

**<sup>3</sup>We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup>because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints— <sup>5</sup>the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup>that has come to you. 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. <sup>7</sup>You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, <sup>8</sup>and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.**

God's Word is Fruitful

1. It produces a harvest of love
2. It produces a harvest of souls

I'm holding in my hand a seed. It doesn't seem all that special, does it? It's small. It's not pretty, by any means.

But did you ever stop to consider just how amazing this seed is? By God's design, he's placed an incredible amount of power in this seed. This dry and dormant little thing, when you plant it and water it, has the power to sprout into a new plant, a living thing. It has the power to grow into something hundreds of times its size, the power to mature and bear fruit.

Did you ever stop to consider how amazing God's Word is? Like a seed, God's Word might not seem like much. It's just sounds and syllables that convey a message. And the message itself – that God became a man, Jesus, and suffered, died, and rose again to save you from sin – even seems foolish.

But Paul reminds us this morning that God has placed incredible power in that message. Planted in human hearts, it has the power to produce new spiritual life – a harvest of souls for God's kingdom. And it has the power to grow and mature in your life and produce a harvest of love.

*1. It produces a harvest of love*

Paul could see God's word doing that among the Colossians. From what the bible tells us, it seems like Paul never visited Colossae. He spent three years in Ephesus, a hundred miles down the road, but we're never told of a trip to Colossae. So how did the gospel get there in the first place? Paul tells the Colossians, **You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf.** Epaphras may have been a follower of Paul in Ephesus. He heard Paul preach the good news about Jesus, and then brought that gospel seed and sowed it in Colossae.

And what was the result? Well, listen to Paul's glowing report. **<sup>3</sup>We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup>because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints— <sup>5</sup>the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup>that has come to you.**

Did you catch how fruitful God's Word was among them? From the message of hope in the gospel, Paul says, **faith** and **love** sprang to life. Keep in mind the condition of their hearts before the gospel came to them. Paul describes that later in his letter. "You were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature," he said, "alienated from God and enemies...because of your evil behavior," in "the dominion of darkness."

But in that dry, sandy soil where nothing should grow, God's Word took root and produced saving trust in Jesus. Knowing their Savior, knowing the love God had shown them, they were reflecting that love in the way they lived their lives – showing **love for all the saints**, Paul said. This was the fruitful harvest of God's Word at work among them.

When you hear what Paul has to say to the Colossians here, what's your reaction? How do you respond? I think a good start is to do exactly what Paul is doing – to fall down on your knees and thank God. What he did for the Colossians, he's done for you. Just stop and think how wonderful that is. Out of the billions of people in this world, God, in his mercy, chose you, and planted his Word in your heart. He caused that Word to grow, and faith and love sprang up. Thank God he's done this for you and every other believer.

Then, stop for a second and examine your life. If Paul were writing this letter to you, would he be giving us the same glowing report he gave the Colossians? As a new creation, a new plant by the power of God's Word, take a look at your branches, and ask yourself: "How fruitful am I? Am I always producing the love that I should be?"

If we look honestly, we have to admit that there are some areas in our lives of Christian love that are lacking. Where are you lacking? Are you struggling with your love for God – placing him above yourself and everything else in your life? Or with your love for your neighbor? Is there someone you're holding a grudge against? Someone who wronged you, and you haven't forgiven yet? Are you having trouble loving your spouse the way God wants you to?

We've all fallen short of the expectations God has for us as his children. But if Paul were writing to you, I don't think his letter would be any different. Do you know why? Your faith is based on the same hope as the Colossians': **the hope stored up for you in heaven**, Paul says. This is your eternal salvation, isn't it? It's what Christ won for you by his suffering, death, and resurrection: A room in heaven, with your name on it. Jesus told us, "I am going there to prepare a place for you," and that's what he did.

This is a sure hope. That place in heaven is stored away safely for you there, because nothing can change what Christ has done for you. He lived a perfect life of love, toward God and his neighbor, and he did it in your place. He suffered and died for all of those times you haven't loved perfectly, and washed those sins away. He bought your room in heaven with his blood, and cleansed you with that same blood to make you ready for that place.

Until you get there, strive to be more fruitful. Use the law to prune off the dead branches, the sin in your life. Then go back to the fruitful power of the gospel, the sure hope we have in Christ, and God will make you grow in faith and in love.

## *II. It produces a harvest of souls*

Paul was zoomed in on the individual life of the believer – now he zooms out, and gives us the bigger picture. **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.**

What happened among the Colossians, Paul says, was happening all over the world: God's Word was fruitful. It was producing a harvest of souls. And he could say that with good reason. Just think of the incredible growth the early church experienced, the growth Paul saw firsthand on his journeys. That first Easter Sunday, there was only a handful of followers. Just thirty years later, Paul was writing letters to churches all over the Mediterranean. By 100 AD, as many as 500,000 believers were scattered across Africa, Europe, and Asia.

God gives us other examples of that in the Bible. You heard about Jonah in the first lesson this morning. God sent him to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, a city full of pagans. What was the result of God's Word there? "The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth." And what about Peter's sermon at Pentecost? 3,000 believed and were baptized in one day.

But what happens when the results aren't so obvious? You might have seen that Newsweek cover story a few months ago, "The Decline and Fall of Christian America." It told of the sharp drop in the number of Christians in the U.S. over the past 40 years. So is there something wrong with God's Word? Does it need to be tweaked to fit society, or to make it more effective? Maybe we should drop that pesky "close communion" thing, or that unpopular teaching about sin.

Absolutely not! Notice Paul's emphasis on "truth" here – **the word of truth, the gospel**, he says, and **God's grace in all its truth**. God's Word is perfect and true. Our methods can change, but the message can't.

Remember that the results – the harvest of souls – that's not our job. That's God's job. Isn't that the point of the parable in the gospel lesson this morning? The farmer sows the seed and, day or night, whether he sleeps or gets up, it sprouts and grows, though he doesn't know how. God simply says to us, "You do the work. You sow my word faithfully and truthfully. Leave the rest up to me." And trust that, even though the harvest may not be visible, the work isn't in vain. God's Word is always fruitful. That's what he promised: "My Word does not return to me empty," he said. "It accomplishes what I desire, and achieves the purpose for which I sent it."

When you pray, "Your kingdom come," you're asking God to live up to that promise: To send his Holy Spirit and work through his word to produce a harvest of souls, to bring people to faith and to strengthen you in yours. And since God has promised it, you already know what his answer is: "Yes! My kingdom comes, wherever my word is preached faithfully."

Someday soon, God's harvest of souls will be complete. The last sheaf of grain will ripen, and the sickle will fall. Christ will come again to bring all those souls into glory. Paul, the Colossians, you and I...we'll all be among them. That hope stored up for us in heaven – that Christ won for us, that we enjoy now by faith – will become a reality. Come quickly, Lord Jesus! Amen.