



Sermon – August 23, 2020
Phillip Bethancourt

Verses Covered This Week

Colossians 1:3 – 5, 27

Hebrews 11:1, 6 – 7

Colossians 3:14

As you grab your seat, let's pick up our Bibles. We're going to be back in Colossians chapter 1 this morning. Colossians 1 beginning in verse 3. And it's great to have you here. We had hundreds of college students with us during the 9:30 service. I hope there are a few more that are gathered here. And if this is your first time here, or just your first time this semester, college students, welcome home. We're glad to have you with us. I want you to know that our church is really focused on three things: gospel, mission, and community. We want to help you grow in the gospel, go on the mission, and gather in community. And part of the way that we do that is we come to God's word every Sunday asking for His Spirit to change our hearts. And that's exactly what we're going to do this morning. Because we're coming to Colossians 1:3. And if you remember, last week as we started this series on Colossians together, it was Paul's greeting to the church. Where he talked about how in Christ we are given a new focus and a new family. And now after that greeting, Paul's going to turn his attention next to gratitude. And I want you to see his heart of thankfulness for the Colossians beginning in chapter 1 in verse 3. Here's what he says.

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,
⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the
saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Now earlier this week we were gathered here with hundreds of men to hear from a man named Dave Eubank. Were any of you guys here with us on Thursday night for that? Awesome. It was an incredible time. If you're not familiar with Dave and his ministry, it's Free Burma Rangers. It's a Christian relief organization providing humanitarian support across the world to those in need on the front lines of international conflict. They show the love of Christ to them by meeting physical needs and spiritual needs. And we had hundreds of students and men from around our community gathered here to be inspired by his story. One of the ways I became familiar with Free Burma Rangers is a documentary that came out this past Spring that shares the story of the Eubanks. Dave came through A&M. He was a Ross Volunteer. He was in the

military special forces. And now he's come back to the front lines, not to fight against enemies, but to meet the needs of those who are vulnerable in conflict zones. It tells a story in this documentary that they had been serving in Asia and had an opportunity to go to Iraq back in 2017 at the height of Isis when there was an extended conflict in the city of Mosul. And Dave and his team were there seeking to provide relief. And as they were serving in that community, they got caught up in the front lines. There was a fire fight around them and they were in a position of protection, but they could see just across the road from them were some civilians who had been casualties in the midst of the battle; several who had lost their life. And in the midst of those bodies, he saw a young girl who was still alive, wrapped up in her mom's scarf. And his heart felt for her. He felt the compelling need to help her, to risk his own life in order to try to save her. And he reached out to friends around the world, asked them to pray for him in that moment. And he was able to connect with the American military who were able to provide some air support and drop some smoke in that area. And him and his team followed behind a tank and came up to where this girl was located and put their own lives at risk in order to bring her to safety. Not only her, but the two other men that were with her. And to bring them back home. And I couldn't help but think about, when you saw the courage of this man, what would possess someone to do something like that? Why would you put your own life at stake for someone you've never met? In a country that you just got to in order to jeopardize your own safety for the sake of saving someone else.

Well when Paul speaks here this morning to the Colossians, he's giving us a sense of the reason why somebody like Dave would do that and the reason why you and I would seek to follow Christ. Because what we're going to find this morning is that in this text, Paul is giving us a picture of several different dimensions of the gospel shaped life. That when we are gripped by the gospel, it overflows in service to others. Now you're going to see him talking about this beginning in verse 3 in this expression of gratitude. He's giving them greetings, now there is gratitude. And as he does this, what we're going to notice is that Paul lays out for us three different dimensions of the gospel shaped life. And I want you to see the first one beginning back there in verse 3 where Paul tells us that the gospel shaped life is grounded in faith in Christ. So notice the way he says it.

