

Date: 2020-06-07

The Growth of the Gospel  
 Guest: Adam Day  
 West Valley Presbyterian Church

There are many things going in our world right now. More than certainly most of us have experienced in a long time, or ever. I'll eventually address some issues going on in the US, but I also want to look at what is going on in the world. In our passage this morning, Paul looks both outward and inward, and so that's what I want us to do as well. To see these two areas, we are going to be looking at Colossians 1.

Let's start reading in v. 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. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, 6 which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it 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, 7 just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf 8 and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

9 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;"

At the beginning of the letter, Paul gives thanks for the Colossians. Why does he thank God for them? Because they are showing the 3 primary Christian virtues: faith, love, and hope. They have faith in Jesus Christ for their salvation. He acknowledges their love for "all" the saints.

He then mentions their hope. V. 5 says "because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. . ." – the reason they have faith and love is because of their hope. Salvation, Paul reminds the Colossians, has a future aspect – and they have that hope. We have salvation now, but it also lies ahead when we are resurrected.

"Of this" (v. 5) – Paul says they heard of this hope before and it's contained in the Gospel. He describes the gospel as the "word of truth." He means that the gospel contains the Truth. In the OT, "truth" refers to reliability and authenticity, so Paul identifies the gospel as the message that can be relied upon.

V. 6 is worded awkwardly, but it seems that Paul wants to make 2 points – and that's where I want to focus today – the first point is that the gospel has come to the Colossians just as it has to other people ("the whole world"). Now, does Paul really mean that every person in the world has heard the gospel? Probably not – he is likely saying that the news about Jesus' death and resurrection to forgive us of our sin has spread far and wide.

So external numbers are important to Paul – he wants to see more and more people come to hear the gospel and become followers of Jesus.

He also says the gospel is “bearing fruit and increasing.” Why does Paul use this language? Why doesn’t he just say that the gospel has gone into the whole world? He is likely pointing his readers back to Genesis 1:28, which says “And God blessed them [humanity]. And God said to them, ‘be fruitful and multiply [increase] 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.’” (Paul substitutes “increase” with “bear fruit”). Genesis 1:28 tells us about the purpose of humanity: to fill the earth with God’s rule over the rest of his creation as his representatives. Humanity is created in the image of God, and as humanity multiplies and fill the earth, they fill the earth with his image bearers, so the entire creation will be filled with God’s image.

That tells us where Paul is pointing us to through the use of “bear fruit and increase”, but the question is, what is he communicating through this reference to Genesis 1:28? He is saying that it is the gospel which is creating people who will fulfill the purpose of the original creation mandate. All humans are made in the image of God (as Gen. 1 says), but that image has been marred because of sin. Jesus’ death and resurrection has broken the power of sin. As people throughout the world believe in the Gospel, they are re-created in God’s image by means of being in Christ (Col. 3:15). Jesus is the true image of God (as Paul later tells us in 1:15) and all his followers are conformed into his image (as Paul says in Rom. 8:29). So as the gospel goes throughout the world, it transforms people into Christ’s image and enables Gen. 1 to be fulfilled.. Genesis 1 then is being fulfilled, not through having physical children, but through people being transformed into the image of Jesus and living under his reign as King.

One focus of this passage then is on the numerical growth or external growth of the gospel in the whole world as well as in Colossae. Paul clearly states that the gospel is “bearing fruit and increasing” in the whole world.

But is that true? Is the gospel really going to the whole world? You may have heard that there are some 3.2 billion unreached people in the world, so it doesn’t sound true. Even though that number of unreached people is large, I want to tell you about some of my students who are testimonies to the fact that the gospel is truly going into the whole world.

I could tell you about Mongolia, a country where about 1% of the population is Christian. A small number, but a group of churches sent 3 families to study at our seminary – the first Mongolian students at our school (in 40 years). When they graduate, they will be the first biblically-trained students at their group of churches. They will be equipped to make disciples in a country which desperately needs it.

