



Sermon – August 23, 2020  
Phillip Bethancourt

**Verses Covered This Week**

*Colossians 1:5 – 8*

*Genesis 1:28*

*Colossians 4:12*

*Matthew 13:23*

And as you grab your seat, we're going to grab our Bibles and be back in Colossians 1 this morning. Colossians 1 in verse 5. If you're a first time guest with us this week, welcome home. We're glad you're here. This is a church that's centered on God's word. We want to dive into it each week. And whether you're joining us in person or online, that's what we're doing right now as we make our way through the book of Colossians. Remember what happened last week. We saw in verses 3 through 5 the way that Paul talked about the gospel-shaped life. That our lives should be marked by faith, love, and hope. And as we look at the second half of verse 5 all the way through verse 8, we're going to see the foundation for that hope. It's in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so if you'll pick up with me in your Bible beginning midway through the verse 5 and following on down with me to verse 8. Here's what Paul says.

*<sup>5</sup>of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, <sup>6</sup>which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world that 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, <sup>7</sup>just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf <sup>8</sup>and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.*

Does anybody hate turbulence as much as I do? You get on the plane and you start feeling that instability in the air and you want to grab around, you're paying attention to the flight attendants to see if they're panicking or not. I'm wired that way. Well if you're like me, and turbulence isn't your speed, then you're not cut out to do what Master Sargent Alex Mitchell and his team do on a regular basis. You see, he is part of a hurricane hunter aviation team. These are the guys that load up in their airplanes and they fly hundreds of miles in order to go out into the storm in the open ocean in order to see its severity. They fly their planes directly into the eye wall and one of them talked about how when you encounter those high winds in the eye wall, he said, "Imagine it's like you're taking a jeep and driving it down a flight of stairs. Just bumping your way down." And they travel into the storm so that they can understand the storm. And one of

the ways that they do that is that they release these things called dropsondes into the storm, that fall from the plane, and travel all the way down the water through the heart of the storm. And as it does that, it's reading important data about the temperature, the pressure, the wind speed, all of these things that will help them to understand and to know what that storm is about, what it's like. Unless and until they encounter that storm directly, they can't understand its true significance.

Well when we come to our text this morning in Colossians 1:5, Paul is unwinding for us what the Colossians encounter, what the gospel was like. When they first came to know it and to understand it in a saving way. When they encounter Jesus and they at that point understood what God was doing in their lives. And as we see this playing out, Paul is going to unpack this direct encounter that the Colossians had in the gospel in a way that illuminates a better understanding of both the gospel message and the gospel messenger. As we look through these verses, we're going to remember that Paul's never met these Colossians. He has not yet been with them face to face. But this one, Epaphras, took the word to them and they experienced Jesus in a saving way. And if we want to help others encounter Jesus in our lives, we must understand two aspects of how that happens, that this text is playing out for us. And I want you to see the first one back in verse 5. We're going to see the way that the text tells us that we need to understand the nature of the gospel message. So look at the way that this begins. He says there that since the day you have heard of this. He speaks there of them hearing before this word of truth that has come to them, that they have now encountered it. And as he does this, he's going to talk about the nature of the gospel message in several different regards. So notice the way he talks about it as a truthful gospel. You see that there in verse 5? He says, in the word of truth, the gospel. There is an element of truth which should be significant to us. We live in a culture filled with relativism. Where people will tell you, "Just live your truth." We're surrounded by fake news or conspiracy theories. It's so hard, at times, to understand what is truth. And what Paul is showing us here is that truth has a name. His name is Jesus. The gospel of Christ is this word of truth. And we don't want to lose sight of the fact that up until this point in the New Testament, the people of God had gone hundreds of years without a word from the Lord. There had been silence and judgment for their rejection. But now in Christ, now through His gospel, this word of truth has come. When he speaks there of truth, in the original language, this would have been a word that evokes a sense of absolutely dependable. It's reliable, authentic. And that's what true about the gospel and why it's so significant for our lives. The fact that it is the truth helps us to stand firm against all of Satan's lies that he brings against us. When he brings deception into our hearts and seeks to lead us astray through sin or he brings accusation and judgment and condemnation to us. The truth of our standing before God and Christ helps us to stand firm. Paul is declaring here that the gospel is a true word. That when you open this Bible, you can trust that the God of the universe, the same one that spoke creation into existence, has now spoken to us through His word. It is trustworthy, it is without error, it is unmistakable. And you can find all you need for life and godliness right here in this word. That's why every week when we come together in our Sunday services, we're going to open up this word. And when we gather for Wednesday night Bible study or for some of our men's and women's opportunities, we're going to center our hearts on the word because every week we need a reorientation to the truth of the gospel. Paul speaks here of how it's a truthful gospel. But he goes on there to talk about, beginning in verse 6, how it's not just a truthful gospel, but also a fruitful gospel. So look back at the way he says it.

