

Colossians 1:1-8

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Preacher: Stuart Cashman

[0:00] Well, what is being a Christian all about? Someone's to stop you on the streets and say, what is this Christianity business? What's it all about? Maybe you might be here because you're trying to figure that out for yourself.

But it's interesting, there are lots of different opinions out there in our culture, aren't there? I think last week I quoted David Cameron. I don't often quote him, don't often quote him, but don't quote him twice in two weeks. But he talked about Christianity as values of compassion and tolerance. Is that what Christianity is about? Living out a certain set of values? Or is being Christian about having a certain experience? Maybe it's seeing visions, speaking in different languages, being able to do something extraordinary.

Is Christianity some sort of experience? Or is Christianity about knowing certain facts? And if you haven't quite learned them all, then you're not really there yet. Is it about knowing? Or is being a Christian about religious observance?

Going to church, going to mass, going to confession, reading the Bible, singing hymns. People often say to me, you must be very religious. Which I always say, what on earth do you mean by that?

[1:15] What do you see in me that looks religious? I never think of myself as a religious person. But is that what being a Christian is about? Is it about being religious? So we need to be clear on what being a Christian is about.

If we want to live the Christian life, if we try to grow as a Christian, we need to know what being a Christian really is. And the Colossians were, as we read through the letter, we'll find a little bit confused and worried about what the Christian life was.

So that was partly due to the influences in their culture. Where they lived, in what is now modern day Turkey, there were lots of mystery religions, as they were known. These were religious teachings that emphasised having a certain sort of magical experience.

Was that what Christianity was supposed to be? Of course, they also had Jewish people around them, who would teach them the law. They know if you want to be one of God's people, you need to not eat pork, you need to keep the Sabbath, etc., etc.

Was that what being a Christian was? Was it a whole load of rules to follow? And then also, there was also Greek philosophy and Greek religious influence as well. Especially sort of Gnostic ideas, like you have to have special knowledge, which is there for a select few.

[2:25] So was that what being a Christian was about? Was it knowledge? Was it experience? Was it religious observance? And part of their worry was the fact they hadn't actually heard the Christian message.

They hadn't heard the Gospel from one of the big guns, like the Apostle Paul. They'd heard it from a guy called Epaphras, as we heard in the reading. Epaphras was one of them. He was a local lad who had probably heard the Gospel, the good news of Christianity, when Paul was based in nearby Ephesus for three years.

And he'd gone home and found the news was so great, and he'd told other people and started this church. And now perhaps people are beginning to think, does Epaphras know what he's on about? What is Christianity really about?

Then all of a sudden, one day, thud. It was a letter on the doormat. Well, actually, it wasn't on the doormat. Someone read it in church. But yesterday morning, as I was sitting at home, I heard a thud on the doormat, and my wife brought up to me the post, and it was a big brown envelope, and

it had those scary letters, HMRC, on the front.

Now, because I'm a minister, I have to fill in a self-assessment tax return. So what does Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs want from me now? Now, so I was kind of fearful. And I wonder if they were fearful when they heard this first line, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

[3:42] What does he want from us? What's he going to do to us? I want us to see, first of all, that Paul wants to encourage them, primarily. We see that in the first two verses, actually. Straight away, he wants to encourage them by telling them who he is, who they are, and what he wants for them.

So who is he? Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. Now, apostle is a technical term in the Bible. What the apostles, the apostles was chosen by the Lord Jesus Christ, by God in this case, by God the Father, for a distinct purpose.

What the apostles wrote went into the Bible. What the rest of us say has to come out of the Bible. What the apostles said went into the Bible, it was God's word that they had. What the rest of us say has to come out of the Bible.

So Paul is starting by letting them know his authority. This is God's word to them. It's not just Joe Bloggs writing. But he also wants them to know, secondly, who they are. He wants them to know their authenticity.

Look at verse 2. To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae. Now, saints are not people on stained glass windows. Saints in the New Testament are not people who live a certain standard of moral life.

[4:53] Saints just means those who have been set apart by God, called into relationship with him through the Lord Jesus Christ, set apart for him. And Paul wants them to know they're authentic.

They are saints and they are faithful brothers in Christ. They're brothers. They're brothers with Paul, brothers of the Lord Jesus, part of God's family. And he also wants them to know what he wants for them.