I could tell you about Bangladesh, a country of 162 million, where Christianity is only .3% of the population there. But I could also tell you about a student whose mother’s family was entirely Muslim. He became an orphan and a family member took him to a Christian school which focuses on taking care of orphans. After years of loneliness, he began to read the Bible and prayed to accept Jesus. In college, he shared the gospel with his Hindu and Muslim classmates. He has been persecuted, but it has not decreased his zeal. His desire after graduating is to go back and take the gospel to those in his country who do not know Jesus.

I could tell you about a student who desires to go to the Middle East after graduation. He did a short-term trip there last summer and found young people eager to hear the gospel, who had become disillusioned by the Islamic government. He just graduated and plans to head to the Middle East in 3-4 years.

Finally, I could tell you about Cambodia, a country with only 2% Christians. One student at our school grew up Buddhist but encountered a Christian classmate who treated him with kindness and invited him to church on several occasions. Eventually, as a result of difficulty in his life, this Buddhist student prayed for God's help and Jesus appeared to him while he prayed. As a result of that encounter, he became a Christian. He is studying and plans to go back to his country to take the gospel to the many Buddhists there.

The gospel is going throughout the world, the students at our school are examples of the message of Jesus going everywhere. But there is still work to be done. In our part of the world, there are 2.7 billion unreached people in Asia. You hear that number and it's an astounding number, and you think, what can I do? I don't expect all of you to move to Asia. But what Jesus calls us all to do is make disciples where we are. You might not go to Asia to reach those who haven't heard the gospel there, but what about your neighbors? Your co-workers? Many of us might have gotten to know our neighbors in a new way or come to appreciate the daily interactions we used to have with co-workers in a new way. Let's use the opportunities we have as we might return to work or talk with our neighbors more. It doesn't mean you need to share the gospel with them today, but it starts small with getting to know people, building relationships. Finding out about their family, what they like, don't like. As you build a relationship, it gives you opportunities to share the gospel as you talk about who you are.

We are part of what God started in the beginning with the creation of humankind. Those bearing his image filling the earth, so we share the good news about Jesus so that the earth would be filled with those who are like him. We are called to take part in the numerical expansion of the Gospel where we are.

I said (if you remember) that v. 6 contains 2 points – the first is that the gospel has come to the Colossians as it has to the rest of the world – external growth of the gospel. The second point is that the gospel is also bearing fruit and increasing *among* them. Paul's focus here is on the internal growth of the gospel. He looks outward and then turns inward.

V. 6 “which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it 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. . .” The second point is that “the gospel bore fruit and increased internally when the Colossians heard and embraced the message.” It is increasing around the world – numerically growing – and also working in their hearts. The evidence of the gospel is not just numerical growth, but it is bearing fruit and increasing within people.

This is the call of discipleship that Jesus gives – it is not just making people Christian, but it is for people to become disciples, those who follow and grow ever deeper in their relationship with Jesus. There aren't two tiers of Christians – those who are Christians and the really serious ones who are disciples – every Christian is a disciple, a follower of Jesus.

Paul prays that the gospel would continue to bear fruit in them. Vv. 9-10, “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;”

His prayer is that they would have a knowledge of God’s will and that knowledge is shown in a lifestyle that pleases God. He then further describes what a lifestyle pleasing to God looks like, and the first two ways are bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

Paul repeats the language of v. 6 (bear fruit and increase): He prays the Colossians would continue to do what the gospel is already accomplishing among them.

Paul’s prayer in Colossians 1 is thanksgiving as a result of the external growth of the gospel and the internal growth of the gospel within the Colossians. But what does it mean for the gospel to “bear fruit and increase” *within* us? We can be tempted to read v. 9-10 and think we need to do more good and learn more about God. Both of those are wonderful things that I hope we do. However, the focus we should have is not merely on doing more external actions but on becoming different people. Those actions then will overflow out of who we are.

