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GROWING IN GRACE: Making Real What We Already Know
Colossians 1:1-2
May 7th, 2017 - Jeff Germo

This morning we are beginning our new series on Paul's letter to the Colossian church. We are just going to look at the first couple of verses, and the background of Colossians so it's going to be very introductory. But starting next week we will dig in pretty deep. I want to remind you that it is impossible to cover everything in the letter. So, each week we will be looking for the big idea from each section we study. The series is going to take about 12 weeks, so we will finish up sometime in the summer. What would be very helpful is if you would read the complete letter of Colossians several times over the next few weeks. Read the whole book several times in one sitting so you will gain a big picture view of the book. What I have been doing, aside from reading it over and over, is listening to it when I walk. There are several bible apps that have audio capabilities. It's a great way to immerse yourself in God's Word. As you read and listen to the Scripture, ask the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart. If you do that, I guarantee this study will be much more meaningful for you.

We've chosen to call this series *GROWING IN GRACE: Making Real What We Already Know*. We are a very diverse group here today. Some of you have been following Jesus for decades. Some of you have just begun your journey with Jesus. And there may be some of you who are just checking things out. You are wondering if this Jesus stuff is really all its cracked up to be.

No matter where we are on our spiritual journey we need to grow in grace. We all need to get the stuff we know intellectually from our heads to our hearts so it affects our behaviour and even to the very core of our being so our thoughts and our emotions are changed. That is the goal of this series, to make real what we already know.

The beginning of Colossians has some foundational Christological teaching. That's just a fancy way of saying there are many truths here about the nature of Jesus Christ. But, Paul, very quickly moves from the theoretical to the practical application of these truths. So, he takes what they already know and says, in essence, "Okay, now, let's make it real."

I grew up believing a couple things about the Christian faith. One was that it was about obeying certain rules such as "don't smoke", "don't drink", "don't dance", "don't play with playing cards", "don't go to movies", "women don't wear makeup, jewellery, or pants", and when you addressed God in prayer you had to use antiquated language that was used four or five hundred years ago that nobody understands today, such as "Thee" and "Thou." In other words, Christians can't have fun, and we had to look and talk silly. Can anyone relate to growing up with those kinds of beliefs?

The other thing I grew up believing about the Christian faith was that it is about believing certain truths and giving intellectual ascent to certain doctrinal creeds,...which of course there is some truth to. But, I didn't understand that it must go further than that. I'm not exactly sure how I came to this conclusion, but it was reaffirmed to me in Bible college.

One of my systematic theology professors would give us exams throughout the year on the different theologies: Christology; pneumatology; angelology; eschatology; soteriology; hamartiology; and a whole list of other ologies". And all of his exams were fill in the blank. Now, if that wasn't easy enough, he also posted the exam on the wall in the hallway near his office the day before the exam. So, you know what would happen then. Nobody would study until the day of the exam. There would be a crowd of students, myself included, standing around the paper posted on the wall by the door of his office, furiously writing down all the answers, knowing that all we had to do was to stay up all night and memorize them and we would ace the exam – even if we had no idea about the meaning behind those theologies. Let me tell you; we all loved this professor. He was everyone's favourite teacher.

But, there is something very disturbing about that methodology. What it did was entrench my already held belief that Christianity was about believing certain doctrines and creeds, and all you have to do is say the right words, and that is enough. And the Christian journey starts by saying the right words in the “sinner’s prayer.” “Say these words after me, and you will be saved.” Follow this easy four step formula, sign on the dotted line and you’ll be a part of the “in group”. And then as soon as you get “saved” you go to discipleship classes where you learn more doctrine and theology, and you graduate to another level, and then you are called mature because you have more information about God.

Now, don’t get me wrong. We need to teach theology and doctrine. It is foundational. The problem comes when we think that all we need to do is teach it for the sake of knowledge, thinking that because we know certain truths we are somehow more mature than those who know less than we do.

I know I sometimes sound like a broken record, but there is a very good reason I preach so much about this. I came out of college thinking I had all the answers.

The danger is that we think the acquisition of knowledge is the end in itself. In reality, knowledge comes before belief, not the other way around. We can know a lot of things without really believing them, or acting on them.

Someone could describe an experience they have had and give you an intellectual knowledge of it without you ever having experiencing it. How many here have never been to Saskatchewan? I could give you all kinds of information about Saskatchewan. I could teach you how to pronounce it just like a Saskatchewanite, reducing it to one and a half syllables – Skatch’n.

