

The Gospel: Bearing Fruit and Growing

Colossians 1:3-8

West Van Baptist, September 21, 2025

I. A short message on a long sentence

It's our fall kick-off Sunday. A barbeque is coming in a few minutes. Perhaps a few of you can already smell the grill warming up and the food that's being organized, and your stomachs are starting to growl. Whether or not that's true, I'm pretty sure that no one wants this to be a long sermon. (Neither do I!) So we'll try to keep things short this morning.

This will be a short message on a long sentence in Colossians.

(Deep breath...) I like short messages, because I get to lunch on time, and people don't get fidgety, and because my feet don't get tired, and also I don't need to drink from my water bottle as often, although it can be tricky because sometimes there's a lot to look at in the passage making it hard to fit everything in, though still it's better to say less and keep people's attention than to try to say too much and bore everyone—since (after all) we rightly point out that “less is more”—which I believe as a good general principle though one that has exceptions because, really, there's no such thing as too much pizza or ice cream, right?

How's that for a long sentence? Back in my teaching days, if someone included a sentence like that in a research paper, I'd have to pull out my red pen and mark it up. I'd point out that, in English, it would be much more effective to break things up a little and allow space for the reader to breathe.

But Colossians wasn't originally written in English, and it's not a paper for a modern class. Ancient Greek was a different language, and it came with different expectations. In Paul's day, there was no punctuation—no periods or commas or quotation marks. And at least some of the time, a long sentence was considered “good style”: it showed eloquence and sophistication. It also communicated that a group of ideas were parts of a single package. So there are a number of places in our New Testament where Paul writes very long sentences.

This morning's passage is one of them. Last week we launched our study of Colossians with a look at the introductory words in chapter 1, verses 1-2. Today we go further through the introduction to the letter. In verses 3-8 we learn a little about Paul's thankful prayers for the Colossians, and the reason behind them.

In today's Scripture reading, which came from the NIV, our passage was split into 2 sentences. Many people still find the first part long, so some translations break it up further. (The New Living uses 8 sentences for our passage!) That's fine. The goal is to make the ideas clear and easy for us to read. But when Paul and Timothy wrote this in Greek, it was all 1 long sentence. It was written that way, partly to hint—politely—that this is going to be a serious letter. And partly to help us understand that everything Paul says in this section comes together as a single package of ideas.

II. A package of ideas

The easiest way to make sense of this morning's passage is to think of it as a series of "because ..." statements. Essentially Paul tells the Colossians:

- We pray for you with thanks ...
- Because the gospel—the message of Jesus—has changed your lives ...
- Because you welcomed it when it came to you ...
- Because the message is spreading throughout the world.

We could easily flip these 4 points around and think of them sequentially.

1. The message of Jesus has been spreading around the world.

We learn a little about this in the book of Acts, which describes how Jesus' followers took the gospel message outward from Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and across the Greek and Roman world.

2. That message came to the city of Colossae, in Asia (today's western Turkey).

Acts doesn't tell us exactly how this happened or when, but it probably took place while Paul was ministering in Ephesus. In Acts 19:10 we're told that Paul taught in that city ... *for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who loved in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord*. Ephesus was the main port that served the cities of Asia, and people from the whole area regularly traveled through that center, meaning that as the church of Ephesus grew, the message was naturally carried outward to other communities.

Paul didn't plant the church in Colossae. A native of that city named Epaphras seems to have come to faith in Jesus during a stay in Ephesus, and then took the message back to Colossae as a representative of Paul and the Ephesian church (see Col; 1:7, 4:12).

3. The Colossians received the message and their lives were transformed.

Paul says "*the gospel is bearing fruit and growing ... among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace*" (1:6). As a result, he can speak of their faith in Christ, their love for God's people, and their hope in God's promise. The New Testament often uses "faith, hope, and love" to describe the character qualities that grow in people as the message of Jesus gets hold of them and transforms them.

4. So ... Paul and Timothy pray for the Colossian church with much thankfulness of heart.

III. Three big ideas

That's a lot to pack into 1 long sentence. We could spend quite a bit of time examining the details. But, since we're trying to keep things brief, let me summarize it with 3 big ideas. From these verses we learn 3 main things.

(1) The gospel changes peoples' lives

The message of Jesus is powerful.

We'll talk more about this message in the coming weeks as we go further into Colossians. We'll discover that Paul teaches some extraordinary things—he makes some amazing claims about who Jesus is and what He has done. Some of those claims are hard to understand fully. Some are—if we're really honest—so big that they can be hard to believe. Could any person really be all that Paul claims Jesus is?! Yet Paul presents them as true—he calls them “*the true message*” (1:5). And he knows from experience that when a person seriously considers the message and accepts it as real, the gospel will change the way they view the world and every aspect of their life. It will begin to rearrange their priorities and revolutionize their character and behavior. It will open the door for the Spirit of God to do a powerful, transforming work that simply cannot be explained as anything but a work of God.