<sup>6</sup>which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing

Do you see that? And he says there, he's speaking to you, you see the word you in the text, it's not singular, but plural. That this word is taking roots in the heart of the entire Colossian church. Not just in individual believers. And it's shaping them as it reaches the world. He talks there about the whole world, likely a hyperbolic statement. But what Paul is declaring is that Jesus' promise in Matthew 28 of the Great Commission, His word in Acts 1:8, that we will go and make disciples of all nations in Jerusalem, Judea, and even to the ends of the earth. Paul was telling us even in that time period, it's now becoming true. This is a fruitful gospel that goes into all the world. And what does it do? When it goes forth into the world, what happens? He tells us in verse 6, it bears fruit and it increases. So there's an outward growth of bearing fruit and an inward growth of increasing. There's both salvation through that outward growth as the word of God reaches more and more people. And there is sanctification as those who meet Jesus grow and increase in measure with Him. There's both an encountering Jesus for the first time and a becoming like Jesus over time that only happens in His word.

Now hold your spot here in Colossians and slide back with me all the way to the beginning of the Bible, Genesis chapter 1. This is a familiar passage, but I want you to look this verse in the eye and see what Paul is doing here. Because he's showing us in Colossians 1 the way that he is picking up on language all the way back from the first chapter of the Bible. Genesis 1:28. Remember, God has spoken the world into creation. He has made Adam in His image. And as He is giving Adam instruction, notice the way that He says to him this in Genesis 1:28.

<sup>28</sup>And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

This idea of being fruitful and multiplying that's right there in Genesis 1:28 is a theme that recurs throughout the Old Testament. It's given to Abraham. It's given to the people of Israel and the prophets that promise a coming Messiah. There is this promise of fruitfulness, of increase that happens there. Adam and Eve were called not just to reproduce physically; but to do so spiritually as they imaged God in taking dominion over the world. And yet we learn just two chapters later that they reject that in their sin. They turn away from this calling and over and over again. Through the Old Testament we see the people of God falling short of the calling of God to be fruitful and multiply in all the ways that God calls them to do that. And so when Paul is speaking here, back in Colossians 1, of how the word of God, the gospel, this word of truth goes forward into the world bearing fruit and increasing, what he is showing us is that in the gospel of Jesus Christ, God is fulfilling that Genesis 1 calling to be fruitful and multiply; but in a different way than we would have ever expected. Because it's not about that physical reproduction, but spiritual reproduction. That we are growing up in Christ through the bearing of fruit that comes with the gospel. And that's exactly why, we won't turn there, but if you'll notice back in Colossians 1:6 when he says, bearing fruit. That's the exact same term as Jesus uses in Matthew 13 in verse 23. You remember this parable. Matthew 13:23, the Parable of the Seed and the Sowers. He sows some seed on the ground, on the road, and it's eaten by the birds. Some on the shallow ground, it bursts forth, and then it fades in the sun. Others in the rocky soil that gets choked out by the cares of life. But some, it tells us, falls on the good soil and he says this,

<sup>23</sup>As for what was sown on the good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

