



Sermon – August 16, 2020  
Phillip Bethancourt

**Verses Covered This Week**

*Colossians 1:1 – 2*

*1 Corinthians 15:8 – 9*

*Acts 9:13 - 15*

Well as you grab your seat, let's pick up our Bibles. We're going to start our study through the book of Colossians today. Colossians chapter 1, work in verses 1 and 2 this morning. And if you're a guest with us for the first time, welcome home. We're glad you're here. Our church is about three things: the gospel, mission, and community. We want to be a church that's centered on the gospel, that's sent on the mission, and connected in community. And part of what we do to make that happen is by coming to God's word every week to let the Holy Spirit work in our hearts. And after our time this morning, as we go through the message, during our response time I want to let you know right now that during the response time we're going to have the steps open this morning for another time of corporate prayer together. If you remember, if you were here last month, we had dozens of you come down just to lay our burdens on the Lord and to come together corporately to lift up ourselves in prayer. And how fitting would it be as we start this Fall semester for us to do that during this response time following the sermon today. I want you to know about that now so you can make plans to join me up here at the front then.

Well let's turn our attention to Colossians 1, verses 1 and 2.

<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 in Christ as Colossae: grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Letters change life. And we know that's true in all sorts of circumstances. But it's especially true as we're kicking off a new year here at A&M and Blinn. I remember 20 years ago, going through the college admissions process. And I sent off applications to schools around the country including Texas A&M and a bunch of other top tier schools. And I felt a little bit early on like I was a freshman guy at my first sorority party. I was interested in all of them, but I found out they weren't very interested in me. Because I kept getting rejection letter after rejection letter. In fact, one day I got three rejection letters on the same day. We called it black Monday in my family. But then one of those thick packets came from Texas A&M. You know

the difference. The thin letters come when it's a no. The thick letters come when it's the good news. And I got it and that's what brought me here. That letter changed my life and I imagine we could go through example after example of ways that a letter has redirected the course of your life or the lives of others.

When we spend our time in Colossians over the next year, what we're going to find is a letter that transforms an entire church community. Paul is writing to the Colossian church from chains. He is in prison, but he is making known to them the mystery of the gospel declaring Christ. And I want us to understand what's happening in this letter. As we start this study, just think about what's going on here. This is written to a church in Colossae which is in modern day southwest Turkey. This was written likely in the early 60's A.D. And we know that because Colossae was largely wiped out by an earthquake just a few years later. Now this was a church that Paul had never been to. He had gone to Ephesus on his third missionary journey and sent out some of his people, including Timothy and Epaphros to reach and to plant churches around the region. And likely that happened at this time. So he's writing this letter to them calling them to follow Christ in a culture that was hostile to them. The city of Colossae was filled with syncretism where people would mix together different religious practices to find their own way, to chart their own spirituality, to take some of the pagan practices and maybe wet it together with some of the Jewish practices that were there in order to find a religion that suited themselves. Sound familiar? Seems like modern day America doesn't it where every person is choosing their own path to God. And as Paul is writing to them, he's writing to a church that he's never been to. One that it seems from this letter is filled with a bit of uncertainty about the supremacy of Christ because of the culture around them infusing itself into the church. And as we turn our attention for the next year to this letter, we need to recognize that at the heart of the book of Colossians is the supremacy of Christ. That Christ is above all things. And so the first half of this letter is going to focus on the Christian's Lord and then the second half of this letter is going to center our attention on the Christian's life. But as we turn our focus to this introduction in verses 1 and 2, what we're going to notice is that in this introduction to Colossians, we should notice two key things that the gospel does in our lives that also sets the trajectory for the entire letter to the Colossians. And you'll notice the first one with me back in verse 1. What we're going to see is that the gospel gives us a new focus. So look back at what Paul says. He says,

<sup>1</sup>Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.