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I could tell you what it’s like to be in minus forty-degree weather, and how when you go outside and breathe it feels like your lungs are going to collapse, and how you don’t want to cry in that kind of weather because your eyelids will freeze shut.

[3]

I could describe to you how big and blue the skies are.

[4]

And how beautiful the sunsets are.

[5]

I could describe to you how straight and long the roads are, and how flat the landscape is.

[6]

I could attempt to describe how beautiful the landscape looks when the canola is in full bloom in the fields and how ominous the sky looks when a thunderstorm is rolling in.

I could give you a lesson in all these things and you would have a sort of intellectual knowledge of Saskatchewan, without ever having experienced Saskatchewan. It would all be theoretical.

That is the problem with theology for the sake of theology. It is theoretical.

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And **God, friends, is much more than theory.** Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, is much more than a historical fact. God is much more than a bunch of ideas and “ologies.” He wants us to experience him in new and exciting ways every day, in reality, not just in theory. And that is what the letter to the Colossians is all about. It is about experiencing the reality of Jesus. It’s about making real what we already know about Jesus, and trusting him with our lives. It’s about entering into a process of discipleship so that we are continually maturing in Christ, so we grow in our trust of him in every part of our lives.

Let me ask you a couple questions:

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First, if someone were to ask you **how you are doing spiritually**, what would you say? Maybe you would say, “Well, I am reading my Bible, praying, going to church, and tithing so I guess I am doing well.” In other words, you might gauge your spiritual fitness by how disciplined you are at doing certain things. And there is some truth to that.

[9]

Second question: **how would you define maturity?** How do you know if you are growing in maturity? Do you write a test to find out how much more knowledge you have about the Bible, or how well versed you are in Christian doctrine and theology? What does a mature follower of Jesus look like?

As we study this letter to the Colossians we are going to gain a clearer understanding of the answer to both of those questions. We are going to gain an eternal perspective in our lives as we let the Holy Spirit use the Word of God to penetrate the fertile soil of our hearts. I hope you are as excited as I am to dig into this amazing letter.

Before we get too much into the text I’d like to share a little background information about the Colossian church that will help us to interpret the book a little better. There are some things we know about the city of Colossae and some of the people involved in the church that may help us as we study Colossians.

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The first thing that we know is that Paul did not know most of the people from the church. He did not personally start the church at Colossae. In verse 1 of chapter 2 Paul says,

Colossians 2:1 (NLT)

1 I want you to know how much I have agonized for you and for the church at Laodicea, and for many other believers who have never met me personally.

In chapter one verse 7 Paul gives credit to Epaphras for being the one who brought the news of the gospel to them.

[11]

Colossians 1:6–8 (NLT)

6 This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed your lives from the day you first heard and understood the truth about God’s wonderful grace.

[12]

7 You learned about the Good News from Epaphras, our beloved co-worker. He is Christ’s faithful servant, and he is helping us on your behalf. 8 He has told us about the love for others that the Holy Spirit has given you.

Epaphras was likely a convert of Paul’s from one of his missionary trips to Ephesus.

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And then Paul sent him out to preach in the area of the Lycus Valley where, as you can see on this map, Colossae was situated in Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey.

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Another thing we know from this epistle is that when **Paul penned the letter he was under house arrest in Rome** in a house that he had rented with the financial help of the some of his supporting churches.

[15]

And Epaphras was likely one of his prison mates (Philemon v.23). So, Colossians is one of what we call the Prison Epistles, which include: Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon. And, remember, Paul and his buddies, were not in prison because they did anything wrong. They were in prison because they were preaching about Jesus.

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The date was about **A.D. 60, so about 30 years or so after Jesus was crucified** and rose from the dead.

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From reading the letter to Philemon we can see that **the Colossian church met in Philemon's home.**
(Philemon v.2)

So, we surmise, since Paul had never been to the church in Colossae, Epaphras had passed on some information about some problems the church was having, and Paul agreed to write a letter to help straighten things out. So, **what was the problem?**

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Well, Epaphras had informed Paul that there were some false teachers who had infiltrated the church and were teaching heresy. We can get some clues from some things he refers to in the letter that the heresy was probably an early form of Gnosticism.

