

Colossians 1:6b–14 (NIV)

⁶ . . . 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. 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. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, ¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and 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, ¹² and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people 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.

Does an attitude of genuine gratefulness come easily to you?

We continue in Colossians this week with rest of Paul’s opening paragraphs. Rev. Lauren Gerlach shares some observations with us:

Paul describes the fruitfulness of the gospel is beyond anyone’s own doing; rather it is thanks to the Holy Spirit! This passage is the only reference to the Holy Spirit in the whole letter to Colossae. As a pastoral leader, Paul is encouraged to see that these people are really embracing the love of God and the gospel. He knows this, because a friend and fellow minister named Epaphras has been shepherding this group of people and keeping Paul updated on their progress. Epaphras likely heard Paul preach and learned the gospel through the ministry that is spreading throughout Asia Minor. In the early church, it is a rare thing to have multiple mentors in the faith and reliable sources of the gospel... so Colossae is thankful for the ministry of Epaphras and Paul.

Gratitude is a key theme for many of Paul’s writings, and Colossians is no different. This is so prominent in his writings because it was so important to him as a person. The posture of thankfulness is the way God desires we live. It is in this way that we come to see clearer all that God is doing around us, in us, and for us.

During his missionary journeys, Paul was usually a disturber of the peace and was often imprisoned for it. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are all letters that Paul wrote from prison. When Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Colossae, we can be sure that he would much rather have been with them. Instead, Paul must be content with writing to them and, more importantly, praying for them. His opening prayer is part of our Colossians passage today.

Paul prays that the Colossians will grow in knowledge and wisdom so that they will delight God with their good works and the fruit of their faith in Christ, such as joy, gentleness, peace, and patience. By maturing as Christians, they will be

The Letter to the Colossians

Colossae was located about 110 miles east of Ephesus on a major east-west highway cutting across southern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Though once the most important city in its region, by Paul's day Colossae had been overshadowed by Laodicea (see Revelation 3:14-22) and Hierapolis. In the early 60's AD, the region was struck by a major earthquake and Colossae never really recovered.

Because letters like this one can only reflect one side of the conversation, disputes rage regarding what Paul is responding to in his letter. But regardless of the exact nature of the problems, Paul points the reader directly to Jesus Christ. In this letter, Paul dwells more upon Jesus Christ – his divinity and his creative and redemptive work – than in any other of Paul's letters. For example, the paragraph immediately following today's scripture passage is one of Paul's classic statements about the nature and work of Jesus Christ (1:15-20)

You may wonder why I include what seems to be historical trivia in these studies – like Colossae's earthquake. I do so because many of us have little idea that some NT "books," like Colossians, are real letters written to real people in real places to deal with specific and troubling problems. It is my hope that a few details will help make all this "Bible stuff" seem a little more real to you!

stronger and able to endure patiently whatever is thrown at them. But most importantly, Paul prays that the Colossians will lead lives of joyful gratitude, giving thanks to the Father for the gift of their inheritance, the gift of God's grace that has enabled them to be adopted as children of God. (see Galatians 4:1-7 for more on this)

Paul will go on to talk about this spirit of thanksgiving over and over in his letter. This is no generic spirit of gratitude. Rather, Paul prays that the Christians in Colossae will always remember that God rescued them, just as he rescued the Hebrews from Egypt long before. For once again, in this new exodus, God has redeemed his people and led them into the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Once again and for all time, their sins have been forgiven. It is in the light of this mercy and our gratefulness for it that we live our lives.

A life of gratitude

In his book, *Prayer: finding the heart's true home*, Richard Foster writes, "Jesus was the ultimate grateful person. The signature written across his heart was the prayer 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth'" (Matthew 11:25). Jesus was of one heart and mind with the psalmist who wrote "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart" (Psalm 9:1) and with Paul who wrote "I thank God for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world" (Romans 1:8) and with the writer of Hebrews, "let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (13:15).

As in all things, we are called to be Christ-like. We must allow ourselves to be drawn more often into the praise of God and the joyful giving of thanks to him. Foster reminds us of Augustine's phrase, "God thirsts to be thirsted after" and writes "Our God is not made of stone . . . Like the proud mother who is thrilled to receive a wilted bouquet of dandelions from her child, so God celebrates our feeble expressions of gratitude."

