

Essential Signs of a Healthy Church

This morning we are beginning a study of Paul's letter to the Colossians so if you have your bible please turn with me to **Col. 1:1-14**. The Colossian church was a young church, and had that excitement and simple faith that new believers so often have. Paul himself had never been to Colossae, but indirectly it was through his ministry that they were brought to Christ because when he was preaching in Ephesus a man from Colossae named Epaphras came to faith and became a disciple of and co-worker with Paul eventually returning to Colossae where many were led to Christ and the church in Colossae was born.

These are exciting times for these young believers as they are learning what it means to follow Jesus and experience the grace of God at work in their midst. They're not a perfect church (that doesn't exist), and they have some issues they need to work through (as all churches do), but unlike his letters to the Corinthians or the Galatians, Paul isn't addressing some great dysfunction or dangerous heresy that is prevalent in the church. He's writing to encourage them to continue to grow in spiritual maturity so that they continue to be a spiritually healthy church.

I read an article last week titled *Seven Personality Types of Sick Churches*. Here are just a couple of types of unhealthy churches that exist (and we don't want to become any of these):

- The Deflector Church -in these churches you hear constant complaints about what others are doing wrong. It's the denomination's fault. It's the culture's fault. It's the young people's fault...etc.
- The Cool Kid Church- These churches are rarely viewed as sick. They are typically growing numerically, and often are seen as the cool church in town. But their growth is largely tied to a single ministry, or to a charismatic leader. When the charismatic leader or the hot ministry goes away, the church declines dramatically. This illness is particularly dangerous because of its superficial appearance of robust health.
- The Nostalgic Church- the church that lives in the past, wishing things were the way they were 30 years ago.
- The Street Fighter Church- these churches are downright mean. Their business meetings are more like a street fight.

The novel *Anna Karenina* opens with the words: *All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way*. That applies to churches too. There are many ways that a church can be unhealthy, but all healthy churches are alike at their core. I'm saying that there aren't differences or distinctions in healthy churches - there are. But there is one core ingredient, the one commonality between all healthy churches is this: Christ is central to everything it is and everything it does and everything it teaches. As the foundation of the church Christ undergirds everything the healthy church is, does, and teaches. As the Lord of the church, Christ is over everything the healthy church is, does, and teaches. As the heart of the church, Christ is central to everything the healthy church is, does, and teaches. So Jesus is under and over and central to the healthy church. In a word, Christ is preeminent in the healthy church. This letter hammers that point again and again: Christ is preeminent in all things. As we go through this wonderful letter, may the eyes of our hearts be opened to see the glory and exalted stature of the risen Lord, leading us to love and worship him. Let's read vv. 1-8.

Col. 1:1-8

As Paul opens this letter, he reminds them that he isn't an apostle of his own choosing, but by the will of God. So he is writing with the authority of a divinely chosen apostle and he's writing this with his good friend and son in the faith Timothy. Paul wasn't a lone ranger doing ministry on his own. He always had people around him that he was investing in and who were investing in his life.

We're not going to get to the third point for a couple weeks, but just so we can see the theme of this first chapter in regards to their spiritual health, the 1st chapter can be broken down this way:

- I. **Paul thanks God for the spiritual health of the Colossian church (vv. 1-8)**
- II. **Paul prays to God for them to grow in spiritual health (vv. 9-14)**
- III. **Paul works by God's grace for their increasing spiritual health (vv. 23-29)**

And in the middle, Paul has this amazing theologically rich, Christ-exalting poem declaring Christ's preeminence over all things. A healthy church is a church that loves to exalt Jesus. May we never get tired, church, of considering the glory of the risen Christ, what he has done to save us, and worshipping his name.

I. **Paul thanks God for the spiritual health of the Colossian church (vv. 1-8)**

Paul has heard about what God has done in Colosse and he thanks God for the evidences of the genuineness of God's work in them. There are three signs of health that you will always find in a church when Christ and the gospel are central to it: faith, love, and hope and we find those three things in verses 4-5:

*...since we heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus and of the **love** you have for all the saints, because of **hope** laid up for you in heaven.*

These three evidences of saving faith are also mentioned at the end of 1 Cor. 13 - ¹³ *So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

Paul goes on to say that when they heard the word of truth, the gospel, it came bearing fruit and growing. This isn't complicated - when the grace of God is truly understood and actively working in our lives, faith, love, and hope aren't just concepts that we adhere to in our head, they are qualities that are growing and being lived out in our lives.