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Full-fledged Gnosticism hadn't developed until the 2nd Century. But there were some very definite Gnostic elements mixed in with Judaism that we can pick out from the text. Here are a few of the major beliefs of the Gnostics:

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- The material world is evil. Therefore, our bodies are evil. The body must be subdued and punished. So, they encouraged asceticism, beating their bodies into submission.

[20b]

- They believed that only the spiritual side of man was good. Body bad – spirit good!

[20c]

- This led them to deny the incarnation of Christ, that is, that Jesus was God in human form. They surmised that if the material world is evil then God could not possibly take on human form.

[20d]

- This also led to angel worship because angels are spiritual beings.

[20e]

- They also believed that salvation comes through a special secret knowledge given through certain initiation rites to a select few. They denied the importance of the person and work of Christ, so 'salvation' was not understood in terms of deliverance from sin, but as a form of existential self-realization, or gnosis.¹ Which is where the name Gnostic comes from. *Gnosis* is Greek for "knowledge". So, they believed they were the spiritual elite – the people in the know with all the answers.

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- This early form of Gnosticism was mixed with Judaism. One of the Gnostic beliefs that was being taught was that Christians need to still observe certain Jewish rituals, special days, such as the Sabbath, New Moon festivals and the idea that certain foods were unclean.

So, these are some of the heresies Paul was writing to refute. And you can see, especially in chapter 1:15-20 how Paul totally and unequivocally destroys their low view of Christ. Colossians is the best place to study to get a strong grasp of Christ's pre-eminence. So, I know this is a lot of detail, but if you keep some of these things in mind as you are reading this letter through the next few weeks it will help you to understand what Paul is saying to the Colossian church and then the Holy Spirit will help you to apply it to your own life. We will be referring back to these things in future sermons as well.

So, after that very long introduction let's read the text.

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Colossians 1:1–2 (NLT)

¹ This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy. ² We are writing to God's holy people in the city of Colosse, who are faithful brothers and sisters in Christ. May God our Father give you grace and peace.

¹Wood, D. R. W. (1996, c1982, c1962). *New Bible Dictionary* (416). InterVarsity Press.

So, Paul begins first by asserting his authority. He was an apostle of God.

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Apostle literally means “one who is sent out,” or a messenger. As we noted earlier, there had been some false teachers who had infiltrated this church and had purportedly brought a new and improved gospel. And so Paul immediately starts off his salutation by telling them that his authority comes straight from God himself. What he is about to tell them is not just his opinion. His words are inspired by God’s Spirit. Paul, on one of his trips to persecute Christians, had met the risen Christ who, at some point, gave him detailed instruction in the faith. So they needed to be very careful to heed what he said because it was the very Words of God, and it should be their authority for life.

[23]

1. Do you accept the Bible as authoritative in your life?

And, again, I’m not just saying do you intellectually believe it’s true. I mean does it influence how you live? Does it affect how you make decisions? Has it infiltrated the fertile soil of your heart so the Holy Spirit can do his work of transformation in your character? If you grew up in the church you would remember the children’s song we used to sing in Sunday school; *The Wiseman Built His House Upon the Rock*.

[24]

The wise man built his house upon the rock
The wise man built his house upon the rock
The wise man built his house upon the rock
And the rain came tumbling down

[25]

Oh, the rain came down
And the floods came up
The rain came down
And the floods came up
The rain came down
And the floods came down
And the house on the rock stood firm.

[26]

The foolish man built his house upon the sand
The foolish man built his house upon the sand
The foolish man built his house upon the sand
And the rain came tumbling down

[27]

So, build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ
Build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ
Build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ
And the blessings will come down

We’ve talked about this before. The song says that we are to build our house on the Lord Jesus Christ. That is true. But, what does that mean? Who does Jesus say the wise man is? Jesus said that there is only one difference between the wise and foolish builders.

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Matthew 7:24–27 (NLT)

24 “Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. 25 Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won’t collapse because it is built on bedrock. 26 But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn’t obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. 27 When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.”

So, what's the only difference between the wise and foolish builders? Both builders hear the words of Jesus. They have that in common. The only difference is that the wise builder actually puts Jesus' words into practice. He obeys. He sees God's Word as authoritative. He internalizes it. It takes root in his heart. It grows and produces good fruit. It is so easy to say, "Yes, I believe in Jesus." Anyone can say that.

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But **true belief always leads to action.**

And, so likewise, Paul in Colossians begins by asserting his authority, not to lord it over them, but to remind them that he is speaking the Words of God. His authority comes directly from Jesus.