The gospel “bears fruit.” It produces faith, hope, love, and a whole lot of other wonderful qualities and results. This is why Paul spent his life spreading the message. And it's why he is so thankful for the news he has heard from the church in Colossae.

(2) The gospel is everyone's message to share

Paul is an apostle. Sharing the gospel is what he does. You might say he is a professional gospel-sharer (though sometimes he gets paid to do it and sometimes he does it while making a living in other ways).

Since the message of Jesus is so powerful, and since it is a message that needs to be taught properly and not misunderstood, we might be tempted to think that it is a message to be delivered *only by professionals*. Only by Peter, James, John, Paul and Timothy and other “official” messengers. Only by pastors, missionaries, and seminary graduates. Maybe a few people who've been in Bible Study Fellowship for 20 years or more.

A lot of people think this way. “Sharing the message is someone else's job. I don't know enough. I have other priorities. I might get things wrong. I don't have what it takes.” It's a tempting mindset. But this is not what the New Testament teaches. When Jesus first gave His “great commission” to spread the message in Matthew 28, He began with the Apostles. But we learn from the book of Acts and from the rest of the New Testament that the task of sharing the message was to be taken up by everyone else who follows Jesus, so that we are all passing the news along wherever God may lead us. Later in Colossians we will study verses that say to the whole church: *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone* (4:5-6).

Epaphras is a wonderful example of this. He wasn't an Apostle who heard Jesus firsthand. As far as we can tell, Epaphras was a new believer who came to faith in Jesus while visiting Ephesus. His life was transformed. Then he quickly realized that the message which meant so much to him needed to be shared with others in his home town of Colossae. So he spread the gospel in that city, and a church was born there.

The message of Jesus will change all of our lives, if we let it. And it's a message that all of us are able—and responsible—to share as we have opportunity.

(3) The gospel is fueled by prayer

Paul prays with a thankful heart because of the good news he has heard. We will learn next week that he also prays earnestly that the Colossians will be fully transformed as God's word takes root in them. Paul knows that the power of the gospel does not rest in him, or in Epaphras, or in any of us. We are just couriers. The message is powerful because God's Spirit makes it alive in people. So sharing needs to be accompanied by prayer.

Here too, we will read more about this in later weeks. For example, in Col 4:2-4 Paul says: *Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message...*

IV. The gospel at West Vancouver Baptist Church

We could spend a lot of time thinking about the many ways these big ideas apply here at West Van Baptist Church. We'll look at some of them in the coming weeks. But today is our fall kick-off Sunday, so it seems to me that for this morning, the most appropriate thing is (a) to talk just a bit about the ministries of our church, and then (b) to pray together for those ministries.

(1) Ministries in our church

We're not a huge church. But this community is involved in a lot of ministry activities every week and every month. It's good for us to pause and talk about them now and then.

It's important to do this because newcomers and visitors join us, and often they're not aware of all the things that are happening and all the opportunities there are to fellowship, to find help, and to get involved.

It's also important because, for us as for Paul and Timothy, these reminders are an opportunity to celebrate and give thanks. God is present, and He is doing all kinds of wonderful things in our community. He deserves praise and thanks for these things. And it's encouraging for us to learn more about what He's up to in our midst. But we're not encouraged, and we're not really able to give thanks properly for things unless we know about them. So from time to time it's good to stop and list some of the places God is at work.

Of course, this is also an invitation. Ministries happen at West Van Baptist because people make them happen. When I began writing out a list of ministries that take place here, I also did a quick count in my head, and I figure it takes somewhere between 120 and 150 people to make all those ministries go. Maybe more. Lots of people are involved in multiple ways, of course, so we're not talking about 150 different individuals. But my point is: this church would hardly do anything if all our ministries were done by professionals and experts with advanced degrees. Our church is active and effective because the people—who are the church—are not only transformed by the message of Jesus, but they're finding ways to share that message with others, in private conversation and also in various ministries that create opportunities to speak Jesus.

Some of our ministries could really use some more "Epaphrases." Maybe the Spirit of God will gently tap some of us on the shoulder and say, "Hey, why don't you consider getting involved there, helping to spread the message of Jesus in that context." There may be some of us who are looking

for new areas where we can be involved, and we just need more information on what the possibilities are. It's always OK to ask. This quick overview might stir some thoughts and creative ideas.

Finally, it's important to do this because the gospel is fueled by prayer. The ministries I'm about to list aren't just activities put on by a social club. They are *ministries*. Practical ways that our church serves people and brings them together, creating opportunities to share the message of Jesus, to help people understand it and live in it. As ministries, we trust that God's Spirit will work when we gather, using us and transforming us. But God regularly chooses to make His presence known and to pour out His power as a response to our prayer. So I hope this list can be a stimulus for us all to pray for our church in practical, specific ways, both today and in the days to come.

It's almost time for lunch, so I'll go through the list quickly. If you're looking for more information, or if you'd like a written list to serve as a reminder for prayer, there's a handy booklet with "Welcome" on the front out in the foyer—you're welcome to take one. Also, please contact the office anytime and we'll be happy to provide more information and to connect you with people who lead our many ministries.