Let's not pretend that even feeble expressions of thanks are easy. Living every day in a spirit of thanksgiving does not come naturally to us; there is much in

life that wants to crowd out any sense of gratitude. Living lives of thanksgiving and praises requires transformation, a realigned heart and mind, revealed in our deepest desires.

Your deepest desires

What do you want? Really want? What is your heart's desire? Sin is a disordered heart and, thus, disordered desire and love; we love the wrong things or we love the right things the wrong way. We can think of our hearts as disoriented compasses that don't point to magnetic north, but instead lead us in the wrong direction, too often right over a cliff. That is the essence of Christian teaching on sin – our hearts are disordered; we pursue what we love, but our wants and desires, our loves, are distorted.

So, the obvious question is this: What can we do to re-orient our hearts, so that we desire the right things and pursue them? What can we do reset our moral compass? The answer lies in our habits -- developing better habits, moral habits, aka virtues. Developing habits of compassion reorients our hearts so that we seek compassion. Developing habits of kindness reorients our hearts, so that we are reflexively kind. If I always have to stop and think about being kind, there is a good chance I often won't be. The same is true of all the virtues. Paul writes,

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:8-9).

Paul is urging the believers in Philippi toward a virtuous life, becoming people of good character, for he knows that the virtues reflect the character of God. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul lists some fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Such is the character of Jesus and it is to be our character as well. As James K. A. Smith put it in his excellent book, *You Are What You Love*:

Virtues, quite simply, are good moral habits. (Bad moral habits, as you might guess, are called “vices.”) Good moral habits are . . . character traits that become woven into who you are so that you are the kind of person who is inclined to be compassionate, forgiving, and so forth. Virtues thus are different from moral laws or rules . . . In fact, as Thomas Aquinas points out, there is an inversely proportionate relationship between virtue and the law: the more virtuous someone is—that is, the more they have an internal disposition to the good that bubbles up from their very character—the less they need the external force of the law to compel them to do the good. Conversely, the more “vicious” [as in “vices”] a person or group of people is, the more they need the “stick” of the law to compel them to do what they ought. Anyone who has raised children is intimately familiar with these dynamics. Early on, we need to constantly tell (and compel) our children to do the right thing. We are training their moral sense. But the goal and hope is that, in the process, they are internalizing a

sense of the good and will become the kind of people who do this without the “stick” of rules compelling them to do so.¹

If we put in the hard work to build good moral habits, then the hard choices, the better choices, won't seem so hard at all. So the question becomes this: How do we acquire these; what sort of hard work does it take? It isn't by doing what comes naturally, for our hearts are disordered by sin. We will develop good moral habits, the virtues, by imitation and practice. Dr. Smith again:

First, we learn the virtues through *imitation*. More specifically, we learn to be virtuous by imitating exemplars of justice, compassion, kindness, and love. In our culture that prizes “authenticity” and places a premium on novelty and uniqueness, imitation has received a bad rap, as if being an imitator is synonymous with being a fake (think “imitation leather”). But the New Testament holds imitation in a very different light. Indeed, we are exhorted to be imitators. “Follow my example,” Paul says, “as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Similarly, Paul commends imitation to the Christians at Philippi: “join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do” (Phil. 3:17). Like a young boy who learns to shave by mimicking what he sees his father doing, so we learn to “put on” the virtues by imitating those who model the Christlike life.

Second, acquiring virtue takes *practice*. Such moral, kingdom-reflecting dispositions are inscribed into your character through rhythms and routines and rituals, enacted over and over again, that implant in you a disposition to an end (*telos*) that becomes a character trait—a sort of learned, second-nature default orientation that you tend toward “without thinking about it.” . . . It's like we have moral muscles that are trained in the same way our biological muscles are trained when we practice a golf swing or piano scales.²

And so we do not merely try to be more like Jesus, more patient, generous, and faithful, we train for it, just like we train for any other challenging goal in our lives. Are you ready?

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Note: On Thursday morning, the Second Act is hosting me for “Mark in a Morning” in Piro Hall at 10am, with an optional lunch following. Register on-line.

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *The gospel of Luke*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *1 Kings*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

¹ Smith, James K. A. (2016). *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (p.16-17), Brazos Press. I used some passages from Smith in a study last spring; they are worth re-reading. Smith's book will be a resource for this entire series.

² *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This week we begin a new series: *Heresy and Orthodoxy*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew"

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.