Why is he writing? See his prayer there at the end of verse 2? Grace to you and peace from God our Father. He wants them to experience grace, God's unmerited kindness to the totally undeserving.

He wants them to know there's nothing they have ever done or ever will do that can separate them from this God who loves them. He wants them to have peace in a restless, chaotic world where they're anxious about things.

He wants them to know peace. Now if we stop for a minute, don't most of us want to know those things? Don't most of us want to know acceptance by God, by the living God who made everything, not on the basis of what we've done, but because he is totally kind to the undeserving?

[6:04] That's grace. And in a world where we struggle with relationships, where we can worry about the future, where we can be anxious about our own state, don't we want to have peace?

And if we have peace from God, then who else do we need peace with? What else would we need? That's what Paul wants from them. He wants them to have grace and peace.

And I pray we all know grace and peace as we work through this letter. Grace and peace from God our Father. So what does Paul say then to these confused new Christians who he's never met? What's he going to do? They're worried about all sorts of things. Is he going to lambast them with their problems, point out what the problems are, tell them the solution? I mean, frankly, that's what I do.

I see my children struggling to put their shoes on because they're trying to put their left foot in the right shoe. I go, no, stop, time out, this way. Sort out the problem. And if we see problems, that's often what we want to do, isn't it?

[7:02] We want to get in there and solve the problem. And we want to do that because we think we've got the solution. We think we can solve the problem. But do you notice how Paul starts? He doesn't start with a problem.

He starts with praise. Look at verse 3. We always thank the God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you. He doesn't go to the problems.

He goes to praise. Why does he do that? Well, I think for two reasons. Partly, he's praising God for the work he sees in the Colossians, the work he's heard about. He knows it's God's work.

It's not something they've generated themselves. It's not even Epaphras' work. It's what God is doing in their lives. But the other reason is if they're going to grow as Christians, if they're going to truly embrace all it is that God has done for them, then that's God's work as well.

That's going to depend on God's action. So Paul prays thankfully. And as he writes out his prayer for them, what he's doing is encouraging them. And I hope encouraging us as well. He's encouraging them by showing them two things.

[8:04] First of all, the signs of their spiritual life. And secondly, the source of their spiritual life. And as we look at these things, we'll see what the genuine Christian life is about. So we look at the signs and the source of it.

So let's look at the signs first. What are the signs of the spiritual life that Colossians have that Paul gives thanks for? Well, there are three of them as we look at verses 3 and 4 and 5. Listen out, see if you can hear what they are.

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

You see the three signs? You hear the three signs of genuine spiritual life? Faith, love, hope. Let's consider them briefly. Faith. Faith is a very misunderstood word in our culture, isn't it?

Some people think that faith is just a sort of abstract force. If you're old enough to know the original Star Wars films and the force of Star Wars, most of you are looking blankly at me, bad illustration, don't use that again.

[9:09] But some people say, have faith the sun will keep shining this summer. What? No one promised the sun would shine? It's great it is, but how I feel about it isn't going to change it, is it?

Faith isn't some sort of abstract force. Some people say to me, I wish I had faith like yours. Faith isn't some sort of force I've generated. That's not what it is.

Equally, faith isn't an irrational belief. That's a very common idea now, isn't it? I think it was Richard Dawkins, the sort of famous new atheist, so-called new atheist, who describes faith as being believing in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence.

Faith is just sort of an irrational idea. And so some people contrast faith with science. Either you have faith or you believe in science. Well, that is, of course, nonsense, because to do science, you have to have faith in the first place.

You have to have faith in the rational intelligibility of the universe. You have to have faith that observing things will help you to understand what is going on. It isn't ever based on faith.

[10:16] So faith isn't an irrational thing, nor is it a force. Faith in the Bible is trust in someone who has proven himself to be trustworthy. Faith is trust in someone who has proven himself to be trustworthy.

So look at what the Colossians have faith in. It's not just a general feeling of faith. It's not just faith in a higher power or faith it will all work out. What does Paul say? Verse 4, Since we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus.

They have faith in a person. A person who has proved himself to be reliable, the Lord Jesus Christ. The second thing, love. The second sign of spiritual life. They have love, verse 4, for all the saints. That is for all the believers, for all of God's family. Now saints, God's family, fellow Christians, are not necessarily automatically lovable. I know I'm not. So Paul says, this is a sign of God's work in your life.

