

THE ABOUNDING JOY OF NEW TESTAMENT HOPE - Part nine

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THE FRUIT OF HOPE - LOVE

Colossians 1:3-8 - “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. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf [8] and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.”

Last week we started to look at some of the *fruit of Biblical hope*. What are the things hope *produces* in our lives as we set out hearts on the future promise of goodness and grace through the accomplishment of Jesus Christ and His work on the cross?

The first fruit we looked at last Sunday was *joy*. Paul says we live life “*rejoicing in hope*”(Romans 12:12). And this joy is not extinguished by earthly trials and difficulties. Rather, it’s deepened and made more precious by them. We appreciate the hope we have in Christ *more* as the thrills of this passing life are diminished. The *counterfeits* of hope serve to deepen the value of the *authentic* hope we have in Christ Jesus. When counterfeits abound, the gold standard is seen as truly precious.

This week we look at another fruit of hope - *love*. And it’s important to look at this fruit for a very good reason. Someone may say that this *joy rooted in hope* is so future oriented that it is no earthly good. People will get so wrapped up in the future they have in another world that they will have no interest in the pressing needs of this age and the hurts of humanity around them. You’ve heard it a thousand times: “You Christians are so heavenly minded you’re no earthly good.”

But this is not the kingdom life described in the New Testament. Hope that produces *only* joy is escapism. It has its head in the sand. It turns people into *dreamers* rather than *doers*.

Today’s teaching is intended to show from the Scriptures that, not only is this criticism not true, but it is the exact *opposite* of the truth. It is not *heavenly mindedness* that keeps people from actively engaging in the world around them. It is *earthly mindedness* and *earthly passions* that dull the call to minister truly and passionately to this needy world.

So the point I want to prove from today’s message is this. *Heavenly hope produces a flow of self-giving love for the needs of others*. Kingdom minded, heavenly hope, so secures our lives that we are free to risk all in the service of Christ. We have no fear of ultimate loss. Earthly mindedness produces selfishness, fear of failure, regret, despair and love of position and power. I repeat, it is not *heavenly hope* that binds the hands of love. It is *earthly mindedness* that destroys the foundation of loving activity in this world.

Let’s look at the text to see if this all fits together: I see three truths that are served in this text:

1) THESE PEOPLE IN COLOSSE WERE MARKED BY AN OUTSTANDING MEASURE OF OBSERVABLE LOVE

Colossians 1:4 - “...we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints....”

As Paul sits and writes these words from a Roman prison, *Epaphras* comes and brings him word of the remarkable love these Christians in Colosse have one for another. In other words, *their love was newsworthy*. It was noticeable. You don’t notice people’s *feelings*. You notice their *actions*.

What caused Paul to rejoice so much for them was the fact that he was absolutely certain the evangelistic efforts in Colosse had resulted in conversions that were genuine. And he knew this because of the flow of love that issued from their experience of saving faith and their gospel hope in Christ.

Let me say clearly that you have every reason to question your salvation if you allow yourself to live in a state of perpetual ill-will toward the saints. I know that’s a strong statement, and I wouldn’t make it if I wasn’t sure I could back it up with the teaching of Scripture:

1 John 2:9-11 - “Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. [10] Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. [11] But whoever hates his

brother ***is in the darkness and walks in the darkness***, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”

1 John 3:10 “By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, ***nor is the one who does not love his brother.***”

1 John 3:14-15 - “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. [15] ***Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.***”

1 John 4:20 - “***If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.***”

All of those passages talk about a **professed** relationship with God and then **contrast that profession with reality**. In each verse the person thinks he is a Christian. He professes to be part of the **brethren**. That word, “brother” is even used by John in each verse. But if I hate my brother (and I’ll usually deny this fact and find some other motive for my distance from my brother **other** than hatred) - if I hate my brother I’m **not** part of the brethren. I’m deceiving myself. I’m living a lie.

This person **claims** to love God (**1 John 4:20**). But he doesn’t really love God at all. He might **think** he loves God. But John says he doesn’t. In fact, John says more than that. John says he **can’t** love God. Love for God is a moral and spiritual **impossibility** in such a heart.