Now this is a standard introduction. If you look across Paul's letter, they have several characteristics. It mentions the author then the audience then there is an acknowledgement. And he does all those things in verses 1 and 2. And there can be a tendency as we see this to just pass right over it. To assume that there's nothing substantive or getting to the good stuff starting in verse 3. But instead, Paul is setting a trajectory for the rest of the letter by showing the way that when we meet Jesus, when we encounter the gospel, it changes our focus. That's exactly what happened with him. We know the way that the gospel gives us a new focus, it reshapes our position. Do you see how he talks about it there when he speaks about being an apostle of Jesus Christ? Now what was an apostle? In the general sense, it's someone who was a messenger, someone who was sent by others. But in the formal sense, it is someone who is commissioned and selected and sent out by Christ. So we know of Jesus' twelve disciples. Judas betrays Him. But then Paul in a sense is grafted into these original apostles as those set apart, selected by God, and sent on a mission. Now we're all waiting to hear if there's going to be a college football

season. But you know if we get together in Kyle field, before the game begins there will be team captains that walk out to the middle and handle the coin toss and determine how the game will begin. And those people are selected by the one with authority on the team and sent out on the team's behalf in order to represent them in an official capacity to express the desires of that team during that moment. And when Paul speaks here of being an apostle of Christ, that is the picture. Raised up. Sent out. Commissioned. Given a new position for the sake of the mission that God sent him on. And we won't turn there, but just think about the way that Paul speaks about the nature of his apostleship in 1 Corinthians 15. If you want to write it down, verses 8 and 9, he says this:

<sup>8</sup>Last of all, as the one untimely born, he appeared to me. <sup>9</sup>For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

He feels like the least of them because of his past history. But when you meet Jesus, He changes your focus. He gives you a new position. And it's not just in a position as any apostle, it's as an apostle, as he says here, of Christ Jesus. That the long awaited Messiah has now come. That through the blood of Christ, he has met God in a saving way. He has been set free from his sins and he is now equipped to carry out the position that God has called him to. But when we meet Jesus, it doesn't just change our position. It also reshapes our direction. Do you see what he says next there? He says,

by the will of God.

Now originally, Paul had one mission. He was dead set against the church through persecution. But when he meets Jesus on that Damascus road, what happens? It changes his direction. His mission moves from persecution to proclamation. And I want you to look back with me. Hold your spot here and go to Acts chapter 9. And I want you to see what happens in the aftermath of this encounter. Because Paul was heading to Damascus in order to persecute the church when he encounters Jesus. And then afterwards, Jesus appears to a man named Ananias. And He gives him instructions about how Saul will be coming to him and he needs to share with him what to do next. And you can sense the fear in Ananias' heart. Look with me in Acts chapter 9 beginning in verse 14. Let's actually look at verse 13.

<sup>13</sup>But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." <sup>15</sup>But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

And so what we find here is that Ananias knows this guy's reputation. He is a chief persecutor of the church. He would sense the danger of that moment. Are you sure you got this right, God? Because if you're wrong, my life is over. And notice how Jesus responds to him. He says, "Go because he is a chosen instrument. He is an apostle. He has been marked out for the mission." See, right there Jesus is explaining to Ananias the way that in a moment, God changed Paul's mission. In an instant, he gave him a new direction. And that's a pattern that's consistent throughout the Bible where we see God using unexpected people to accomplish His purposes. You can think of a murderer like Moses or a prostitute like Rahab or a young shepherd like

David or a loud fisherman like Peter or in this case, a persecutor like Paul. The pattern that we see throughout Scripture is God gives us a new direction by supplying us with a new focus rooted in the gospel. And I remember experiencing that in my own life. I came to faith when I was 8-years-old. When I came to school here at A&M I jumped into Central right from the beginning of my freshman year. But right before my junior year, I was at Impact camp helping to lead that. It's an incoming camp for incoming freshman students to know what it looks like to walk with the Lord throughout your college days. And in that moment, God changed my direction. I experienced a clear call to ministry that pulled me away from the business world that I was heading into and pulled me into exactly what the Lord had planned for me that I'm seeking to follow His will and even right now in this moment. God is in the business of changing our direction. But the problem can be that we often think about what we want to do and then we sprinkle a little gospel on top to justify it. We baptize our own desires in order to justify how they might be the will of God. Paul did the opposite of that. He knew that when he met Jesus on that road, it changed everything. And he surrendered his life and his ministry to following after Him. That is what we should recognize that God is calling us to trust in the goodness of His will for our lives. Because when we know that we are sitting in the center of God's will for our lives, it has a profound impact on us. It gives us a sense of comfort. That even in the midst of uncertainty, we can have security that God knows what's best for us. It can also fill us with a sense of confidence. That we can know that God has us right where He wants us. Every diaper you change, every countertop you wipe down, every Zoom class you log into, every work project you complete is according to the will of God. He gives us a new direction. He calls us to follow after Him in the gospel just as Paul did here. And when Paul began to follow that new direction, you'll also see in this text the way that the gospel gives us a new legacy. Do you see what he says there at the end of verse one? He says, and Timothy our brother.

