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Time for a Makeover? – Colossians 1:1-14

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Colossians is not a “book” – it’s a letter. We used to call them “Epistles” until people forgot what an “epistle” was: a letter. The letters of the New Testament are much different than the Gospels: they aren’t narratives, telling about events to a universal audience, but are teaching tools, giving instruction and guidance – initially, at least, to a single group or person.

Just as letters have a particular form today, there is a form to the letters Paul sent. First, he told who was sending this letter – Paul and in this case, Timothy; then who he was sending it to – the church at Colossae; then some elaborate (to us) greetings; then on to his subject. He probably dictated it to a scribe (or drafted it in his big, scrawly hand and had it copied) and had it carried to Colossae by a fellow Christian going that way, where it was and read to the congregation. It was then copied some more (by hand, of course) and those copies spread with the growth of Christianity.

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I walked us through this passage because just reading it is sort of like looking into a clothes dryer while it’s running: the words and ideas

and images tumble all over themselves, and it's worth taking some time to sort them out: Paul designed a careful order to this. Then, we'll look at the window into Paul's prayer life this passage gives, and what we see means for you and me.

Paul's greeting contains two sets of three examples. In the first set, he and Timothy give thanks in prayer for the Colossians'

- 1) "Faith in Christ Jesus and love for all God's people;"
- 2) The results of that faith and love since "the day you first heard and truly believed God's grace;" and
- 3) Their "love in the Spirit."

Because of these wonderful things, Paul and Timothy "haven't stopped praying for" them, their prayers asking that the Colossian Christians "be filled with wisdom and spiritual understanding."

Why? Very simply, so that their lives are worthy of and pleasing to God. And he gives three examples again to explain how their lives will be worthy of and pleasing to God:

- 1) By producing good works and knowledge of God;
- 2) By being strengthened by God to endure and be patient; and
- 2) By giving thanks, just as Paul and Timothy are doing in prayer for them.

Finally, Paul tells them that all this is possible because God set us free through Jesus Christ, forgiving our sins – actually brought us into God’s family. The same is true for us today. A lot in a greeting!

For us, this is much more than a greeting to those believers long ago. Paul is teaching us about prayer, by example.

There’s a regional saying, “to make over,” meaning to make a fuss over someone or something – in a positive way. It’s a way of overlooking faults in something or someone in favor of what really *is* great – often exaggerated, just a touch.

The rest of us are familiar with another form of “makeover,” which has to do with actually changing a person’s appearance or rebuilding a structure to take better advantage of good features.

Now, “making over” has to do with imagination and perspective: like admiring a beautiful view while ignoring the power lines. A “makeover” has to do with actual change. One’s in the mind, the present; the other’s reality, the result of change. Paul starts out emphasizing the Colossians best qualities, making over them – in fact, making over their makeover, the growth and progress that they’ve made since they heard and believed in Christ.

In truth, while I could easy make over this church’s wonderful qualities, we all could stand with a makeover. That’s what Paul calls growth, both noting it *in* and asking it *for* the Colossians.

It's in his makeover greeting that Paul gives us a great place to start our makeover: our prayer. Paul mentions prayer work twice, just before each of the sets of three examples: first, his prayers of thanksgiving for the Colossians, and then that he and Timothy "haven't stopped praying for" these young Christians' growth.

Continual prayer. The bookmarks the Mission Committee is handing out today quote another of the several places Paul talks about always praying: "Pray without ceasing." That sounds great; but how many of us actually do it? Is this "continual prayer" just hyperbole?

Paul leads by example. He says: "We *always* give thanks to God when we pray for you," prayer which is continuous: he says "we *haven't stopped* praying for you." He means what he says: pray without stopping. Yet he was a very busy person. So how do we do this?