[We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus.](#)

Now if you look across Paul's letters, it's common for him to not only greet his recipients, but also to express gratitude, and to offer up a prayer. And he's not just being nice in the moment. This isn't the ancient equivalent of when you start an e-mail by saying, "I hope this finds you doing well." He is writing to them and building into their life, these people that he's never met, he is speaking with a grateful heart to them and to God. Because he sees the Lord at work in their lives and it is energizing to him in a way that overflows in praise. He says, "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." So Paul gives gratitude for the Colossians not on the basis of their gifts, not on the basis of their generosity, but on the basis of God's goodness in their life. When he sees it, it overflows in thanksgiving. And Paul speaks there of gratitude because it is so essential to contentment in the Christian life. If you think all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve, when they turn away from God, they do it out of a sense of entitlement rather than encouragement. They do it because they are ungrateful for what God has provided and longing for something else. And yet Paul here speaks with a grateful heart. And

he tells us that he does this every time he prays for the Colossians. These people that he has never met. What happens is when a heart is fueled for prayer, it's also fueled for praise when we see God at work in the lives of others. When we turn our hearts upward towards God, He often turns our hearts outward in praise for others. And we see that now in this moment. Paul speaking to these people that he's never met. And yet he is grateful for what he has heard from them. And it reminds me of the fact that we've just welcomed thousands of college students back into this community. Perhaps you're one of them sitting in here for the first time right now. I've never met you, I don't know you, but I love you. I'm grateful for you. And this message is showing us the reality that if you are in Christ, there is much to be thankful for because of these things that Paul speaks of next. He's very specific in what he gives thanks for. What we're going to find is that he speaks about his gratefulness in his heart for their faith, their love, and their hope. If you look throughout the New Testament, you see those terms used over and over again as markers of the Christian life. And he tells us there in verse 3 that he's heard of these things. Even though he hasn't been with them, their reputation has preceded them. He has gotten word; he has heard about their faith in Jesus Christ.

Now what is this faith that he has in mind? Faith is not just something that you're born with. It's not something that your family chooses for you. It's not something that accumulates over time if you are a good person or you consistently go to church. Instead, he's not speaking of some generic faith, he is talking specifically about faith in Christ Jesus. It was just a few weeks ago my family had the chance to go to a Pine Cove Family Camp and one of the things we had a blast doing is heading over to the zip lines. We took all of us over there and everybody wanted to try it including our youngest, Hudson, who was 5. And he was all in on the zip line until he wasn't. Because he got harnessed up, he sized it up, he said he's good to go, but when he climbed those steps all the way to the top and he started noticing how far down it was going to be, and he started to see this wasn't something he could just do on his own. Somebody else had to step in and help him and attach him to that harness and connect it to the thing that goes down the zip line. He wasn't so sure anymore. What seemed to easy and certain on the surface, now seemed much different in the midst of the circumstances. And so he was back and forth, back and forth, unsure if he was willing to do it. He'd step out to the ledge and then bring himself back. Until finally he was willing to take that step of faith. And in doing that, as he stepped off that ledge and began to ride down that zip line, he was putting all his trust in something outside of himself in order to provide the way that he couldn't find on his own. When Paul speaks here of faith in Christ Jesus, isn't that the picture that the Scriptures are giving us? That faith is not something that we can just look up to the heavens and see, "Yes, Jesus can meet my needs if I want Him to." And that be enough. It's not even enough to put the harness on of faith and have the appearance of it, to fake it, to show up to church, to do all of those things. Unless and until we are willing to step to the edge and allow someone outside of ourselves, God's Holy Spirit, to hook us in to what it looks like to be saved by faith, we cannot experience it. But Paul celebrates this reality in the Colossians. That in Christ, they have a saving faith that is worthy of commending. And what he's showing us is that the key to faith is not the strength of your grip on Christ, but the strength of His grip on you. Paul saw that in the Colossians. He's wanting to see that in the hearts of each one of us so that we can understand faith even more clearly. Hold your spot here and slide back to the book of Hebrews chapter 11. If you remember this chapter in the book of Hebrews, we see over and over again the author writing about the nature of faith. Speaking about what it looks like for God's people to display faith in Him throughout the

Scriptures. And I want you to notice what he says beginning in verse 1 and then we're going to look down to verses 6 and 7 where he says this:

¹Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

⁶And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that he rewards those who seek Him. ⁷By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

