

## *The Grace of God in Truth*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on November 29, 2020.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth (Col. 1:3–6).<sup>1</sup>

What is the gospel? How would you define it? You would likely begin with the unbreachable chasm between God’s holiness and our sinfulness. You would probably emphasize God’s act of free grace, bestowing his unmerited favor upon sinners. I would imagine that you would qualify God’s favor in Christ, since God loved the world in such a way that he gave “his one and only son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, NET). You would of course emphasize not only the truth of this statement but that Christ himself is the Truth. All of this, and perhaps more, you would convey as the “good news,” the best news in fact, the gospel. Having explained all of this you could then abbreviate it, as the Apostle Paul does, in this one, succinct phrase: “the grace of God in truth.”

It’s a beautiful expression, isn’t it, “the grace of God in truth”? As beautiful as it sounds, it is more beautiful experientially and worth sharing with others. In fact, God has purposed that it be shared around the world. How is it shared? It comes first through preaching, as it is “the word of truth,” for “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). It advances from local to international witness, “bearing fruit and increasing,” as it has here in Fort Smith, Arkansas and had in Colossae in the first century. And, it is for the evidence of “the grace of God in truth” that Paul gives thanks to God, as should we.

What is the evidence of “the grace of God in truth”? Paul describes it using a triad of Christian virtues: faith, love, and hope. While each word may be commonly used, what Paul is describing are not innate human virtues but spiritual gifts from God, evidenced by true conversion through the gospel. Just as faith is not our own doing but a gift, “not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:9-10), so also “love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God” (1 John 4:7), and we are given hope through our calling from God (Eph. 4:4).

It is this triad of virtues that gives evidence of “the grace of God in truth,” truly revealing God’s grace to us individually and his work among us collectively. In our passage, the apostle highlights specific manifestations of these God-given virtues, which edify the church then and now: faith in Christ, love for the church, and hope in heaven.

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

## **Faith in Christ**

Thanksgiving is given to “God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” for the Colossians’ faith in Christ. Paul prays as we are taught to pray, to “Our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9), to whom thanksgiving is offered, and rightly so. It is this thanksgiving to God that underlies what follows. Let’s be clear: Paul is not offering congratulations to the Colossians for believing. God alone is the bestower of the gift of faith, and all other Christian virtues follow after it. He thanks God from whom every “good gift and every perfect gift” (James 1:17) is given, including faith.

However, their faith it is not merely a belief in God. There is a singular object of God-given faith, “Christ Jesus,” the Son of God. God gives the faith to confess belief, but that confession must be “that Jesus is Lord.” God gives the faith to believe in the heart, but that belief must be “that God raised him from the dead... For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Rom. 10:9-10). The sovereign grace of God does not produce Deists, only Christians.

In fact, the prepositional phrase “in Christ Jesus,” should not be skipped over quickly. It is more than an objectification. Paul uses “in Christ” consistently to describe the comprehensiveness of Christ’s lordship over all who have believed in him. All and only those who by God’s grace have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ are *in Christ*, conferring all of God’s promised blessings through him.

The writer of Hebrews defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). The defining characteristics are “assurance” and “conviction.” It is one thing to believe in God but quite another to *believe* God.<sup>2</sup> The distinction is key (Ligonier post). To believe in God is to acknowledge his existence. But to believe God, according to his Word, is to be both assured and convicted. For example, Abraham “believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Abraham was assured according to God’s promise and convicted that God would do what he promised, or as Paul explains, “[Abraham] did not waver in unbelief about the promise of God but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God. He was fully convinced that what God promised he was able to do. So indeed it was credited to Abraham as righteousness” (Rom. 4:20-22, NET).

Such faith was evidenced in Abraham’s life, from God’s covenant promise to Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Faith produces evidence of its authenticity. Martin Luther said, “Faith is a living, restless thing. It cannot be inoperative. We are not saved by works; but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith.”<sup>3</sup> And Calvin would later add, “It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> R.C. Sproul, “Putting Faith Into Action,” Ligonier Ministries, January 30, 2011, <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/putting-faith-action/>.

<sup>3</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> “Christianity,” Stack Exchange, August 4, 2015, <https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/42366/is-luther-really-the-originator-of-we-are-saved-by-faith-alone-but-the-faith-t>.

For this reason, Paul includes in his prayer of thanksgiving their faith in Christ Jesus but also “the love that you have for all the saints.” Their faith is evidenced in love, or “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). Specifically, Paul is thanking God for their love “for all the saints.” Or, we could say that the grace of God in truth is revealed in love for the church.

### **Love for the Church**

The Colossians’ love “for all the saints,” or all God’s people, reveals a breadth as wide as the advancement of the gospel. Clearly, they were not an inclusively-focused church but had a love for Christ’s church catholic, his universal church. As love is a gift from God, it was not a superficial love (“I love everyone”) or a natural love (“I love my wife”). The world may know the love of family, but apart from Christ no one can know Christian brotherhood and sisterhood. How can you explain a love for those socially, politically, culturally, even nationally different from you yet redeemed in Christ? Paul explains that it is only possible in Christ: “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11). Such love can only be explained through the supernatural presence of our Lord (Matt. 18:20).