If we want to know how healthy we are as a church or in our individual Christian walk, these are the vital signs to check, so to speak. If you were to get a thorough exam, would the doctor find a vital, living, active faith in Christ? Is your faith limber and being exercised every day, or has it grown old and brittle? Faith in Christ isn't something we did when we prayed a prayer so many years ago. It began then - it began when God opened our hearts to believe in Christ, but faith in Christ is an ongoing, everyday adventure that keeps us believing in and trusting and leaning on the grace of our Lord Jesus.

For those of us who have been believers longer, one of the things we need to watch out for is the hardening of the arteries of faith. Where we get so mature and so wise in our Christian walk that we never flex our faith muscles and after a while they begin to atrophy. Maturity in Christ is good and it helps us to avoid doing dumb things in the name of faith, but you know what? It's probably better to do a dumb thing or two every once in a while and have a vital, fresh faith than to have our faith become calcified. If I

were to ask you, when was the last time you stepped out in faith and did something that didn't make total sense because you felt the Lord leading you to do it, if the answer takes you back to the days when Bill Clinton was president and Carmen was topping the Christian music charts, it might be time to work those faith muscles again! If you don't know who Carmen is, google him. The point is when we understand the grace of God in truth, faith in Christ is active and growing in our heart and lives.

The next vital sign that is going to be checked in a spiritual health exam is our love for one another. If we are really getting the truth in this book, we're not going to be a mean-spirited, judgmental, and unloving church. Street Fighter churches are missing the heart of Jesus! If we're getting this in a spiritually healthy and mature way, there will be a growing love and kindness towards one another and others.

When I was in school we always loved it when a test turned out to be a take home exam. We always felt like we were pulling one over on the teacher: *hey! don't tell anyone, but I'm going to look up the answers when I get home.* That was kind of the point. But if we want to test our spiritual maturity and health in Christ, it needs to be a take home exam. Our maturity in Christ isn't measured by how much we know about the Bible in our heads, it's how we live it out at home. As someone once said, "if it ain't working at home, don't export it!" Do those closest to us see us as a loving person? Do they see and feel and experience the love of Christ in us? Are we growing in love for one another right here in our own church family? Our isn't to be limited to those closest to us, but those who know us best will be in the best position to see if it's real or just a show we put on to impress people. The love of Christ should begin with those closest to us and then emanate outward, even Jesus says, to those who are our enemies.

So there is faith in Christ, love for one another, and these things spring from our hope that is laid up for us in heaven. As I've often said, biblical hope isn't a "maybe it will happen, maybe it won't" kind of thing. It's a certainty that just hasn't happened yet. If you are truly a Christian, truly trusting in Jesus Christ as your Savior, and have been made alive by His Spirit, then you are on your way to heaven right now. It's a certainty and only a matter of time. No matter how hard things get, no matter how dark the days might get, you are on your way to heaven. When you pass from this life to the next, an eternity of glory and joy and wonder such as you cannot imagine await you! Jesus saved you and one day very soon He will welcome you into his eternal kingdom and you will be home! That hope should thrill our hearts every day!

If you're like me and sometimes you find your faith, love, and hope wearing thin, I don't want you to leave here thinking "I need to try harder. I need to believe more, love more, and hope more! Or else I'm not a healthy Christian!" That will just add a burden on you that you will never be able to lift. This is not the work of the Colossians, this is the evidence of God's grace at work in them:

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^[c] behalf ⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. vv. 5-8

It is God's grace working in them. Yes, God used a human instrument, Epaphras, to lead them to Christ, but it is God's power at work in them. Look at verse 8: *has made known to us your love in the Spirit.* We don't need to try harder, at least not in our flesh, we need more of God's power working in us and through us producing what only God could produce in us.

Someone kindly sent me a devotional book this week by Max Lucado and I began reading the first pages and Lucado opens it up by telling about a family vacation by a lake where he watched his daughter as she took a parasail ride, being pulled by a speedboat. As she soared several hundred feet above the lake, he saw in that a picture of grace:

*Speeding around the lake, high above the clamor below, the passenger hangs on and enjoys the view, letting the boat do the work. What choice does he or she have? To reach such heights help is needed. To maintain such heights, power is mandated. No person can self-elevate to such a level.*¹

Paul knows that very well, which is why after he thanks God for His grace at work in the Colossians, he then prays that God will continue and increase that work.