So notice the way that faith is spoken of here. It's this assurance of things hoped for. It's a conviction of things unseen. And in this moment, when the author of Hebrews is speaking about the nature of faith, the first example that he gives right after that down there in verse 7 is of Noah. And you remember that story. God commands him to build the ark. He constructs it in the midst of ridicule, mockery, skepticism from the people around him. "Why would you need it?" But then one day the rains come and the judgment of God falls upon the entire world and Noah and his people and all the animals get bound up in the ark. And when those rains of judgment come, if you are outside the ark you received that judgment that leads to death. But if you are on the ark, your faith in God's goodness and provision has saved you from His judgment. In that moment, you are either on the ark or you are not. You are either receiving the judgment of God or you are being delivered from it. And the question before each one of us this morning is, "Are you on the ark of faith? Have you put your trust in God's deliverance for you through His Son?" That is what Paul is reminding us of here when he commends the Colossians for their faith. He is giving us a picture of what it looks like to trust in Jesus as our Savior Lord and treasure. But I also want you to notice as we go on in verse 4, Paul doesn't just talk about the nature of their faith; he commends a second dimension of the gospel-shaped life which is this. The gospel-shaped life is geared toward for others. So notice how he talks about it there in the middle of verse 4,

and of the love that you have for all the saints;

So he's just spoken of faith. He's talked about our vertical relationship with God. And now he turns his attention to our horizontal relationship in love with one another. That what he speaks here of love, what does he have in mind? Because we know in our world, the way that the word love is used can have such a variety of meanings. You can love Aggie football, you can love breakfast tacos, you can love your granny, and you can love Jesus. It's so wide ranging in the nature of its meaning. But love here for Paul is not just some sentimental feeling that you experience when the circumstances are right. Instead, in the original language, the term for love that he is using is the word *agape*. Can you say that word with me? *Agape*. *Agape* love. That's the picture. And in the New Testament *agape* love is sacrificial love for the sake of others. That's what it's all about. And that's bound up in the heart of the gospel. Think about the way that Jesus says, "Greater love hath no man than this but to lay down his life for his friends." Or we see the Scripture affirming that the first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart. Or we watch the way the New Testament speaks about how we as Christians love because God first loved us. That is the image of *agape* love that we see in Scripture.

Now what does that *agape* love look like? *Agape* love looks like God the Father sending His one and only Son. *Agape* love looks like Jesus having a crown of thorns plunged against His head so that He can take away the curse of sin. *Agape* love is our Savior being beaten, mocked, and scorned so that in Christ, if we face the assault of satan, we can stand against him. *Agape* love is Jesus being nailed to the cross cancelling the record of death that our sin has laid before us in our standing before God. *Agape* love is that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. *Agape* love is that God made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf so that we might become the righteousness of God. When Paul speaks here of love in the life of the Colossians, that's the image. He commends that love for the Colossians and he commands that love for you and me. I came across a story this week of a man by the name of Jack Eccles. He's a retired Baptist minister out in North Carolina. 93 years old. Been married for nearly 70 years. And his wife is in an assisted living facility. She has Alzheimer's. And every day as often as he could, he would come up to visit her until one day in March he was no longer able to do that. As Coronavirus arrived, they shut down the facility to guests and he was on the outside looking in. And he was wrestling with the decision. What can I do in this moment? I want to be with her, but I'm unable to. And other people who were not as committed might have just given up and said, "You know, it's been a good run. We've had 70 years together. I'll come look at her through the window. I'll try to check on her through other means." You know what he did instead? He went home, he packed up his belongings, and checked himself into the assisted living facility too. So he could live right down the hallway from her. And for all those months since then, at every meal he's been at her side with goggles and a mask on spoon feeding her her nutrition because she can't take it any other way. He's not seen the outdoors. He can't visit other family. He sacrificed his own desires, his own freedoms, for the sake of someone he loved. I felt like I noticed in the first service people elbowing their spouse saying, "Would you do that for me if we were in a similar situation?" But what a picture of self-sacrificial love. Laying down your own desires, your own preferences, for the sake of others. That's what Paul sees in the Colossians and it's what he commends for each one of us. But it's not just a generic love. Notice what it says there in verse 4. It's a love that you have for all the saints. You remember that word? We just saw it last week in verse 2 if you look back. Paul talks about how they are saints in Colossae. These holy ones who are set apart, bought by the blood of Christ, standing righteously before Him. It's a way that Paul speaking about the holy family of the church. And he says, if you want to see love on display, one of the clearest pictures you can get of it is the way that we love one another in the local body of Christ. He says to show love for all the saints, not just some of them, not the ones that are easy to love, not the ones that are in the same age and stage as you or share similar interest. But everyone who knows Christ are the ones we are called to love. So maybe the case that we don't all see eye to eye when it comes to politics, or the presidential election season, or we might not see eye to eye on the best way to address Coronavirus, or to solve racial injustice in the United States. But Paul is saying regardless of what divides us, what must bring us together is an *agape* love for one another. And notice the way that he talks about that. Hold your spot here in Colossians 1 and turn one page over in your Bible and look at the way he says it there in Colossians 3 in verse 14. Paul, in this section of the passage that we'll get to in a few months from now, is speaking about different commands, instructions, for the Colossian church. And notice what he says in Colossians 3:14 about love.

¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

So Paul is writing there with all these instructions about how to live out their faith, but he says, above all else, if you only do one thing, if this is the essence of how you live, put on love which binds us together in the perfect harmony of unity. There's an urgency to this and he's commending it right out of the gate to the Colossian church. And so the question that we need to wrestle with together this morning, Central family, is what should that *agape* love look like today for us as a congregation. Why I can tell you about it because I've seen it in action over the last several weeks. I can think, for example, of the way that right before the semester started, we heard from Bryan ISD who said they had a deep need, that they needed thousands more small masks for children; disposable masks that they could use throughout the school year if students didn't have them. And so Central and several other churches in our community banded together, brought together the funds, and were able to get 10,000 masks for Bryan ISD and deliver them just this week. That's *agape* love. Or I think about, for example, there's a Christian spiritual retreat for incoming freshmen at A&M called Impact that was only able to meet virtually. But one of the normal things that happens there is a ministry and church fair where students can come and hear about local churches and ministries around Bryan/College Station to get connected. And since that couldn't happen, just this past Friday, we opened up our foyers and the Family Life Center and hosted over 30 churches and ministries from around town so that over a thousand students could come onto our facilities and hear about ways they can take next steps in involvement in their Christian faith. That's *agape* love. Or I think about a preschool volunteer that's here at the church who was initially reluctant to serve in the kid's ministry because of some of the dynamics with Coronavirus who came to me and said, "I came to the realization that if all it took for more kids to hear more about Jesus is for me to wear a face shield for an hour, I'm willing to do that." That's *agape* love. That's the type of sacrifice that Paul is commending for the apostles. That is the type of sacrificial love that he is saying is of the essence of the gospel-shaped life. And I want you to see the way that this text finishes. Because Paul moves his attention in verse 4 from love to now in verse 5 a third dimension of this gospel-shaped life when he tells us that the gospel-shaped life is guided by the hope of heaven. So notice how he speaks about this hope. Verse 5.

⁵Because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

Now the Colossians will learn later on in this book it seems as if there's been some false teaching that's come into the church. And maybe that's caused them to doubt the certainty of the hope that they have in Christ. And Paul, from the very beginning, is seeking to commend them for this hope. That their lives are guided by this hope. And what is this hope? Well, you need to understand that when the Bible speaks about hope, it's not some sort of subjective aspiration. It's not the woman that's been in and out of bad relationships who says, "I think this time it's going to be different." Or it's not the student who says, "I hope we don't have to go back to all virtual classes." Or it's not another situation like us saying, "I hope we get to have a college football season." All of those things are aspirational in nature. They are an expression of our desires. But when the Scripture speaks about the nature of hope, here's what it means. Hope is a present confidence in a future promise. Hope is a present confidence in a future promise. And I want you to see that when Paul begins this verse in verse 5, it starts with the word because. In other words, what he's saying is that hope is the foundation for the faith and love that we are called to display in the gospel-shaped life. It is the key. When we keep our eyes fixed on Christ, when we see that hope reflected in our own lives, it overflows in ongoing faith and love for others. Unless we wonder what does Paul exactly have in mind when he speaks about hope in

Colossians? Look just further down in chapter 1 to verse 27. Notice the way that he speaks about hope there.