Now we see Timothy come up over and over again in the New Testament. But let's just remember who he is. We learn about him in Acts 16. He joins with Paul at the start of his second missionary journey and he was with him ever since then. On and on in the ministry. He is Paul's most trusted ally. He is the next generation of leader that Paul is raising up to invest in. And what it seems to likely to be what happened here is that when Paul was based in Ephesus during his third missionary journey and he sent out people to the surrounding towns, he would send out Timothy, he would send out Epaphros. He would send out others in order to start these churches. And he is riding to the Colossians, not just as himself, but with the next generation of leadership right there with him. And that's because Paul knew, if you want to leave a legacy that outlasts yourself, you need to invest in the next generation. You need to bring them along with you. You see, Paul had twin missions in this new direction. One was to reach this generation and one was to raise up the next generation. He wanted to be intentional in evangelism, in missions, in discipleship, to reach those right now. But he wanted to do it with an eye towards raising up that next generation so that he might invest in them and prepare them to leave a legacy that would outlive himself. And the truth is today, Central family, we're called to that same twin mission. To reach this generation and to raise up the next generation. That's why we're intentional about evangelism and serving our community. That's why we're intentional about raising up and sending out mission teams and planting churches. And that's why we're invested in reaching the next generation here. I love having 150 or 200 kids back in the preschool and children's wing. Just seeing the vitality there fills my heart. It was amazing over the last two and a half weeks out on our soccer fields over the course of 8 different nights, Impact Camp hosted worship night for incoming freshmen and to see them giving their hearts to the Lord. We

want to do what we can to reach that next generation, to raise them up in the same way that Paul was doing with Timothy.

But I want you to notice as we turn our attention from verse 1 to verse 2, we see a second thing that the gospel does in our hearts when Paul shows us that the gospel gives us a new family. So look back at what he says there.

<sup>2</sup>To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: grace to you and peace from God our Father.

So the gospel doesn't just give us a new focus; it gives us a new family. Now if you were to look across all of Paul's letters, you'd see lots of similarities in the introductions to each of them. But it's the unique features in Colossians that help us to understand what Paul is driving at from the very beginning. And the unique feature of this particular letter, introduction, is its focus on the family. That the church at Colossae is a family. So if you remember, last time I was with you and we preached, we talked about from 1 Corinthians 12 how the church is a body. Now we see Paul speaking about how it is a family. So what type of family does the gospel give us in the church? Well we see several aspects of it here. We're going to notice the way that the gospel gives us a holy family. So if you look back at verse 12, he refers to the Colossians first as the saints. That's the way he speaks of them. What does it mean to be a saint? So you might have grown up around Catholics who would affirm that in order to become a saint you had to perform several miracles and live a noteworthy life. But the Bible is giving us a different picture. That a sainthood is not for the greatest Christians, it is for the least of these who follow Christ. That your standing before God as a saint is not on the basis of what you accomplish, but what God accomplishes in you through the cross. That what is happening is that when you and I come to faith, God changes our position, our standing, before Him. He no longer sees us as sinners who are separated from Him. He sees us as saints, holy ones, set apart, covered by the blood of Jesus Christ, cleansed in total righteousness. When Paul speaks there of them being saints, he is talking about the way that at the moment of salvation, God sets apart for Himself a holy people that are called to unite together as a church. But he doesn't just speak of the church as a holy family. He also speaks of the church as a faithful family. Because right after he uses the phrase, to the saints, he goes on to say, and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae. So over and over again in verses 1 and 2, we see this family theme coming out. And we see him speak of Timothy as a brother. We see him speak about a faithful and elsewhere in verse 2, we're going to see him speaking about God our Father. There's this family focus that is there in the text that is captured in verse 2 by the use of the phrase faithful brothers. Now he wasn't speaking to the men only. In that time period this was a catch-all term that would refer to brothers and sisters. Paul has in mind that they are knit together as a faithful family.