Do you see that language? Bears fruit. It's exactly what Paul is speaking of here. That the gospel is a fruitful gospel. That when God's word goes forward by the power of His Spirit, it takes root in people's heart in a way that brings forth fruit. Now last winter there was a cold snap that passed through western Michigan in an area of the state where it's common for orchards of Apples to be grown. Now it was after harvest season, but there were some that were rotten or not worth picking that were still on the trees, and a bout of freezing rain passed through there. And one of the people that worked on one of these orchards, snapped a few photos of what was left behind and it went viral. They became to be known as ghost apples. I'm not sure if you saw about this, but what would happen is when the freezing rain fell along the outside of the apples, it would encase them in ice. And as the temperature began to warm up closer than freezing to freezing, it was still cold enough for that water to be frozen. But the temperature at which the apple itself thaws out is below 32 degrees. And what happened is, over time, that inner apple turned into mush and was able, the remnants of it dripped out of the bottom of this ice encased shell. So that as a result of that, all of the impurities on the inside were washed away and all that was left was a pure and spotless ice apple. One that came to be known as ghost apples. Over time those impurities faded away and were replenished by something pure and undefiled. And when we think about the nature of what the gospel does in our hearts as it goes forward, isn't that the picture that we have from Colossians 1:6? It's a fruitful gospel, one that bears fruit in our hearts in a pure and undefiled way as we take up the fruit of the gospel, embracing this word of truth.

But also look at the way that the text goes on because we see another dimension of the nature of this gospel message when he speaks there about it being a powerful gospel. Look at how verse 6 ends. He says,

As it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth,

So Paul turns his attention from talking about what is happening in the entire world to now what is happening in the life of the Colossians themselves. That this same gospel that's at work in the world is now powerfully working in their own hearts; bearing fruit and increasing. See what Paul recognizes that's true in life is true spiritually. That healthy things grow. When something is healthy, it brings forth the fruit of what it is intended to produce. And that's true in the life of the apostles. He says, "It's doing this among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth." That term understanding is one that goes beyond mere knowledge. It's not just something you know in theory that's out there as if it's a formula that you have discovered. Instead, it is a deep understanding. To know exactly. To fully know something. I encountered this just this weekend. Our boys and I, we went out to Jack McReynold's ranch for a Trail Life campout Friday night. I typed in his address on Google Maps and I followed the pathway and I thought I knew exactly where I was going. Turns out I was wrong. Because the map, for some reason, led me to the back of his property, down a dirt road that dead ended right into the backside of his lake. And then it had this little dotted line like it wanted me to drive over

the lake in order to get to his driveway. I thought I knew where I was going. But it turned out, I didn't understand where I was going at all. I had to come back around the other side and find my way there. And by the time I had done it, I didn't just know in theory where it was, I understood it now because I had experienced it myself.

When Paul is speaking here of how the Colossians understood the gospel, that's the picture. That it's not some truth that's out there. It's been encountered in our hearts. It's not something you grew up with or something that you were baptized into as a child when you didn't genuinely believe it. It's not something you do just because you show up here on Sunday. It's something that you understand and embrace and have made your own. And what is it? He says there in verse 6, it's the grace of God in truth. That in Jesus God has taken our sin, He has nailed it to the cross, He has cancelled the debt that we owed because we have fallen short of God's design. And instead, He has given this great exchange where He has taken our sin and He's given us His righteousness. We have received a grace, something that we didn't deserve, He has poured it out through the death of His Son, through His resurrection, seated at the right hand of God. He now makes that offer to You and me. Not just so that we can know it from a distance, but so that, as Paul says here, we can understand it, we can be, experience it. And the question that this raises for us is, do you know and have you understood this gospel of grace this morning? Have you experienced it in a saving way just like the Colossians? See Paul is speaking here of the nature of the gospel message.

But I don't want you to miss the way that he goes on. Because in verse 7 and 8, he turns his attention now to how we need to embody the nature of the gospel messenger. So look at the way he speaks of this gospel messenger back in verse 7. This one, Epaphras. He says:

*<sup>7</sup>just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf <sup>8</sup>and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.*

