



Colossians 1:1-14
 Colossians: Mature In Christ
 A New Look At the Church

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Today is Kick-off Sunday as I mentioned earlier. It's the Sunday that marks the start of the church program year as things begin to go full-swing around here after some ministries scaled back or took a hiatus for the summer. So today is an opportunity to regroup and commit to getting back into the ministries of the church more fully: discipleship, missions, evangelism, fellowship, a building campaign (as we heard about earlier)...and so forth.

And in that spirit, today we begin a new sermon series that over the course of 6 weeks, starting with today, will take us through the book of Colossians. The theme of growing in maturity in faith...of growing in our discipleship to Jesus Christ...is throughout these first 14 verses, and that theme continues throughout this letter.

So Colosse was a town about 100 miles east of Ephesus, which was a major trading center in the Mediterranean region. Paul spent over 2 years in Ephesus, but never visited Colosse. So this is not a church that he personally helped get going. But, it was almost certainly a result of his extended time in Ephesus...there was probably some connection from one church to the other. As Paul writes this letter – along with the letter to the Ephesians and the Philippians – he is in prison for his faith. And while there, he was visited by Epaphras, who was from Colosse, who let Paul know how things were going in the church there – the ways people were growing, and the challenges they were facing as well. And that visit prompted Paul to write this letter. And now 2,000 years later, we get to benefit from it as well. So, with that brief intro, let's dive into this Scripture passage as we read Colossians 1:1-14.

...Do you ever ask yourself a question along these lines: **Am I growing in my faith?** I think that for many Christians this is a question that at least occasionally crosses our minds. I know it does for me. There's so much I would like to do to grow in faith – from more Bible studies to mission trips to discipling my kids better to spending more time in prayer to starting a ministry to ski bums (someone's gotta reach them, right?) ...I frequently give thought to my growth, my maturation, as a disciple of Jesus.

Probably for most of us (whether you've been a Christian for most of your life or have only recently become a disciple of Jesus, or even not quite to the place of professing faith in Jesus)...regardless of where you are on that spectrum, probably most of us can say that there has been some growth in our journey of faith...there has been some maturation in our spiritual walk. Maybe not linear, but trending in that direction. And that's one thing that we see highlighted in this passage: that the Church is the collection of Jesus' disciples, and we are to grow...to mature, in faith.

For instance, Paul says that he thanks God for the church there in Colosse because of their faith in Jesus and their love for all the saints...which "springs forth" from the gospel message they heard. And then he writes, **"All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth" (Colossians 1:6)**. So this faith "springs forth" which communicates a sense of forward momentum, of progress, of growing...and then he explicitly comments on the fruit-bearing and growing that the gospel message is experiencing. And it's not just growth in a general sense, "everywhere" without any specificity. Paul writes that it has been growing "*among you* since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth." *They* have grown! They have matured.

When I hear this phrase "bearing fruit and growing" I think of a plant or a tree. And a fruit-bearing plant is a mature plant. That doesn't mean it's reached it's full growth potential, but it does mean it's reached a certain point in its maturation process that it now bears fruit. And Paul says the gospel is bearing fruit and growing, including in them in Colosse. Paul may have heard of individuals in particular who are growing and maturing in faith, and undoubtedly he heard about collective things that God was doing in the people there as they matured in faith as a Church.

And so this leads me to ask, as I do occasionally and maybe you do as well: Am I maturing? How is my faith journey going? **Am I allowing this "word of the truth" (verse 5) to influence my life, to grow, and to bear fruit?**

With a plant, it grows when the environment around it is right for growth:

good dirt with lots of nutrients, the right amount of sunlight and water. As long as those things are present, the plant will grow. It *can't help* but grow if they're present; and if they're not, they won't. That's why you don't want me tending to your garden or house plants if you're out of town: I'm not a good gardener. I think I shared with you previously how I once killed a cactus because I didn't water it enough. Do you know how badly you have to under-water a cactus in order to kill it? They thrive in dry conditions – and I made the conditions too dry!

But with our spiritual growth, we have a more active part to play in our growth. God puts us in the right environment: a church that encourages us in faith and gives us opportunities to minister to people, we've got His word, the Bible, to encourage and challenge us in life, we've got Communion to nourish us and remind us of Jesus' death and resurrection, we've got the Holy Spirit who leads us and works in our lives, and more...All the elements are there for growth. But unlike a plant, which is passive in its choice about whether or not to accept the nutrients and the sun and the water, we have an active role in our maturation. We can go to worship each Sunday or not; we can use the gifts and talents and abilities God has given us or not; we can love our neighbors as ourselves or not; we can spend time in the Bible or not; we can ask for and extend forgiveness or not; we can share with others the hope that we have because of Jesus, or not; we can live with generosity or not; we can live with joy or not; we can root for the Seahawks, or not. ☺ In our God-given free will, we have a lot of power about whether or not we're going to grow and mature as Christians, or not.

How about us? Does the growth and maturation expressed here in this passage describe us as well? Can you and I read this passage, and insert our names into it? “We have heard, Brian...we have heard, John...We have heard, Barbara (I just got like half the women in the church)...We have heard, Rose Hill Church, of your faith in Jesus Christ, of your love for the saints, of the hope you have stored up in heaven...we've heard that this word of truth is bearing fruit and growing among you, Rose Hill Church...” Could we read this passage like that with honesty and integrity?

From what Paul has heard, the church in Colosse *can* read it that way, as Paul has heard word about how faithful they are (v. 7-8). The people of this church

are in a good place, by and large.