You motley crew of people have been brought together, and I hear you love each other. He emphasizes that again down in verse 8. It says that Epaphras made known to us your love in the spirit, the love, the spirit of God has worked in your hearts.

[11:25] It's miraculous love. I see that in all the churches I've been in. People who are very different, loving each other. I used to work in Richmond, where we literally had a senior high court judge who would often be sitting next to or in the row behind or in front of a homeless

man who sadly really smelled.

You could smell him before you could see. But they loved each other. They'd be brought together by God's work. So your faith in Christ and love for all the saints. There's a third sign as well, verse 5.

Always comes because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Now as human beings we need hope, don't we? We need hope to live for. Politicians know that, don't they?

I don't know if you noticed the pictures in the paper this morning or websites yesterday of Ed Miliband where he launched the Labour Manifesto. Behind him was a big sign with the theme of the campaign saying a better future.

And that's what everyone wants. We all want a better future. And all political parties want to persuade us that they can provide that. But often that's sort of wishful thinking, isn't it?

[12:32] I'm not making any party political comments here. But it's sort of a general idea that life will get better. We often use the word hope very loosely to kind of wishful thinking. We hope the economy will pick up.

We hope the weather will be good this summer. We hope, or at least I hope, that Andrew Murray will finally beat Novak Djokovic sometime and maybe win Wimbledon again. But you know, the hope the Colossians have is not wishful thinking.

It's based on an objective reality. See what Paul says about this hope, verse 5. It is hope that is laid up for you in heaven. Let me contrast that. Some people might hope they win the lottery.

Well, they may never do it. Whereas if you knew that a rich great uncle had deposited four million pounds in your name in a Swiss bank account, then whatever you're going through right now, you know actually one day when that's mine, I can pay off these debts, I won't need to worry about the things I'm worrying about now.

That would be a solid hope based on objective reality, not just wishful thinking. Paul says, you have a hope, a real hope, laid up for you in heaven. You don't have it now, it's in the future, but it's real and it's solid.

[13:39] And it makes a difference. And because you've got that hope, it changes everything now. As we read on through this letter, as we read on through the Bible, we find this hope is the hope of a new life in a new world where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain, where no one would remain redundant, where the economy will never collapse, where no politician will make the wrong decisions, where best of all, the Lord Jesus will be there and we will be there with him.

That's the hope they have and because of that hope, they have love for each other. They're going to spend eternity together, so they're loving each other now. Because of this hope, they have faith in the Lord Jesus who's risen from the dead, whom they've heard about.

So they have faith, hope and love. These are the signs of spiritual life. So what does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be a Christian about? Well here we get an insight, don't we?

It's about faith, hope and love. And these things are God's work, which is why Paul thanks God for them. So the question for us is, are these things we want?

Is this the Christian life we want? Or are we stuck in trying to observe a set of rules, hoping that will give us something? Or are we stuck in looking for some elusive experience to make us feel fulfilled, which never comes?

[14:58] Or are we stuck on just learning lots of facts which we hope will help us, not actually living out the life that God is working in us? See, faith, hope and love are things you and I want.

We need to know where they come from. And Paul is clear on where they come from, having talked about the signs of their spiritual life. He now, verses 5b to the end of verse 8, talks about the source of this spiritual life.

Let's pick it up again in verse 5. Because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of this hope you've heard before in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you as indeed in the whole world it is, bearing fruit and growing.

As it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth. See how Paul's encouraging them. You've got the source of this life.

You've got it. You've already heard it. It's in this gospel message that comes to you. The gospel just literally means good news. It's the good news about what God has done through Jesus Christ. To pay for the rebellion, pay for the mess we've made of his world.

[16:03] And Paul's saying you've already heard about this. All you need is what you already have. Is this great gospel message that you've already heard from this guy Epaphras. Now, no doubt the Colossians were worried about whether they really heard the full message or whether there were other things they needed to know like some other experience or some other special insight or some other set of rules they had to obey.

And so Paul's reassuring them. You've got what you need. You've got this glorious gospel message which is the source of spiritual life. And very briefly, there are four things he tells them about it. Look at verse 6 again.

It's come to you as it is in the whole world. It is bearing fruit and increasing. It also does among you since the day you've heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

He calls it the word of truth at the end of verse 5. He talks about it telling us the grace of God in truth at the end of verse 6. It's true. It's a reliable message. It's not just something someone made up. It contains the truth about God and about human beings.