One of the things I’ve most noticed in the present time is how polarized Christians have become – especially since I left for the Philippines. On the one hand, everybody I know, read, or listened to, believe that what the police officer did to George Floyd was heinous and wrong—I have yet to hear any disagreement about that.

On the other hand, where I do see increasing polarization is over the *solution* to the problem behind what happened to George Floyd and views of the riots – and, before that, polarization on views of our response to the coronavirus pandemic. When I read what Christians say on social media, it honestly feels like I’m reading the talking points of one of the political parties. And it’s both parties – either the Republican party or Democratic party. Now, let me say this, there are public policy issues that each party has views on that as Christians can agree with – I’m not disputing that.

What I find most appalling is how frequently I see Christians unwilling to listen to one another and resort to name calling one another – in this case, I’ve seen Christians call each other racist or anti-cop or anti-American or pro-exploitation. I’ve seen Christians justify actions that we would normally abhor.

Is this how we are supposed to argue? This is how I see people in the world argue. Yet I see Christians being co-opted by both political parties. Paul tells us in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

What I see in these past few weeks is Christians being completely conformed to the world, arguing like the world, only proposing the exact same solutions that either party has come up with. If the gospel has taken root in us, we must show the world a better way.

That starts with listening respectfully. I've been here long enough to know that nearly all of you agree that all people are made in the image of God and should be treated with dignity and respect. How to ensure that takes place under the government in which we live does not have a singular right answer. And so we must listen to each other with the goal of understanding, learning, and growing. We need to read or hear opposing viewpoints rather than only read opinions that confirm what we already think. Often we read what those who agree with us say about opposing viewpoints, but we need to read them directly.

Social media can be an echo chamber where you just read and see what you want to, but we must be able to talk with those who hold differing views. And we can disagree on the solutions without maligning one another because we agree on the underlying issue of wanting all people to be treated with dignity and value and desiring justice.

I'm not sure the solutions either side has proposed are all accurate. And that actually makes sense from a Christian perspective. While there are some public policy issues that the Bible has clear views on, there are some where it gives some moral foundations and we are left to wisdom to decide how best to implement those values the Bible teaches. But we have to be careful to not let ourselves be co-opted by either political party. For those who think I'm hinting at one party over the other co-opting Christians, I'm not. I've seen it pretty clearly with both parties lately. Let's be clear here: when Jesus returns, he does not take sides, he takes over.

I want to give you an example of the better way the gospel gives us, of the gospel bearing fruit and increasing internally. Since Britain granted them independence in 1947, India and Pakistan have fought 6 wars. During the original period of independence, there are some 500,000 people who died in the subsequent war between India and Pakistan. In 2001, an attack on the Indian parliament almost brought the countries to nuclear war. Part of the reason for the wars is due to a disputed land between the two countries. Another reason is religious-India is predominantly Hindu while Pakistan is predominantly Muslim. But in the 70 years since independence, both countries remain bitter enemies and rivals.

Our seminary in Manila, we have students from both Pakistan and India, sometimes even in the small group. I had a man in my small group from India and his best friend at the school is a woman from Pakistan. At our school, we see these students who should be enemies in the world's view, are friends and partners in the gospel. The gospel bears fruit in their lives.

Paul celebrates and prays for the continual internal growth that the gospel brings. And the gospel changes how we think and helps us unlearn old ways of doing things. Unlearn the ways we argue, how we speak about each other, work together for change. We live in a culture that loves to argue: no attempt for common ground, no attempt for clarification, no attempt for nuance. What would it look like for us to be people who do all those things?

We want to be people who see the gospel moving out into the earth – growing numbers of disciples of Jesus – in our neighborhoods, workplaces, in other countries. We also want to be people who the gospel changes internally, so we respond to events in our country and world, not as the world does, but as those who have the gospel bearing fruit and increasing in our lives. We must show the world a better way