So when Paul is speaking here of Epaphras, he is giving us a specific example of how when the gospel changes somebody's heart through its message. It now equips them to become a gospel message. The message shapes the messenger. And it does that in several ways. We see here through the life of Epaphras that a gospel messenger is a servant leader. Notice the way he talks about Epaphras there in verse 7. Just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. Now who was this man Epaphras? We don't know a whole lot about him other than what is captured here in the book of Colossians. But it appears from the way that Paul talks about him that he was known, that he was likely even from the city of Colossae himself. He probably encountered Paul on his third missionary journey when he was in Ephesus and experienced Jesus in a saving way. And then as Paul raised him up, he sent him back out to this region in order to share the gospel and plant churches including the one right here at Colossae. And the way that he talks about him there is as a beloved fellow servant. Do you see it? There's only two people in the New Testament Paul talks about in this way. This reverent way, respecting the significance of their contribution for the gospel. Now this idea of servant and being a servant leader as a gospel messenger is one that's not new to the New Testament. All throughout the Old Testament in our whole Bible we see the people of God who are leading as servants, referred to in this way, whether it is Abraham or Moses or David or the prophets. They are all regarded as servants of God's word. They are servant leaders as gospel messengers. But I want you to hold your spot here in Colossians 1 and turn one page over in your Bible to

Colossians chapter 4. Because Paul speaks about Epaphras one other time in this text. And I want you to see, not just who he is, but why he served. It tells us there in Colossians 4:12

<sup>12</sup>Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, why, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

So think about why he was a servant? So that they might stand mature. So that they might be fully assured of God's will. He was working in their lives in order so that they might grow in Christ and understand where he was leading him. That's what a servant leader looks like. When someone is shaped by the gospel message, it overflows in service. That's the big test for all of us right now during this COVID season, isn't it? Where so many things have been taken from us and it feels as if it's unsafe. Some of the things that you might have been used to doing in terms of service and volunteering in this church or around the community. It might be easy to justify no longer connecting. And, of course, we want to be wise and prudent and safe. But we also don't want to use that as an excuse not to follow God's call on our life to be the type of servant leader that Epaphras spoke about here. He was a servant leader. But he wasn't just a servant leader, the text tells us he was also a faithful leader. Do you see how it says it there in verse 7? He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf. Who this term minister, from the root word that also is translated elsewhere, deacon, it's used over 20 times in the New Testament to mark out a role of significant service. And when Paul commends Epaphras to the Colossians, he commends him uniquely for his faithfulness. And we learn elsewhere in the book of Philemon in verse 23 that Epaphras was so faithful to the gospel it even led him to the point of being a fellow prisoner of Paul. He was willing to do whatever it took for the sake of the gospel. Even to the point of imprisonment. And just think about that legacy he's left behind. That Paul, that Paul reached Epaphras and Epaphras, through his faithful ministry, brought the word of God to the Colossians and now we, over the decades, the centuries, the millennia, are now encountering the fruit of Epaphras' legacy through this book of Colossians. He reached the people that Paul wrote to that God is using even this morning to shape our hearts. That can be the effect of faithful ministry. That can be the impact when we follow after God's design as faithful messengers of the gospel.

You know, if you're anything like me though, you've encountered unfaithful messengers of the gospel over your life. I can think back to when I was a youth living in Connecticut right after we moved back to Texas, within a year, our youth leaders were found having an affair with one another. The pastor of that church was caught embezzling funds. I've had people I've admired and respected in ministry around the country who, whether it was for the love of pleasure, the love of money, or the love of approval of others, have left behind their calling to chase other things. I'm sure I'm not the only one that's carrying scars from your church experience in this room. There's a sense though, why should we be surprised when that happens? Satan hates gospel ministry. And if he can take down a minister, it multiplies the impact. It doesn't just destroy him and his family; it destroys entire faith communities. It's why at our staff retreat this week, part of what we talked about is the call to be faithful, to press into Christ, to cling to Him, longing for Him to preserve us in the way that Paul commends in the life of Epaphras. We are called to be faithful messengers. But notice the way that this text wraps up when Paul speaks there of how a gospel messenger should also be an encouraging leader. Do you see it in verse 8? It says, he is made known to us your love in the Spirit. So verse 7 is focusing on what Epaphras