It's also not only true, it's universal. This gospel is bearing fruit in the whole world. It's not just true for them down there and not for other people in Rome or somewhere else.

[17:15] There's this idea today, isn't there, that truth is relative. Paul says, no, it's universal. This is true truth for all people. But also, it's powerful. Verse 6. It is bearing fruit and increasing as it does among you.

And they've experienced that power for themselves. They experience it not in some sort of weird spiritual experience, but in growing faith, in growing hope, in growing love for others.

That's the power of God in the gospel and work in them. So it's truth, it's universal, it's powerful. And what's it about? Well, it's about grace, isn't it?

The end of verse 6. You understood the grace of God in truth. See, being a Christian isn't about trying to do things to achieve.

It isn't about trying to be good enough for God to accept us or forgive us. It's about what God has done. It's about his undeserved goodness to the completely undeserving.

[18:14] It's about the good things he gives us, not what we give him. Now, does that mean we don't need to do anything? We just sit there and go, great, okay, brilliant.

I'm a Christian. Everything's going to be fine now. Well, did you hear how the Colossians grew? Yes, it was God's work. What was their part in it? End of verse 6. All that has happened since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

In other words, it's not just enough to hear it, but you do have to hear it. You just have to understand it. That's not just intellectually, but embrace it in our hearts and our lives. That's God's truth as it really is. That was part of God's work.

That's part of the faith, hope, and love that he works in us. So here's the question for us. If we want to grow as Christians, those of us who are, if you want to become a Christian, if you're here exploring it, what do you need to do?

Well, you don't need to do certain behaviours. You don't need to get all religious. You don't need to have some mystical experience. You need to hear God's message and understand it.

[19:19] Now, that may take time. I'm delighted that so many of you have chosen to take time out on a beautiful sunny day, where many of you have got lots of work to do, to come and listen to the word of God. And that's necessary, because that's what it takes for us to grow, isn't it?

To hear the word of God. If we want spiritual growth, Paul is telling us, we need to hear this message, and we need to stick with this message, this simple gospel message of what God has done.

But for the Colossians, there can always be this question about, okay, but have we heard it right? I mean, this guy Epaphras, he's not an apostle. What does he know? Is he really fit to teach us? We knew him at school, when he was a teenager.

Can we really believe him? So Paul, having encouraged them about God's gospel message, very briefly, verses 7 and 8, wants to encourage them to trust God's gospel messenger.

Verse 7, you've heard it all, he says, just as you learned it from Paphras, our beloved fellow servant. He's a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf. See how Paul commends Paphras?

[20:23] He's not just some random guy. He's a beloved fellow servant.

Paul sees him as a colleague in the work of making Jesus known. And he isn't just a lone ranger, he's working with Paul.

And he's not working for himself, he is literally a slave of Christ, a servant of Christ. He's someone who is pouring his life out, serving Christ. Some of you pour your life out serving Ealing Council, or whichever other job you work in.

Paphras really was pouring out his life, giving up everything, as a slave of Christ Jesus, only interested in pleasing one master, not working for himself.

He's an all-one operator, he's not doing it for himself. Do you see, you're ultimately serving Christ as a slave of Christ, and who's benefiting from this? Verse 7, he's a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf.

He's working for the good of the Colossians. That's why he's telling them the good news about Jesus. And I was struck as I was preparing this. If Paul was writing a letter about me, what would he say?

[21:26] My boss pulled back, that is Rodney, Pastor Paul. Would he say, he's a beloved fellow servant, he's a minister of Christ on your behalf, working for the good of those who come every Tuesday lunchtime to a lunchtime talk, the good of those who come to Ealing International Presbyterian Church where I serve?

What about the people we listen to? People you look to to teach you your Christian faith? Do you just look for academic qualifications? Do you look to see how many people are following their blog, buying their books?

Or do we look to people who really are servants of Christ, laboring for Christ for the good of those whom they're serving? Paul wants to encourage these confused believers.

There are signs of spiritual life in them. That's God's work. They have the source of spiritual life, the gospel that's been preached to them. Now if all that is true, if being a Christian is about God's work through the gospel, then what does that mean for us?

Surely it means that because God brings spiritual growth through the gospel, we must keep on learning this gospel of truth, day by day. Let's pray.