So I learn that love for God isn’t something I have the power to turn on and off. I may be able to work up some **feelings** or some **emotional state**, perhaps even **tears**, that make me imagine I love God. But, says John, if I hate my brother I simply don’t have the **capacity** to truly love God at all.

Imagine a person, attending church, singing, playing, teaching and worshipping. He’s trying somehow to strike up a feeling of devotion and passion for God. He knows he **should** love God. He **wants** to love God. But no matter how hard he tries, no matter how many altars he visits, no matter how hard he weeps, God seems removed and distant. **He can’t make himself spiritually warm inside**. He just can’t “**keep himself in the love of God.**”

John would come to all who feel that way today and say, “Look to your relationship with others who are in Christ. This is where most people poke their spiritual eyes out because this is one sin we can most easily justify.”

All of that to say, no wonder Paul was so pleased with this church. No wonder he lifts his voice to God in praise for the proof of a genuine work of grace so powerfully at work in their midst. Their love wasn’t pretend and it wasn’t secret. It was demonstrated for all to see.

2) **THE LOVE DEMONSTRATED BY THE CHURCH AT COLOSSE WASN’T A PRODUCT OF NATURAL HUMAN EFFORT**

This too, seems to be an inevitable conclusion from the words of Paul:

Colossians 1:7-8 - “....just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf [8] and has made known to us ***your love in the Spirit.***”

To say it another way, this is a love that came from their being linked together in the Holy Spirit. Or better still, this love was birthed and carried along by the **Holy Spirit in them**. This seems obvious when you look at the way Paul prays in **verses 3 and 4** - “***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....***”

If this love had just been an invention and product of the Colossians, Paul would have thanked **them**. But since the love is a product of the Spirit at work in them, he thanks **God**. In other words, Paul doesn’t thank God merely as an **exclamation point** - “Thank God you made it home through that storm!” No. Paul literally turns his thanksgiving in God’s direction because he recognizes God as the **source** of the love they were demonstrating.

So just as the **joy** that we looked at last week wasn’t produced or maintained merely by the exercise of human will, so this **love** is something that lies beyond our own abilities to manufacture. It has unique elements to it that go far beyond the kind of affection we can find outside of Christ.

Now, people **do** love each other outside of Christ. This world is capable of earnest love - and sometimes great sacrifice - apart from any relationship with Jesus at all. So what makes this love produced by the Holy Spirit any different? In other words, how is **spiritual love** different from **natural love**?

First, remember that whenever the Bible says something is **spiritual**, it isn't using it in an "**Oprah**" fashion. It isn't describing our **inner wonderful self** or the **glow of human potential**. When the New Testament says something is **spiritual** it means **two things**. **First**, whatever is being described is **produced** by the Holy Spirit. And **second**, whatever is being described has the **character** of the Holy Spirit.

So how is spiritual love different from natural love? The love produced in our hearts by the Holy Spirit is **love dedicated to the glory of God**. Earthly love is, at **worst**, exercised for attention and **pride or possessiveness**. And at **best** it's motivated by **human benevolence**. This is what we mean when we call it "**the milk of human kindness**."

And human kindness is a wonderful thing. It is part of God's common grace to this fallen planet. But it is not the unique possession of Christians. Atheists can be very kind and giving.

Love prompted and given by the Holy Spirit has certain distinct qualities to it: First, **it is rooted in faith in Jesus Christ** - "**....since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints....**"(1:4).

Second, **like all truly spiritual actions, its primary motive is the glory of God**. It **is** concerned about human need and the **meeting** of human need. But even those concerns are **the fruit of something else**. The dominating motive is that God will receive glory in the obedience and sacrifice of His children - **Matthew 5:16** - "**In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**"

Now the problem here is that sinful people do not normally do **anything** primarily for the glory of God. We can't work that motive up in our hearts. That's why it takes the inward, renewing work of the Holy Spirit to produce that love - **the fruit of the Spirit** - in our hearts and minds. And that's why Paul thanked **God** for this grace in the Colossians.

So, we've seen that spiritual love is a **visible expression of love to Jesus**. Without that kind of practical love being evidenced in my life, it's impossible to express love for God at all. I'm deceiving myself about my spiritual state. And we've seen that this kind of love is unique, different from love on a merely earthly level. Only the Holy Spirit can produce spiritual love.