What does this love look like in the church? The Bible is not silent on this topic but provides plenty of examples of what love looks like among the saints. For example, love for the church reveals a family bond even closer than our natural family. When asked to meet with his mother and siblings, Jesus pointed to his disciples and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:49-50). The Proverbs says, “There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Prov. 18:24), yet such wisdom reaches its true fulfillment in the brotherhood we know in Christ. And, love for the church reveals a supernatural affection that honors others above self. Paul commands us, “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom. 12:10). A loving church is consistently considering the value of one another. Also, love for the church reveals an encouraging consideration for one another. The writer of Hebrews tells us to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb. 10:24). A loving church is an encouraging church but not just encouraging, encouraging in the right things: loving one another and good works. This, of course, isn’t an exhaustive list, but the point is that as Christ’s beloved, we are to “love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).

This love is worthy of our thanksgiving to God and worthy of our continued prayers for it. The Apostle John wrote, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1). Love among us is a defining characteristic of whose we are, as is the faith he has given. But it is the third of the Christian virtues, hope, which Paul describes as the basis of faith and love . . . hope, specifically “hope laid up for you in heaven.” The New English Translation captures this meaning, translating verse five as, “your faith and love have *arisen from the hope* laid up for you in heaven, which you have heard about in the message of truth, the gospel” (emphasis added).

## **Hope in Heaven**

How does this “hope laid up . . . in heaven undergird faith and love? The answer is found in understanding the future reality in which we hope. Consider this: By God’s grace through faith in Christ, we enjoy a personal relationship with God; by God’s grace we enjoy love with one another. These are present, individual and collective, realities, but they are not yet complete. Just as “faith is the assurance of things hoped for” and just as the love of God is to be “perfected in us” (1 John 4:12), so we hope in that which awaits us in Christ. The Apostle Peter explains it this way: “[God’s] According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:3-5).

So, this Christian virtue, this supernatural gift of hope from God, is not merely wishful thinking or desire for improved circumstances but is a future-oriented act of hoping in an objective and certain reality, heaven. And it is a hope centered on Christ. In fact, later in his letter Paul explains, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:1-4). As Christ is indeed “our life,” so our hope is in heaven.

But, to think of Christian hope as future-oriented can be difficult for many of us to grasp. It can sound like veiled escapism or a dismissal of the responsibilities of today. The problem with this way of thinking forgets the connection between our ongoing faith and love. Our hope in heaven undergirds them both.

I find the perspective of Joni Eareckson Tada especially helpful on this topic. As many of you know, as a result of an accident, Joni has been paralyzed from the shoulders down since the age of seventeen. By God’s grace, she has enjoyed a long and amazing life and Christian witness. Pertinent to our hope in heaven, she writes,

I still can hardly believe it. I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed with righteousness – powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope this gives to someone spinal cord-injured like me? Or someone who is cerebral palsied, brain-injured, or has multiple sclerosis? Imagine the hope this gives to someone who is manic depressive. No other religion, no other philosophy promises new bodies, hearts, and minds. Only in the Gospel of Christ do hurting people find such incredible hope.<sup>5</sup>

Some might dismiss Joni’s perspective on hope because of her condition, but she pushes back against this notion connecting hope in heaven to faith and love today. She says,

---

<sup>5</sup> “Joni Eareckson Tada On Health, Healing and Heaven,” Culture Watch, November 6, 2020, <https://billmuehlenberg.com/2020/11/06/joni-eareckson-tada-on-health-healing-and-heaven/>.

## *The Grace of God in Truth*

When Christians realize that their citizenship is in heaven, they begin acting as responsible citizens of earth. They invest wisely in relationships because they know they're eternal. Their conversations, goals and motives become pure and honest because they realize these will have a bearing on everlasting reward. They give generously of time, money, and talent because they are laying up treasures for eternity. They spread the good news of Christ because they long to fill heaven's ranks with their friends and neighbors. All this serves the pilgrims well, not only in heaven, but on earth; for it serves everyone around them.<sup>6</sup>

Or, as R.C. Sproul put it, "Right now counts forever."<sup>7</sup>

This perspective also directs the glory back to the One to whom we give thanks. By his grace and through his gift of faith, we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. By his grace through faith, we love the church, "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). And by God's grace through faith, we hope in heaven, "where Christ is, seated at the right hand of the Father" (Col. 3:1). Therefore, faith, love, and hope are ours by the grace of God in truth. "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3:21).

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> R.C. Sproul, "Right Now Counts Forever," Ligonier Ministries, May 1, 2007, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/right-now-counts-forever/>.