Ever have someone say, "I'm praying for you!" Of course you have. Too often, that's just a way of expressing concern. There's a cartoon that shows a guy greeting at the door of a church. He sees Tom coming in. "There's Tom," he thinks. "Oops, I told him I was going to pray for him! Lord, please help Tom. Amen. Whew." Then he steps up, puts out his hand and says, "Hi there, Tom! Been praying for you!" Paul means more than this, certainly.

We think of prayer, I suspect, as an exercise in words, in language, like the prayers we say in worship or use to start and end meetings or

grace over meals. But there must be more to prayer than words – Jesus himself pointed out the so-called “holy” people who stood in public and piled up phrases, and how little that pleased God.

Prayer, we say, is communicating with God. And God wants us to do that – not for God’s sake, but for ours and – as Paul points out here – for the love of all God’s people. Prayer *should* be easy; it’s built into our souls. But try and get someone to pray: for something natural and easy, prayer is hard. Prayer is exercise. Prayer is abandoning ourselves in God’s presence. Prayer is intense. Prayer is release and relaxation. Prayer should be cautious and considered. Prayer should be spontaneous. Prayer is, well, complicated!

Or, maybe, prayer is many things, takes many forms, like letters, like books. We see prayer as an intellectual activity, stringing together words and thoughts. Sometimes it is, but not always; certainly not for Paul, who writes in other places about praying in “groans too deep for words.” So here’s the makeover part – here, in this passage, Paul’s encouraging us by example to think of prayer not so much as brain activity as a work of the heart. A continual work of the heart.

If continuous prayer is churning out unending streams of thought, well, that’s impossible. There are other approaches: If you watched Nik Wallenda walk across the Grand Canyon on a high wire a few weeks ago, you heard him saying “Thank you, Jesus” nearly every step of the

way. But even that was focused on his (incredible) task at hand – walking a two-inch cable fifteen hundred feet above the ground; he wasn't bringing in the totality of the people he knew and cared about, the full range of his acquaintance and concern. And it stopped when he finished his walk. So what else could Paul be referring to?

There's an ancient form of prayer that I've sometimes practiced that uses something called the "Jesus Prayer:" "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This is first spoken repeatedly, then internalized, so that it becomes a continual background, a part of one's self. Much like driving a car: at first, you think about every little touch of the steering wheel, but as you get more experience, those tiny corrections become intuitive. It *is* continuous, though not always or even usually conscious. But the prayer itself is solely about an individual's relationship with God.

So even that's not what Paul means; his prayer must include all the people of God. And he's not talking about prayer vigils where people take turns eating and sleeping and keeping up a non-stop one-way conversation with God, either. He's talking about prayer that is lived out in relationship with other human beings here – belief (faith) and activity (love and good works) are inseparably linked. That can come only from the heart, which the ancient Hebrews understood to be the center of our being – emotion, will, faith – and in this way, prayer is not just interesting words, thoughts, or images. It's life as prayer – faith as

part of our daily activity. This sort of prayer changes us and draws us closer to God, building up that “wisdom and spiritual understanding.”

This sort of prayer is the Spirit’s active working in us. This is prayer without ceasing; not only petition and thanksgiving, but living through Christ and the Spirit, as individuals, in connection within the church, and with all believers in the mystical communion of saints: bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God and the Kingdom together.

It is a connection based in the heart. When we root our prayer in the heart, which includes thought and will and faith and love, *even memory*, then all who have entered our experience, whether we actually know them or not, are brought into God’s presence at the center of our souls, by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is prayer that includes all the other ways we’ve looked at, a way of prayer in which we are bound together, and can pray without ceasing for and with every other believer: by striving to live a life of faith, love, patience, and good works.

And all of this is possible because God chose to make it so – by setting us free in the Spirit through Christ through forgiveness. This isn’t a technique or a routine (which makes it hard to describe) – though it includes both; prayer without ceasing is, quite simply, living your faith in all of who you are and what you do, which the Spirit uses to draw us –

all of us - together. It is a makeover, a changing of how we are, in the light of Christ. Thanks be to God!

Oh, and by the way, I'm praying for you...