has done for the Colossians. Now verse 8 is focusing on what Epaphras has done for Paul. He has come to Paul and given him a report. And we're going to learn more about the nature of what he reports throughout the life of the Colossian church during this entire book. And it seems as if some false teaching had crept into the church that Paul is rebuking and addressing. But for now, Paul remembers the significant encouragement he finds when Epaphras tells them about this love in the Spirit. That Paul was encouraged by this gospel messenger. That when he heard the way that God was at work in the life of the Colossian church, it gave him a deep seated encouragement. And the reason for that encouragement, the text tells us, is because of their love in the Spirit. You know, that type of love isn't natural to us. We're so often reluctant, restrained, resistant to giving ourselves over to one another in love. But when you encounter Jesus, it changes your heart towards others. This week, Randy Wilson and I had the opportunity to go out and visit Pat Wigley whose husband, Larry, if you're not aware, has passed away. I didn't know Larry as the new pastor. We hadn't gotten a chance to connect. And I had encountered Pat in the hallways here. But didn't have a deep relationship with her. But when Randy and I walked into that room, and we had the opportunity to mourn with those who mourn, to weep with those who weep, we experienced the love in the Spirit that Paul is speaking of here in Colossians. This knitting together of our hearts in love because of the common foundation of the gospel. And if we want to reach the lost with the gospel of Jesus Christ, it's going to take this type of love. And the question we need to be confronted with this morning is, who was that Epaphras in your own life? When you look back at God's saving work in your heart, God used Epaphras to reach the Colossians in a saving way. Who was that for you? Who was that servant leader? That faithful messenger. That encouraging minister who came alongside you and God used them to change your life. And in addition to that, in whose life are you serving as that type of person? Where you are being faithful in your way of serving. That you are being encouraging in the gospel. That is the picture of the gospel messenger that Paul is calling us to here in this text.

Well it turns out that as Master Sargent Mitchell and his hurricane hunters were finishing up their flying routing through the heart of hurricane Laura, things were just starting to get more intense for a doctor in Lake Charles, Louisiana name Juan Bossano. See, he and his team of 20 led the neo-natal intensive care unit at the main hospital in Lake Charles. And as you recall, as Laura was preparing to make landfall, Lake Charles was right in the bullseye. It was in the direct path. And they knew there could be significant storm surge, that there could be the danger that their homes would be lost, that bad things would happen to their families. And yet this 20, this group of 20 people under his leadership, sacrificed their own interests, desires, and preferences in order to care for these children. There were 13 babies in the NICU. Some born as early as 23 weeks. Some weighing less than 2 pounds. Some on respirators just to keep them alive. And as the storm picked up and the winds began to crash against the walls, and rain and wind began to seep through the windows in the exterior of the building, they had to bring those kids, those patients into the hallways in order to insure maximum protection. One of the nurses was assigned to be the chief encourager. She was regularly in communication with the families that were not able to be there with their own newborn children. Could you imagine? Could you imagine as a new mom how difficult that would be to leave your premature child in the NICU wondering what would happen? And this nurse would make regular call and contact with these people to encourage their hearts, to let them know what it is that was going on, and that their kids were safe. You had this situation where people sacrificed of themselves, they served others, they carried out their duty faithfully, they encouraged those that were in need. Why? Because when

the storm of, the storm came, they wanted to protect the most vulnerable among them. And when Paul speaks here of what it looks like to be the type of gospel messenger that we find in Epaphras, that is the picture that he's giving us. That we will be servants who sacrifice our own desires. That we will be faithful even unto the end. That we will be encouragers who are marked out by the gospel's work in our own hearts. And so the call of Colossians 1 to each one of us this morning is to understand this gospel message and to embody the nature of this gospel messenger.

Let's close in prayer.

Father, we see You in Your word here. We come to You as sinners recognizing that we have fallen short of Your design. And we're praying now in this moment that as we encounter your word, that You will strengthen our understanding of Your gospel. That You'll help us to experience its power in our own lives by Your Spirit, God. That we would not rely on our own strength, but that we would depend on You. Lord, we know that we're prone to be selfish, to be faithless, often discouraged. But we're pleading with you now, Lord, to shape us into a people who are faithful and encouraging servants who are relentless as messengers of Your gospel so that many more in this community and around the world may encounter Jesus in a saving way. We ask these things in Christ's name. Amen.