One of the challenges of Coronavirus is that we don't get to spend as much time around each other. And when we do, often all we can see is each other's eyes. And so I imagine you've had this experience and if you won't, you soon will. You walk up on somebody and you know you know them; you just can't place their name. And you're trying to figure it out and it's even worse when they immediately call you by name and then when you don't know how else to respond and you're sitting here in church, you'll go, "Hey, brother. How's it going?" That's kind of the filler. That's the catch-all. It sounds spiritual. And there can be a temptation to think of that phrase, brother, in that type of way rather than seeing the significance that is stated

there in the Scripture. That when Paul speaks of saints, he's talking about our secure standing before Christ. But when he speaks of us as faithful brothers, he talks about our steadfast striving on behalf of Christ. That we're relentless in the pursuit of the mission that God's called us to. That we are walking with faithfulness, living out what God has called us to be. Just think about all the ways we can see faithfulness around our community even now. There are faithful nurses in hospitals and nursing homes where family members aren't allowed to visit. And they're not just caring for the patient. They might be going the extra step to FaceTime in the family so they can have some personal interaction. Or maybe in addition to that, you might see the facilities team around here or up on campus or around your office going the extra mile when nobody's looking. To wipe down surfaces, to take steps to sanitize things in ways that nobody will ever actually see the results of their work, but they're committed to their cause. Or I think about, we've got an aquarium right out here in our Central Town Square. And Audra Murphy, one of our staff members, is just dedicated to caring for those fish. And she does it, not just because she loves fish. She loves to watch the wonder of these children when they see them and she's trusting that if God can awaken their wonder towards these animals then perhaps He will use that to awaken their wonder towards the gospel when they head into their classes. Or maybe it's somebody like Lester Banks. When we were out here at our worship night with Impact a few nights ago. It doesn't start until 10 P.M., and that's just a reminder, I'm starting to get old because I was tired before it even began. But what do I see? Lester's out there bringing the energy with him. He's got his parking jacket on and he's got his wand; he's waving people around. He's serving faithfully.

When Paul speaks here of the church as a faithful family, that is the picture he's giving us. He could have used any word to describe the church. But he uses the word faithful. He doesn't talk about powerful, influential, successful. He doesn't even talk about fruitful brothers in Christ. He talks about being faithful. Because he knows that when we are faithful, then by the power of the Spirit, then we will be fruitful. But notice what he does. He doesn't speak about them as faithful brothers in the abstract. He talks about them as faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae. They are engaged in a specific local church community. He's not calling them to be faithful to the church in general, but to a particular body of believers. When God rescues us, He invites us into a family. He calls us to connect. And He doesn't want us to just be committed to the church that's out there, He wants us to be committed to a specific church. And for those of you that are college students, especially if you are new to town, that's going to be the temptation. That you can hop from church to church, that you can follow the crowds, that you can absorb a bunch from several different ministries, but never take the step to actually being faithfully committed to a single body. And to the families in the room, unless you kind of nod your head and say, "That's right college students," we can face the same temptation when it comes to out of town vacations or sports and activities or other things that might vie for our attention that would hold us back from the type of faithful commitment that Paul is picturing here in Colossians 1. See, Paul speaks about how the church is a faithful family. But he also shows us about how the church is a peaceful family.