II. Paul prays to God for them to grow in spiritual health (vv. 9-14)

Read vv. 9 - Let's stop for a moment. Notice that what he prays for isn't some abstract form of God's power, or a feeling produced by power. He prays that the power of God fills them with a deeper knowledge of God's will leading to a deeper and truer degree of spiritual wisdom and understanding. That seems kind of boring! I mean, if you're gonna pray for an explosion of power pray that people shake or convulse or at least get tingly feelings all over! He prays that they think better. That their understanding of God's will is expanded. For Paul, the power of God's grace wasn't primarily measured by sensational things happening *to* people, but by the sensational things happening *in* them. Knowing God's will, having a more biblical understanding of the world around us, reacting and responding to life with a wisdom that reflects God's perspective on things. But not wisdom and understanding that just remains stuffy concepts in our minds that we can use to win theological debates with, but spiritual wisdom and understanding that is worked out in how we live. Let's read Col. Vv. 10-11

Let's keep it simple: God fills us with spiritual wisdom and understanding so that we can *walk* and *work*. So that we walk in a manner worthy of the gospel and that pleases God's heart. Did you know that it's possible for you to bring pleasure to God's heart? And you don't have to be perfect to do it. Janice went down to Florida yesterday to spend several weeks with my daughter Jennifer and son in law Jordan, and our 7 month old grandson Asher. Asher doesn't need to do much to bring pleasure to his grandmother's heart. He doesn't need to run a 5 minute mile, he can't even walk. He doesn't need to quote Shakespeare or the Pythagorean Theorem to grandma, he can't even talk. All he has to do is gurgle a little bit and wave his arms wildly about and flash a smile and his grandmother's heart overflows with joy.

Your heavenly Father loves you that much and more. Nothing can change that, but when you or I walk in a manner worthy of the gospel, according to our own level of spiritual maturity, it pleases God's heart. If you're a new believer and you're gurgling and waving your arms around, it pleases the Father's heart so much! If you've been a Christian for 20 years and you're still gurgling and flapping your arms around then it might be a bit concerning to God. Empowered by grace, walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. And that leads to good works. We aren't saved by good works, but we are definitely saved for good works. And there it is again, increasing in the knowledge of God. Do you know Christ better today than you did five years ago? One year ago? The danger we all face is spiritual stagnation - be honest and ask God to fill you and empower you so that you can soar higher and not be stuck at one level.

¹ Lucado, Max, *In the Grip of Grace*, pg. xxi

As we finish up, Paul prays that we are strengthened with all power by God's might, but again, it's kind of unexciting and glamorous what he sees this power accomplishing. That we might have "all endurance and patience with joy." That's it? God strengthens us with all power so that...we have endurance and patience? Can you imagine advertising a miracle service that way? Come see the power of God do amazing things: see people have endurance. Watch as feats of patience are performed! But again, we see God's power not aimed at doing sensational things to His people, but doing sensational things in His people.

Those two words endurance and patience are interesting words. Endurance speaks of being able to tough it out in hard circumstances, and patience speaks of being able to tough it out with difficult people. Are you in a hard circumstance? The power to bear up is God's power at work in you. Has God put difficult people in your life (don't shout out any names!)? To love a difficult person is evidence of God's power at work in you. God gives us the power to deal with difficult trials and difficult people in a way that is worthy of the Lord Jesus Christ.

All the while, never losing sight of the hope that is laid up for us in heaven, giving thanks because God has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. By his atoning death, Jesus has made us qualified (there was nothing we could do to qualify ourselves) to be transferred from Satan's kingdom to Jesus' kingdom, redeemed back to God and forgiven of all our sins.

Call band up

The point of this book is to help us soar in Christ. To be healthy, not sickly in our faith. And to know and live in the hope that we will spend eternity in heaven. Forever and ever. In God's presence. In Jesus' kingdom. What is that kingdom like? What do the buildings look like? Are the streets made of gold? What will the atmosphere of heaven, made of sheer love and joy, be like? What will the light look like, powered by God's brilliant glory? What will we look like when we are glorified? And what will we care about the brief little trials we endured in this brief span of time on earth when it's over, God wipes every tear from our face, and an eternity of joy lies before us?

This is God's grace in truth at work in us. Let's make it our aim to grow spiritually healthier and more mature as we go through this book for our great joy and God's great glory.