I'm almost certainly going to forget some areas and groups—so I apologize in advance if I miss yours! And I'm not going to try to list all the people involved, because I will certainly fail to name too many of you. But I hope this quick sketch of regular ministries offered or hosted by West Van Baptist will be informative, encouraging, and a useful resource for prayer.

General ministries and events

- **Sunday morning worship services** (including music teams, tech support, readers, etc.)
- **Sunday Night Live** worship gathering – Sunday once/month, 6:30 pm, Sanctuary
- **Casual choir** – Sundays after the service
- **55+ luncheons** – Fridays at noon, monthly

Small groups and classes

- **20/20 Intergenerational Community gatherings** – Tuesday nights, 7:00, Fireside room
- **Divorce Care** – Zoom
- **Gospel Jam** – 2nd and 4th Wednesdays, 7:00 pm, Library
- **Ladies of Faith Bible study** – Thursday, 12:00, Fireside Room
- **Men's morning coffee** – Wednesday, 8:30, Adult Lounge
- **Men at the Beach Bible study** – Friday, 8:00, adult lounge or John Lawson Park
- **Men's breakfast Bible study and fellowship** – Saturdays, monthly, 8:30 am, Fireside Room
- **Soul Sisters Bible study** – Wednesday, 9:30 am, Fireside Room
- **Spiritual Odyssey Book Club** – online, occasional in-person gatherings
- **Baptism and Membership Classes** – as needed

Prayer groups

- **Prayer Chain** – online
- **Sunday morning prayer** – Sundays, 9:00 (before service), Kids' Room
- **Monday morning prayer group** – Monday, 9:00 am, Zoom
- **Healing Prayer Room** – Wednesdays, 7:00 pm, Fireside Room

Regular outreach-oriented activities

- **English Conversation Club** – Sunday mornings, 8:55, Fireside Room

Pastoral Care

- **Care mobilization team** – under construction *

Mandarin-speaking community

- **Leadership** committee
- **Translation team** for Sunday services
- **Sunday Mandarin worship** – 2x month, 11:45 am, Fireside room
- **Saturday night fellowship** – last Saturday of the month, 6:30 pm, Fireside room
- **Friday night Bible studies** – 7:00 pm, Stage Room
- **Mandarin Bible study for men** – Sundays at 12:00 pm, Adult Lounge
- **Home groups** – every 2nd Saturday
- **Hiking group** – Fridays, 9:30 am

Farsi-speaking community

- **Friday evening fellowship** – 7:00 pm, Fireside Room
- **Sunday morning classes** – 9:00 am, Stage Room
- **Translation** for Sunday services *

Children and youth

- **Sunday morning classes** – 10:00 am meet in Foyer *
- **Other youth activities** – under construction *

Organizational

- **Council** (our senior leadership board)
- Leadership and mobilization **committees**:
 - Human Resources: policy management for church staff
 - Finance: planning, oversight of church finances
 - Missions: promoting missions, mobilizing, stewardship
 - Facilities: planning, oversight for facility care *
 - Benevolence: distribution of funds for those in need
 - Nominating Committee: identifying candidates for election to Council
 - Search Committees: identifying candidates for new hires
 - Education and Discipleship: oversight, resourcing educational ministries

Special events

- **Events** at Christmas, Easter, etc. *

Again, I know I've missed ministry groups and activities. And there is always space to explore new, creative things too. But this captures quite a bit of what goes on regularly here at church.

I want to stop today and say a huge "Thank you!" to everyone who participates in these and other ministries, and especially to those who lead and coordinate and make things happen. Other than a couple of us who are on staff, nobody gets paid anything for their time and effort to do all this.

Well, nobody gets paid in money. As so many of you can attest, involvement brings wonderful rewards. We grow as we serve and lead. Our faith in God and our experience of His faithfulness is increased. We get to see people transformed and blessed by the gospel. We ourselves are blessed as well. Sometimes there are challenges, and service takes work. But God meets us there, and it's very good.

Thank you all so much for all you do to make West Van Baptist a fruitful, growing community!

And thank you for your prayers. I've highlighted some of these areas of ministry where there are particular needs right now. I think especially of our ministries for pastoral care and missions, our Facilities Committee, and ministries for kids and youth. In some cases what's needed are more leaders. In some, we need special wisdom. Hopefully having a list will help you to pray more specifically. Of course, all our ministries need God's touch in order to be fruitful, as do all the people involved.

(2) Prayer

That takes us to a second practical application. I would like us to pray together for the ministries of our church. Usually on Sunday mornings we have what we call the "prayers of the people" earlier in the service. Today, we've moved it to this point, after the message. There are always lots of things to pray about. But this week, especially as we think about a new season of ministry in our "fall kick-off," I'd like to dedicate the time to prayer for the many ministries of West Van Baptist Church. Please join me in prayer.