So if you look at the way that this verse ends, he tells us,

[Grace to you and peace from God our Father.](#)

This was a common refrain in his letters. Both grace, as the scholars tell us, God's unmerited favor. When we get what we don't deserve. And peace, that restoration of Shalom, the brokenness that the world has experienced through sin now being made right. Brought to wholeness. Experience in fullness in the design that God has called us to. He pours out that blessing on the Colossians and to you and to me as we begin this letter. Because Paul knows that when we experience Jesus, it brings the peace of God. That we can be a part of a peaceful family. The word peace is used over 90 times in the New Testament. And when Paul is speaking here of giving us peace, of bestowing peace upon us, he is reminding us that as a church, we should be peacemakers. Those that come alongside others in their distress and help them to bear one another's burdens. Those that seek to be unifiers rather than dividers. Those for whom our circumstances don't define us; our Savior does. So when you get that cancer test and it's different than you hoped. Or you get called into your supervisor's office at 4 P.M. on a Friday and gets some bad news. Or you don't get into the campus organization that you hoped to be a part of. If God and His peace are in your hearts, it helps you to sustain and to press on in the faith regardless of your circumstances. Paul is reminding us here that our eyes should not be fixed on our circumstances, but on Christ. And he shows us that the only way we can experience that peace is as he tells us at the end of verse 2. Because it comes from God our Father. Now the Old Testament had a lot of different ways to talk about God. You'll see Him referred to as Creator or King, maybe Deliverer or Shield or Shepherd. But rarely do you see Him referred to as Father. But that all changes with the coming of a Son, Jesus. That God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for you and me that we might have everlasting life. And when we look to Christ in faith, what happens in our hearts is we are adopted into the family of God. He welcomes the prodigal home. The spiritual orphan now finds a forever family. Those of us who are fatherless in our faith now have an Abba Father who loves us and cares for us. And I can't help but wonder this morning, have you experienced that adoption? Have you tasted of the peace that can only come through Christ? That is what Paul is speaking of here when he talks about how in the gospel we are given a new family.

I had the incredible opportunity this week to have breakfast with one of our church members who's a part of a group that meets on a regular basis here in town. And the group's acronym is BSA which stands for Been Shot At. And what it is it's a group of former military aviation members who get together and reminisce about the good old days. And as we were talking about things, he shared with me the story of one of these men who passed away just a few years ago who lived in this community name Captain Bob Pardo. And if you're not familiar with his story, he was a Vietnam veteran. He flew F4's in Vietnam and he was on one mission. He's in one plane, a man named Earl Aman is in the other. And they're going behind enemy lines to make a bombing raid on a steel mill. And as they are striking the enemy's target, their planes are both struck by enemy anti-aircraft fire. They're in bad shape. Bob's in a little bit better spot than Earl is. But neither of them have the fuel they need to make it all the way back to the refuel station. And Bob is faced with this crisis, "What do I do? Do I abandon the one that I'm on this mission with in order to enhance the likelihood of ensuring my safety? Or do I stick with him even if it may cost us both of our lives?" Well he was committed to Earl like family. And he knew he couldn't leave him behind. So he tried to think about what could he do to help him out. They ascended to the highest altitude that they could get to. And when they got up there, Bob came up with an idea. You see this type of plane was originally built for Naval operations and had a tail hook on it so that if it landed on an aircraft carrier, it could stop quickly. And Bob told Earl to lay down that tail hook right behind him and for the next several minutes, what Bob did is pulled

the nose of his plane directly behind Earl's and essentially pushed him forward in such a way that he could turn off the engine and save some of that precious fuel. In fact, this story goes that every 15 or 20 seconds, Bob would have to pull off and then reengage because it was so precarious to maintain that balance. And by that ingenuity, by that sacrificial engagement, they were able to successfully get across Vietnam airspace and into Laos where they were able to eject from their planes and be rescued just a few days later. See a man like Captain Pardo sacrificing for one of his own, putting his own life at risk for the sake of serving others. And when Paul speaks here of what the gospel does for us, it changes our focus. It reminds us that we've been given a new family. It calls us to do exactly that. To lay down our lives, to set aside our priorities for the sake of serving others for the mission that God's called us to. And Central family, as we begin this Fall semester, the call of the gospel for each one of us is that if we are in Christ, God has given us a new focus and a new family.

Let's pray together.

Father, we turn our hearts to You right now, Lord. We're asking that by Your Spirit you'd awaken us, that You would fill our hearts in a manner that equips us to walk in a manner worthy of Your gospel. And as we start this journey through Colossians, Lord, we pray that You will shape our lives, conform us to Christ. I'm asking, God, that You would help us to fix our focus on Your design for our lives and not our desires. And will You help our church thrive as a family united in Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen.