

# Colossians: Understanding God's Grace

by Mariano Di Gangi

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*Mariano Di Gangi's sermon on Colossians emphasizes the transformative power of God's grace through the gospel as communicated by faithful servants like Epaphras.*

**Duration:** 31:35

**Scripture:** Colossians 1:5

**Topics:** "Grace Of God"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of the word of God as the word of truth and the gospel. He explains that the gospel is only understood in light of the bad news, which is that all have sinned and the wages of sin is death. However, the good news is that through Jesus Christ, eternal life is offered as a gift from God. The preacher also discusses the reception of the gospel, highlighting the role of hearing and faith in accepting the message. He concludes by emphasizing the transformative power of the gospel, leading to hope, love, and a desire for societal reform.

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## Transcript

From the hope stored up for you in heaven, and which you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is producing 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. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

We're on the first Sunday of yet another year that God in his providence has permitted us to experience. It's a new year that has a tremendous potential for good or evil. It's a year in which there will be a great many international problems, national difficulties, interpersonal problems and strains, and personal difficulties and distresses to cope with.

Now in view of what lies ahead, why should we take up time to expound a letter that was written by a Jew in a Roman prison and originally addressed to a small congregation in Asia Minor? Is it really relevant, with all the needs that face us at every level in the 20th century, for us to take the time and to make the effort to open up the epistle to the Colossians in this new year? Aren't we just engaging in a kind of antiquarian research? Aren't we engaging in a kind of literary archaeology? I remember meeting the president of Gordon Conwell Divinity School, who was an archaeologist by profession, and he told me with a bit of a mischievous twinkle in his eye that for years his career had been in ruins. Well, I'll leave that for

archaeologists to figure out. But aren't we engaging in a bit of literary archaeology to go back almost 20 centuries into a little letter written to a tiny congregation that today is shrouded in almost total obscurity? Why bother with the letter to the Colossians? I think the reasons why this epistle demands our attention will become plain enough once we have an ear that is willing to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying in this scripture.

This is a letter which is little but powerful. It has an abiding validity when it speaks on matters of doctrine and of duty, because it comes to us from one who is an apostle of Christ Jesus. That means that he has been directly commissioned by the risen Lord.

That means that he has been authorized to deliver God's truth. That means that what he has to say is not time-bound and culturally conditioned, because what he tells us on matters of belief and behavior comes with the very authorization of the Lord who made him an apostle. And therefore, if we receive the teaching of Paul, we receive the teaching of the Lord who sent him.

And if we despise or ignore the teaching of the apostle, then we are despising and ignoring the authority of the one who sent him. This is a letter that comes to us from an authentic, authorized, delegate of Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul. And it is one that is written to a group of Christians who are described as holy, as faithful, as brothers in Christ at Colossae.

And there's a world of meaning in that thumbnail sketch of the Christian community in ancient Colossae. Here were people who were described as holy. Now surely we ought to disabuse ourselves of any idea that they had already reached total and irrevocable perfection.

When the Bible says that they were holy, what it means is that they were consecrated and set apart for the exclusive use of the Lord who had created them and redeemed them with his own precious blood. They were marked out as being devoted to his service. They had not yet reached perfection, but their life was already moving in a new direction.

They were devoted to the Lord. They were holy and they were faithful. They were dependable.

They were trustworthy. They were not fair-weather Christians, but they were persevering in their commitment to Jesus Christ. Now notice that combination of words.

They were in Christ and at Colossae. They were in Christ as a branch is in the vine, drawing from that vine its life. Here were men and women who had been grafted into Christ.

He was their life and from him as a divine source flowed vitality from him to them. They were related in a very vital dynamic way to Jesus Christ, but they were also at Colossae. They were also in the marketplace.

They were also in the place where ideas were exchanged and the kingdom of evil was to be confronted. They were also in a situation dominated by superstition and immorality and false religion. They were also in a world where perversity of every kind was tolerated and even accepted.

And so you have people who are in Christ, but also at Colossae. And that is the situation of every single one of us here today. If we are in Christ, we are also in Metropolitan Toronto, we are in Cabbage Town, we are in Don Mills, we are in Mississauga, and that is where we have to hammer out the meaning of our discipleship.

In Christ, drawing from him the strength we need to confront evil and roll back the kingdom of darkness wherever we find it in our individual Colossae. And so you have a dual relationship in Christ and in the world, and we are to live in the world as men and women who belong to Jesus Christ, the salt of the earth, the light of the world. And so the letter comes from an Apostle to a Christian community, and it has a message worth pondering.

The first thing that the Apostle underlines in the words of our text has to do with the communication of the gospel. Through whom was the gospel communicated? Well, it was communicated, Paul says, through a man named Epaphras, or Epaphroditus if you want the longer form of his name. John Calvin was fond of pointing out that God's usual way of communicating was not immediately and directly from the sky, but through men and women on whose heart he had laid a burden.

We need to remember that. If God is going to reach people in our time, 99 times out of a hundred, he's not going to do it by flashing something miraculously in the sky, but through men and women who feel the burden and sense the urgency of personal witness in the world. God communicated his message to the people of Colossae through a messenger, and his name was Epaphroditus.

And this man is described as our fellow servant. The Apostle Paul was loaded with talent, bristling with skills, but he was not so foolish as to suppose that he had a monopoly of gifts and could function as a lone wolf operator. The Apostle Paul was no freelance person.

The Apostle Paul wanted to feel himself part of a team, and he valued Epaphras as a fellow servant. Together we serve. I may have gifts that you do not possess, but you surely have skills and talents of which I am desperately short, and therefore each of us has to work together for the common cause.

That's why I'm glad that in our Presbyterian system there is no provision for ecclesiastical bossism. The minister of the church, the teaching elder, is but one elder among many. He may moderate, but he cannot dominate or squelch a Kirk session.

And the session is to function together as a team of elders who share common concerns and between them together seek to do the Lord's work. And the elders of the church must work with the managers of the church, and the elders and managers need to cooperate with the trustees, and so on down through every organization in the church. We need fellow servants, men and women who were open and willing to serve together.

What Scripture calls us to do is not to seek status, but to render service and to do it together. Epaphras, a fellow servant, another member of the same body, another player on the same team. And, says the Apostle, he is not only our fellow servant, but he is a faithful minister, a faithful servant of Jesus Christ.

He's proven loyal. He's proven dependable. He has not deviated from sound doctrine.

He has stayed the course. He is a faithful minister. Maybe not sensational, maybe not spectacular, maybe not super successful as the world counts success, but faithful.

And this is what God prizes in his servants. Dependability and loyalty. At the end, what the Lord will say to his servants is not, great, sensational, spectacular, successful servant.

Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord. The messenger through whom the gospel was communicated was a fellow servant and a faithful servant.

What about the message itself? The message is described with two very simple terms. It's considered as the word of truth and the gospel. The word of truth, because it comes from a God who cannot and does not lie.

The word of truth, because it comes from him who is the truth. The word of truth, because it tells us the truth about God and it tells us the truth about ourselves. It's the word of truth.

And it's also called the gospel, the good news. And good news is only understandable over against the background of bad news. You cannot understand the shore unless you take it together with the ocean.

You cannot understand a valley unless you take it in comparison to a mountain peak. And so you cannot understand the good news of the gospel apart from the bad news. The bad news is that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God and the wages of sin is death.

The good news is that the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. The bad news is that all we like sheep have self-centeredly and stupidly gone astray, turning everyone to his own way. The good news is that the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

And the message that Epiphraas preached to the people of Colossae as a faithful minister of Jesus Christ was the word of truth and the word of the good news of the forgiveness of sins and new life in Jesus Christ. Now the Apostle does more than tell us about the communication of the gospel. He goes on to speak about the reception of the gospel and he uses three verbs to describe how the people of Colossae received the gospel.

The first of the terms that he uses is the word heard. You heard the word of truth, you heard the gospel. It enters into our hearts and minds through the gate of the ear.

Faith comes by hearing and hearing what? Hearing the word of God. And that is why the preaching of the word is of such great importance for it pleased God by what people consider foolishness, namely proclamation to save them that believe. And that is why it's so important that in addition to the message that comes from the pulpit there be the gossiping of the gospel in our casual contacts and conversations with others as part of our lifestyle and Christian witness day by day.

And that is why Christian literature is so important and that is why Christian music in song and in drama acting out the gospel is of such importance. It is a message that needs to be heard. It's also a message that needs to be learned.

It's great to have our affections stirred. It's wonderful to see our will challenged so that we come to a decision. But more than that the word of the gospel is meant not only to stir our emotion and to challenge our will but to enlighten our mind.

Presbyterianism or the Reformed faith or Calvinism, whatever nickname you give it, has always at its best addressed itself not only to the feelings and to the will but especially to the mind. We are to love the Lord our God not only with our heart and soul and strength but with our mind. Our mind must be open to God's truth.

Our mind must be disciplined by God's truth. Our mind must be affected by God's truth. The message is not only something to be heard but also to be learned.

And more than learned it is to be understood. Well you say what's the difference between learning and understanding? When we learn the message of the Word of God we are able to quote and to paraphrase scripture. That's good.

But it's even better to understand what that scripture is saying so that we then can apply it to our lives as individuals and to our interpersonal relationships. It's important for us not only to know what the scriptures teach, we have to understand how they should influence and affect and change the way we live. To discern the meaning is one thing.

To see the significance for our daily life, that's something else. And that's going to take us from now until we see Jesus face-to-face. To know the meaning of scripture and to see its significance and to understand how it should affect our lives for the better.

And so they received the gospel. They heard it. They learned it.

They came to understand it. And so Paul speaks about the communication of the gospel and he speaks about the reception of the gospel. But notice this one thing more.

He goes on to speak of the transformation of the gospel. For the gospel is no sterile, static thing. It is dynamic and once we receive it, it sets about changing our whole chemistry.

How does Paul describe the transforming power of the gospel that has been presented and received? He does it with three simple terms. For example, he says that when the gospel comes to us, when the word of truth is lodged in the fertile soil of a believing heart, our faith will be awakened. He speaks of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christians in the days of the New Testament were not known as Lutherans or Baptists or Presbyterians or Anglicans or Pentecostals. Christians were known as believers. Why? Because in response to the word of God, faith had been created in their hearts and they were led to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

But what does it mean to be a believer? What does it mean to have faith? It means that we receive Jesus into our hearts. It means that we rely on him and on him alone as he is offered to us in the gospel for our salvation. It means that we renounce any idea of self-righteousness or personal merit and trust in him and in him alone for our salvation.

One of the things that the gospel does when it's received is to create faith in our hearts, faith that reaches out and lays hold of Jesus Christ and feels his saving power coming back to us in return. Part of the transformation of the gospel is that we move from doubt and disbelief to the certainty of saving faith. I know in whom I have believed.

The transformation performed by the gospel in a human personality does more than awaken faith. It arouses hope. The hope which is reserved for you in heaven, that inheritance which is incorruptible and undefiled, reserved beyond this world for you in heaven.

We may be discouraged, we may be depressed, we may be dispirited, but when the gospel strikes home it arouses in our hearts hope beyond this world, hope of being with Christ, hope of becoming like Christ, and we are lifted out of discouragement and out of despair when we turn from the sorry mess that we have made of this life and we look to that ultimate goal of conformity to Christ beyond all pain, beyond all suffering, beyond all sickness, beyond all sorrow, beyond all temptation, beyond all death, to be with him

in heaven. But someone might say, doesn't that encourage escapism, this idea of pie in the sky and glory by and by? Doesn't that encourage people to cop out on their present responsibilities? There are indeed some people who have used Bible prophecy in a most impractical way to evade and to escape in fanatical style from contemporary ethical responsibilities, but that's not the fault of Bible prophecy, that's the fault of those who pervert it. Down through history some of the greatest reforms that have ever been achieved in society have been reforms achieved by men and women who took seriously the Christian hope that beyond this world they were to be with Christ and like Christ.

Let me just cite two examples very briefly in passing. One of these was a man named William Wilberforce. He was appalled over the iniquity of the slave trade, so dehumanizing, so degrading, not only for those who were enslaved but for those who did the enslaving.

And one of the things that led William Wilberforce through a brilliant career in British Parliament and made it his crusade to abolish the slave trade was the hope that he had in his heart. He knew that someday he would see Jesus, and he knew that someday he would have to give an account to him of his career as a parliamentarian, and he knew that he could not stand before Jesus with a clear conscience if he had not done everything he could to sweep out the iniquity of the slave trade. His hope did not lead to escapism but to action.

Or what about that other man, the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury? In the early years of the 19th century, he became increasingly concerned over the way the children were robbed of their childhood and compelled to be exploited in the darkness of the minds. He became concerned over the way that women were dehumanized and made to work like beasts in pulling carts of coal in the bowels of the earth. He became concerned over the plight of the working man who was exploited by ruthless capitalism.

He became concerned over the plight of the mentally ill who were objects of curiosity and amusement and brutality. And he was a man who in Parliament championed all these causes and helped to bring about reform. And he was a man who had a heart full of hope.

On the outside of his envelopes he had stamped the verse from the book of Revelation, Even so come Lord Jesus. Hope of seeing Jesus. Hope that beyond this world there would be perfection.

Hope that someday he would have to render an account to his Lord, drove him to reform society in his own time. And when the gospel comes to us, it changes us and it leads us to put our faith in Jesus. It leads us to look at the world with hope that something good can happen and things can change for the better and the crooked can be made straight.

And it also animates love. Love which is related to the Holy Spirit. Love which is created in our hearts when we understand the grace of God.

The reason why we love in a world of indifference, hostility, and hatred, the reason why we love is because he first loved us. And so it is right and proper at the start of a new year we should gather around the Lord's table and remember in the broken bread the body of Jesus broken because he loved us and took our place. That at the start of another year we should partake of the cup symbolic of the blood that he shed and the life that he surrendered because he loved us.

And it's the love that he shows toward us that changes these cold, indifferent, hostile, hating hearts of ours into hearts of love for him and love for one another. And so instead of alienation and estrangement there is

forgiveness and forbearance and the bearing of one another's burdens and sympathy one for another and mutual encouragement and serving and sharing because of the transformation that the gospel brings. It not only awakens faith and arouses hope but animates love.

God grant that as we draw near to the Lord's table we may do so with faith in the crucified Jesus, with love for him who loved us and gave himself for us, and with the hope that doing this till he comes or calls us home we shall someday stand before his presence with exceeding great joy and enter by grace into his everlasting glory. Let us pray. Spirit of the Living God, awaken fresh faith in our hearts that we may trust in Jesus alone for our salvation.

Arouse within us the power of hope, hope that looks for the coming of the kingdom and hope that anticipates that kingdom by making the crooked straight here and now. Spirit of the God, create and sustain within us a new love, love for the Lord Jesus Christ, love for the household of faith, love for the world he came to save. In Jesus name we pray, amen.

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