And yet: **That does not stop Paul from praying for this church.** In fact, it's because of this, that he prays. He writes in verse 9, “For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you...” In other words, just because they're getting things right, they aren't to be satisfied with that. For one thing, even though he's heard good things, there is undoubtedly more room for growth. They aren't perfect. (There's no such thing as a perfect church, and it's been said that if you find one, don't go, because you'll ruin it!) Paul is praying that they would continue to hunger and thirst to grow in their faith, to grow in hope, to grow in love, to grow in their understanding of God, to grow in their fruit-bearing, even to grow in their growth! Even though they're doing well, he keeps praying for them to know and experience more of God.

Paul hears how wonderful their church is, but that's no excuse for letting up now. They can't ride on the coattails of their past faith, their past love, their past growth. And so Paul prays for them. And when does he pray for them? All the time! “Without ceasing,” he says, which is just hyperbole to let them know that he and others are praying for them a lot (he did sleep, for example). And then he shares with them what it is he's praying for them: **That you “would be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you would lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God” (1:9-10).** And he goes on even further, but let's pause here for a moment.

That's a pretty cool prayer to have someone praying for you, don't you think? How great would it be to know that someone is praying for you to be “filled with the knowledge of God's will, in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to bear fruit in every good work and to grow in the knowledge of God”? (Or to pray it for someone else!) There have been times where I've had people tell me, “Brian, I'm praying for you.” When our family has gone through changes or challenges or transitions – like moving here to Kirkland nearly 7 years ago – people were explicitly praying for us in those times. Gwen's family certainly started praying diligently for her the moment she told them she was dating a ski bum named Brian. And they kicked it up a notch when

we announced our engagement and then got married. And the prayers probably changed along the way from, “Lord, open her eyes up to see that dating a ski bum is not wise” to “Lord, bless their marriage and we pray this ski bum she’s engaged to will finally mature and get a real job.” When you’ve got people praying for you, it’s encouraging and helps us to grow.

Now, here's the thing: Paul doesn't pray that the Colossians would know God's will simply for the sake of knowledge. He prays that they would **“Be filled with the knowledge of God's will...so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him” (Colossians 1:9-10)**. The Christian faith isn't just about becoming educated about the ways of God, and then going our own way as we always have before. It's about understanding God's will, which is revealed to us in Scripture and most profoundly in Jesus Christ, and then letting that knowledge influence how we live so we'd go *His* way. It's not just head knowledge. It's knowledge for living and eternal living...it's knowledge to help Christians like you and me to grow and mature, and to grow and mature together, collectively, as the church, because you and I *are* the church along with all the other Jesus followers on the face of the earth.

A number of years ago at a conference I attended, Steve Hayner was one of the keynote speakers. He passed away a few years ago, but early in his ministry career he was an Associate Pastor at University Presbyterian Church here in Seattle. He shared a story from his time there that is so appropriate. He had young kids at the time, and as he took one of his kids into their Sunday School classroom one morning he noticed a sign on the wall a little further down the hallway. He could just make out some of the words as he looked down the wall. It said, “The church is...” And then he couldn't tell what the rest of it said because of the angle he had. He decided he'd like to know what his kids were learning about what the church is. So he stepped away from the wall, and moved over in front of this sign, and he realized that below the words, “The Church is...” was a mirror. He then quickly ducked so he couldn't see himself in the mirror. ☺ Actually, he was very pleased to see what his kids were learning.

And they had it exactly right! **You and I and all who follow Jesus are part of the Church.** We should all put on our bathroom mirrors a little sticky note

that says, “The church is...” and then allow our reflection to complete the phrase. And God wants us, the Church to grow!

How often, however, do we “duck” when we're faced with an opportunity to grow? How often do we listen to a sermon and say, “that's a great thing for the church to do” and then go on our way – forgetting that *we are the church*. Or how often do we say, “I love the direction and vision and mission of the church” and then not get involved, or not live it out in our own lives? How often do we hear God inviting us to follow him more closely, to live our faith more devotedly or more publicly...and we duck? Those are all missed maturation opportunities. They're part of the environment in which God has planted us so we'd grow and mature and bear fruit.

So Paul is praying that the Colossian church wouldn't “duck” at spiritual growth, but would embrace it. He's praying that they wouldn't be stagnant in their faith. That they would still hunger and thirst for more of God, that they would keep growing in faith and love, and live out their faith. He expresses God's desire that he wants them to grow and mature in Christ!

And that is still the desire of God's heart: that you and I...Rose Hill Church...The Church worldwide...would mature and grow, and bear fruit. God makes it possible to even happen. He's put us in the right environment – like a plant that has what it needs to grow. God has provided what we need – we don't have to earn it, buy it, or manufacture it. Paul puts in verses 12 and 13 that God has “*qualified* you (us) to share in the inheritance of the saints” and that he has “*rescued* us from the dominion of darkness and *brought* us into the kingdom of the Son he loves...” God has done the qualifying for us, God has done the rescuing of us, God has done the bringing of us into His Kingdom. So the environment is there, provided by God. Our job, therefore, is to grow; to mature in faith so that we would bear fruit.

An apple tree makes apples, and an orange tree makes oranges. It's not rocket science, right? We even name the tree after the fruit it produces. And the fruit that disciples make that is highlighted here is: *more disciples*. The fruit of Epaphras' faith is the church in Colosse, the people there; and it has continued to bear fruit among them, Paul writes. In other words, disciples of

Jesus are making more disciples of Jesus. That's the fruit and sign of their maturity in faith. That's the fruit of a church that is wholeheartedly living into its discipleship to Jesus. So if you want to know if you're maturing in your faith, one great sign of it (and there are others) is whether or not you're bearing this fruit – in your family, with your friends, in your neighborhood, and so forth. This is a significant part of what the Church is about. And we are the church, along with all the other Jesus-followers on the face of the earth. Let's join together this fall and beyond to bear fruit for Jesus right here at Rose Hill and with other Christians throughout the world, as we mature in faith and bear fruit together. Let's pray...Amen.