And all of this leads to the final, and central point of this message:

3) **SPIRITUAL LOVE IS A FRUIT GROWING OUT OF THE ROOT OF BIBLICAL HOPE**

Again, this connection is too clear to be of chance. Trace your finger under each of these telling words to make your eyes see them with care: **Colossians 1:4-5** - "**....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...."

Verse 5 **explains** verse 4. Verse 5 gives the **reason** for verse 4. That's what that word "**because**" means. The **reason** they have such love for all the saints is they were vice-gripped by the hope of heaven.

There is only one thing that will satisfy the person who has his or her heart set on heaven. A person who **hopes** for heaven will be **doing the works of heaven**.

Listen to these great words by **John Piper**: "**It is not the chords of heaven that bind the hands of love. It is the chords of leisure, pleasure, money, comfort and human praise. And the only power to sever these chords is a strong Christian hope. Find me the person whose heart is so passionately in love with the promised glory of heaven that he feels like an exile and a sojourner on the earth.**"

"Find me the person who has so tasted the beauty of the age to come that the diamonds of the world look like baubles, that the entertainment of the world has become empty and trite, and the moral causes of the world are too small because they have no view of eternity in them. Find me that person and I'll show you a person free to love as Christ loved."

It's easy to see the proof that hope fuels love right from the New Testament. Let me show you some examples.

Hebrews 10:32-34 - "But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, [33] sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. [34] For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one."

The situation was this. Some of the Christians had been hauled off and put into prison. As hard as it was for them, it also caused a real *moral dilemma* for those Christians who were left free. They faced the choice of **going underground and saving themselves** or **going to visit their brothers in prison, risking loss of life and possessions.**

Verse 34 tells us *what* they did. But far more important to our teaching today, it also tells us *why* they did what they did - "For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one."

There it is - **love fuelled by hope**. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. Christ gets the glory because it was their **hope in Christ** that drove them to the prison's door. Or, to put it a bit more strongly, it was the promise of a **Christ-filled lasting hope** that **broke the power of worldly love for furniture, chairs, houses, security and caused them to risk their lives in hope!**

Let me give you one more illustration: **Hebrews 11:24-26** - "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, [25] choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. [26] He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward."

Notice that last phrase. Moses was **looking to the reward**. That is really striking. The very thing critics would say **numbs** the life out of loving action in this world is specifically listed as the **source** of Moses' love. Moses wasn't **ignoring** reward for his actions. Moses' love was so rugged and tough he endured "**mistreatment**"(25) and personal "**reproach**"(26). And he kept on giving and sacrificing and loving because of his **Christ-filled hope!**

Do you see what's happening in these examples? **Biblical hope changes values**. Are your **hopes** converted? Moses' hope put him out of step with the world around him. I mean, who in his right mind chooses **ill-treatment over riches, comfort, power and fame?**

Where does the power come from to love a bunch of grumbling whiners and eat dust as you wander through the wilderness for much of your adult life? That kind of self-giving love only comes from one source. You have to have your eyes set on a different country and a different reward.

So where does this leave us? Is there anything we can do to increase the power of hope for eternity and love for those around us? Or is it just a matter of hoping that Holy Spirit will give me this love when He's good and ready? I think there are two verses that show us the way home here:

Colossians 3:1-2 - "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. [2] Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."

Heavenly realities don't **come** to you. You must **go after them**. That's what that word, "**seek**" means. Here's the key. Both the **positive** and **negative** sides of these verses must be obeyed. I must consciously and prayerfully, **transfer my affections** off the things of this earth and place them on the hope I have in heaven. Through the new birth - through faith in Jesus Christ - my heart has been "**raised with Christ**"(1). That means God's Spirit has been joined to my own.

And that means there is a capacity to **cooperate** with the Spirit that wasn't there before I was born again. I am called to willing **involvement** in the **movement** - the **transferring** - of my affections and ambitions. Paul says I must "**seek those things that are above**"(1). I must **diet** my life around the hope of glory. Remember, I can't make the wind blow. But I can put up the sail!