²⁷To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

So what Paul is reminding us of here is that hope is in a person. That Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father having conquered satan, sin, and death through His death and resurrection. And He is our hope. When he speaks there of a hope that is laid up for you in heaven, that is the picture. Laid up. It's something reserved, protected, secure, certain. Elsewhere in the New Testament when Jesus tells the parable of the talents, when people give Him money and they're supposed to go invest it for their master, one of them keeps it back to themselves, they hide it, they shelter it, they protect it. The same word in the original language is used for how they laid it up. And in that instance, it's condemned. But in this instance, it's commended that our hope is laid up in heaven, it's secured, it's sheltered, it's protected, it's in a trustworthy situation so that when Jesus says to us in Matthew 6:21, we're reminded of the fact that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Where do you find your hope this morning? Is your hope in your performance in the workplace? Is your hope in the approval of others? Is your hope in your accomplishments and your GPA this semester? Is your hope in your involvement on campus? All of these things, which cannot be laid up, that cannot be stored, they are fleeting, and in the midst of that Paul is calling us to lay up a secure hope in heaven. That we can have a confident expectation of that future promise. If you want to know what it looks like, you'd only need to look at some of our own church members right here at Central. Just within the last couple weeks I had the chance to visit an amazing woman of God named Margret Stanfield that many of you know and love. She's been a part of Central since the 1960's. Margret's on the last chapter of her life. Cancer is ravaging her body and there's limited options for treatment. But when I walked into her home and I spent time with her and her family, you know what I saw? I didn't see somebody in despair because of her circumstances. Discouraged because there wasn't a clear cure. Disheartened by the fact that her body was wasting away. You know what I saw? I saw someone with hope. I saw someone with confidence today about a future promise to her tomorrow. That's the kind of hope that Paul is speaking of here. And he's reminding us that if we put our hope in anything else, nothing else will sustain us. It is only through Christ that we can withstand the circumstances of this world. But just a few years ago, back in 2017, there was a song written in 1983 that made its way back to the billboard charts after over 30 years. It was by a woman named Bonnie Tyler. The song was called Total Eclipse of the Heart. And I apologize in advance if that gets stuck in your head for the rest of the day. Don't blame it on the pastor. You'd say, "Why would that have come back? Why would that have made it back as a chart topper after all those years?" Well it just so happened that the week that she rose back into the charts was on the same week back in August of 2017, exactly three years ago this week that a total solar eclipse crossed the face of America. You remember that? I was living in Nashville at the time. And Nashville happened to be one of the few major cities in our region of the country that was directly in the path for the eclipse. And so there was all sorts of excitement. People changed everything about what they were doing in that moment so that they could catch a glimpse of this, to be there. I remember for us we went up on the rooftop of our downtown office building and had a watch party out there. We had those paper glasses on and people were recording the footage on their cell phones in that moment. We were doing things we never would have done otherwise. And the reason that we

did it, is we had a confident assurance of what was to come that caused us to live differently. There was something that was about to take place in the heavens that changed the way that for a season people were living on earth. And when Paul speaks here this hope, he is talking about something far more certain than the heavens, far more significant for you and me, but something that in our lives should change the way that we live today. And so what he's doing is giving us a call from the gospel this morning that if we want to walk in the gospel-shaped life, we need to be grounded in faith, geared toward love, and guided by this hope.

Let's pray together.

Lord have mercy on us, we're sinners. So often we fall short of Your design for our life. We see the way that Paul celebrated the Colossians and we experience conviction, perhaps even guilt because our faith, hope, and love aren't always on display in the way that we see it celebrated here, Lord. And I pray in this moment that You would meet us here, God. That by Your Spirit, You would help us to recognize that so often we wander from the path that You've called us to. And in this time, Lord, we're praying that You would strengthen our faith. That You would help us to trust You each day. That You would strengthen our love, that You would enable us to serve You each day. And You would strengthen our hope, that You would help us depend on You each day as we seek to follow Christ with all our hearts. We ask these things in His name. Amen.