

Colossians 1:1-14

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

² To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

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 growing - 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.¹ 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.

¹¹ May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy,

¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,

¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

“So that You May”

“Walking in a manner worthy of the Lord”, this was Paul’s hoped for outcome to his prayer for the Colossian Christians that God would fill them with the knowledge of his will. It seems a bit grandiose we might think that the prayers of an early church apostle would result in a change in lifestyle among a group of Christians he had never and would never meet, whom he had only heard about. Yet, this change of lifestyle is largely the heart of this letter. Paul spends a good bit of the first two chapters explaining who Jesus is and then most of chapters three and four he explains that lifestyle.

Lifestyle is simply living in a manner which corresponds to a people’s values and beliefs. There are components of our lifestyles that we choose and others that we are just born into. Lifestyle can be changed. If it couldn’t then every commercial on TV and every billboard along the road wouldn’t be trying to sell us lifestyle. There are myriads of lifestyles available to us. There’s the lifestyle of the rich and famous, the adult lifestyle, the Gay lifestyle, the cottage lifestyle, the hockey/soccer lifestyle, the middleclass lifestyle, Western lifestyle, etc. We all reflect with our way of living our core values and basic beliefs.

Now, if someone were to ask us what the Christian lifestyle was, what would we tell them? This I think is a relevant question for us to wrestle with because I think that for most of the history of the Western church the Christian lifestyle really hasn’t been all that different from our surrounding culture. There have been such groups as the Amish and the Puritans who tried to live differently. But, for the most part, the people in the pews have had very similar lifestyles to the people who are not sitting. But anyway, how would we answer that question?

Paul gives us what would be the quintessential pat answer here. The Christian lifestyle is living according to God’s will, the way God would have us to live. Right? Yet, how do we determine that? Looking at the Bible, the Sermon on the Mount seems a good place to start; but what happens when we have a look at the Book of Leviticus which tells us to do things like stone women who wear pants? We have to be very careful about literalism. Another answer we might have to describe the Christian lifestyle is that it’s living like Jesus. Well, if we push that to the extreme then we should all be wondering around rather aimlessly with twelve of our buddies proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is at hand, doing miracles, enjoying rock star celebrity (being careful not to be more popular than the Beatles), publicly arguing with religious authorities, and living by means of the provision of five or six wealthy women. I could dig that.

But seriously, what is the Christian lifestyle? Well, Paul gives us a starting point here in somewhat lofty terms which need unpacking. Basically, it is walking in a manner worthy of the Lord or which corresponds to Jesus’ way of life; living in a way that is driven by the desire to please him rather than the other values that define the “way of the world”.

Walking in a way worthy of the Lord begins with the proclamation and the hearing of the Gospel. For several years now I have been preaching that the Gospel in the Bible is way more than what we have reduced it to. You see, the Age of Reason and Revivalism (1780-1980) has left the church with a formulaic almost magical Gospel that is way different from anything we find in the Bible. We have been schooled to believe that the Gospel is: I am a sinner condemned to Hell. Yet, because God loves us, he has provided a way for us to have eternal life in Heaven – Jesus died for us and for our sins. All I must do to make this Good News apply to me is to make the decision to believe that this is the truth, invite Jesus into my heart, and publicly confess that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Saviour and I will be eternally saved provided I continue to live in conformity with this decision. I do not want to dismiss this truncated version of the Gospel outright. There’s truth there. But, as I have said, it is reductionist and as such it forces us to miss out on the power of the Gospel to save now, in the present, as it does not speak of the Kingdom or Reign of God or of the Holy Spirit. It simply calls us to rely on reason and morality for our salvation.

In Paul's day, there was something known as a gospel. It was an imperial declaration (and they believed it to be a declaration empowered with the power of the gods) pertaining to something that had happened in the life of the Roman emperor. Usually it was an announcement that Caesar had won a major battle and the domain of the empire had been increased. And so, imperial heralds would proclaim this good news on the street corners of every city. Well, that is exactly what Jesus was doing when he entered villages proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is at hand and therefore people should repent and believe the Good News. It is exactly what Paul and the other apostles and missionaries were doing as well. They went to the street corners of the cities of the Roman Empire proclaiming that Jesus is Lord and he has won the victory of sin and death, that he has died for us and for our sins and that had God raised him from the dead demonstrating that Jesus is God's son. Therefore, we humans are now free to live in God's Kingdom. Those who accepted this Gospel did so because the Holy Spirit had moved upon them with the result that they began to meet together for worship and the Lord's Supper and they began to live a new lifestyle that powerfully demonstrated the love of God. Paul says God the Father has rescued us from the domain of darkness, the domain of stumbling around and groping about to find some sort of way in life, and transferred us into the Kingdom of his beloved Son. Please get this. By the gift of the Holy Spirit we have been transferred into a new realm of existence. We have been transferred into a new realm of existence.

The Proclamation and Hearing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is New Creation being poured out upon and made effectual in human beings. The people of the Roman Empire rather superstitiously believed that an imperial gospel had the power of the gods behind it. Our Gospel, the Gospel of new life in Jesus Christ actually does have the power and presence of God behind it. The proof is that in its wake God creates communities of people who love in the Spirit, who share their lives together in a fellowship of mutual affection.

Furthermore, Paul speaks of Gospel as being the word of truth. In the Bible truth cannot be separated from one's experience of reality. True reality is that the Gospel has come not only to the Colossians but also to us. There in verse six the word for "come" in the Greek has the sense of a present reality that has come upon us to the extent that it is in us. This Gospel of the Kingdom of God/the Lordship of Jesus Christ is upon us and in us by the power of the Holy Spirit who helps us to understand fully that God's will flowers and fruits in the love that Christian communities, indeed Christian families share.

Paul also speaks of bearing fruit and what he means by fruit is the change in our character and lifestyle that comes about by knowing God and his love both deep down in ourselves and deeply in our fellowship, our Holy Spirit-filled fellowship of love. Paul speaks of growing in our knowledge of God. He doesn't mean book knowledge. He means really knowing God personally by means of his steadfast love and faithfulness towards us in Jesus Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit resulting in our caring for one another and our neighbours in a Christ-like manner.

The Christian lifestyle is the way of unconditional, sacrificial love for each other and for our neighbours that would appear wasteful to the world. I heard an interview with Warren Buffet the other day. Warren Buffet is in the top three of the richest people alive. The interviewer asked him what the best advice he'd ever been given was. Surprisingly, it had nothing to do with money. He said that his father had taught him unconditional love and that if parents could love their children unconditionally then their kids will be on the right track. Unconditional love...I was actually quite impressed with the man even though it was obvious there was no church in his life. Still, he knows the way of the Kingdom of God, he knows the key to living in a manner worthy of our Lord: unconditional, non-judgmental, no-strings-attached love. Go and do likewise. Amen.