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So, next Paul says that he is addressing the letter ***"to God's holy people in the city of Colosse."***

The word "holy" here is literally "saint".

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To the faithful saints. What did Paul mean by that? Was he just addressing a select few in the church – the holier group? Did he venerate them higher than they should be? No! Paul was addressing each member of the congregation who trusts in the death and resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. He was describing their position in Christ. In Christ, positionally, they are saints. As are all who trust in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

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Did you know that you are a saint, if you trust Jesus? If Paul wrote a letter to us he would call us "the saints at CRBC."

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Now, they obviously didn't take that position lightly because Paul not only calls them "saints", he also calls them faithful.

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A. W. Tozer said, **"The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience, nor does it recognize any obedience that does not spring from faith."**² The two are opposite sides of the same coin. We already looked at the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders where Jesus said the wise person is the one who faithfully obeys his words. And Jesus, in the last commandment, he gave His disciples before ascending to heaven told them the same thing.

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Matthew 28:18–20 (NLT)

¹⁸ Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. ²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

So, Paul echoes what Jesus said. The true saints of God will not only hear God's Word. They will not simply be "Saints" or "Christians" by name.

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They put the Word of God into practice and actually teach others to obey Jesus. That is the business we are in as God's people at CRBC. We are in the business of making disciples by teaching them to obey Jesus. That mission is what we must keep front and centre at all times in every ministry or program that we employ. If it is not in line with the mission Jesus gave us it must be jettisoned. That is what the book of Colossians is all about. It is about making real what we already know, putting into practice the words of Jesus.

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² A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*

So, Paul closes off his salutation in his customary way. ***“May God our Father give you grace and peace.”*** Ten other times in the New Testament Paul gives this same blessing for the people who he addressed his letters to. He basically reminds them that the gift they have been given by God is just that. It is a gift. It’s free for the taking. We do nothing to earn it. God initiates towards us and we simply open our hands and receive. And along with the gift comes his peace that surpasses all understanding.

Friends, God wants to do a work in our hearts. He wants to do an extreme makeover in our hearts and change our character so we do the things that we don’t naturally want to do. He wants to grow us up in grace so we make real what we already know.

There was an article I read several years ago in the Vancouver Sun by Douglas Todd who interviewed a social psychologist that did a study on how religion affects people either negatively or positively.

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His findings were quite disturbing. He said “that religious people tend to be more helpful and generous than non-religious people – on two conditions. Those conditions are: [1] that they believe their helpful behaviour will enhance their reputation among their peers, and [2] that they have been freshly reminded of their belief in supernatural agents. But, if researchers remove those two conditions, ‘all of a sudden you don’t find any differences’ between the religious and non-religious.”³

[39]

Friends, we are not talking about religion. Our God wants to do something bigger than religion. He wants to make us into the kinds of people who are good, and generous, not just when people are looking, or when it will benefit us, but the kinds of people who do the right thing even if it’s going to hurt. And that is what the book of Colossians is all about. We are embarking on an exciting journey together, and I hope you are as excited as I am to dig into this very powerful letter.

[40]

Colossians 1:6 (NLT)

⁶ This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed your lives from the day you first heard and understood the truth about God’s wonderful grace.

³ Douglas Todd quoting Ara Norensayan in the *Vancouver Sun*, November 22, 2008



Growing in Grace
Making Real What We Already Know
Colossians 1:1-2
Week of May 7, 2017

Objective of this study: To become familiar with the big themes of Colossians.

[Remember, the main goal of each Growth Group is to allow God's Word to change your heart so that others would see Jesus in you and be likewise changed to be like him. He wants to change the world through us]

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.
2. Spend five minutes in silence asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
3. After the five minutes have someone interrupt the silence and read **Colossians 1:11-20** meditatively to the group. Pause after each phrase letting God speak to you. **Did anything jump out at you?**

Welcome

What are looking forward to in your life right now? (You don't have to sound spiritual - maybe it's fishing season)

[It's really important when doing this study that we each think about ourselves specifically and ways we need to grow, not how Christians in general need to grow. Do the hard work of letting the Holy Spirit speak to *your* heart.]

Word/Work

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read all of Colossians looking for the main themes. Discuss what you see.
 1. What are you looking forward to discovering as we dig into the letter?
 2. What do you want the Lord to teach you?
3. Spend the rest of the time in prayer. Begin by praising God and worshipping Jesus.