10). The connection between knowledge and love are where the "things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (3:1) have their expression here "below," through "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (3:12). Such "knowledge" is shown in humble service to God and each other (2:8, 16-23). **Susan Grove Eastman**

Fourth, love in the Spirit is to be in every part of our lives. As excited as Paul was about their salvation, he asked them to allow the fruit that flows from Christ's love to be shown in their lives. He gave them an example by his actions. He shared with the church that prayers of thanksgiving were being offered for them because of their faith in Jesus Christ and their love for all the believers. What good news! More than simply thinking about them, the apostle was praying for them. In this way, the apostle was connected to the believers in Colossae and everywhere else.

In the early church, the ancient monks understood this connection. They believed that a life of prayer manifested itself in a relationship with others and that prayer, as dialogue and union with God, had the effect of holding the world together. It is little wonder, then, that prayer features so prominently in Paul's letters to the early Christian communities. Prayer not only drew those fledgling communities closer to God; it is also what held those fragile groups together.

So why are so many Christians reluctant to pray? For some, the reluctance is a result of experiencing persons who use prayer as an attempt to portray themselves as "holier than thou." After all, Jesus himself warned against the hypocrites who prayed in public to bring attention to themselves. Others may be afraid of imposing their own spiritual practices on friends and family members who may not believe as they do. Some view prayer as a quaint and outdated display of personal piety that more "mature" Christians have outgrown.

In *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry*, theologian Henri Nouwen says that one problem with prayer is that many Christians view it largely

as an intellectual exercise—an "activity of the mind" that reduces prayer to simply speaking with God or thinking about God. This is a problem, Nouwen writes, because viewing prayer as thinking about God makes God into an object that needs to be scrutinized or analyzed. Successful prayer, then, is understood as prayer that leads to new intellectual discoveries about God.

Nouwen is quick to affirm that certainly the intellect plays an important role in the practice of prayer, but he worries that focusing only on the mind in prayer reflects a modernist notion that everything can be reduced to reason and subjected to rational control. Nouwen prefers to look at prayer as an activity of the heart and encourages us to reclaim the Jewish understanding of heart as the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral energies. From the heart arise unknowable impulses, as well as conscious feelings, moods, and wishes. The heart includes reason and is also the center of perception and understanding as well as the will. In this way, prayer does not limit our relationship with God to interesting words, right thoughts, interesting conversations with God, or pious emotions. By its very nature, prayer changes us and draws us closer to God.

This understanding of prayer helps us read verse 9 with new eyes when the writer tells the believers that "we have not ceased praying for you" If we understand prayer as only an intellectual exercise, for Paul and Timothy to pray without ceasing conjures up visions of a marathon prayer session where each must take turns sleeping and eating so as never to stop speaking to God. If we, however, understand prayer as an exercise of the heart that involves all of life, then to pray without ceasing is to understand that prayer continues within us when we are talking with God or with others, participating in a meeting, doing yard work, or even sleeping. Prayer of the heart is the active presence of God's Spirit at work in one's life. This is likely what the apostle meant when he told the believers that he and Timothy had not ceased praying for them. This gives new understanding to Paul's admonition in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to pray without ceasing.

The apostle and Timothy were connected to the believers in Colossae through their prayers of petition and thanksgiving and through the evidence of the believers' faithfulness in bearing fruit and in their growth in the knowledge of God. This is no glib or superficial connection, like what sometimes occurs when well-meaning persons say, "I am praying for you" or "I am thinking about you." Rather, this is a connection of the heart—of one's whole being joined with another—through the Holy Spirit. When we understand prayer as located in the heart, and in our love in the Spirit, then all who have entered into our lives, and even those who are beyond our knowing, are brought into God's presence at the center of our being. According to Nouwen, this is a mystery for which words are inadequate, yet it is the very nature of God that in some wondrous way we are redeemed, strengthened, and joined together in love in the Spirit with the whole church. **Rodger Y. Nishioka**

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