

Good morning! We have finished our series on the seven churches in Revelation and are now starting the book of Colossians which we will work through the rest of the summer.

Since we are starting cold in a new book, it's always helpful to give some context. Paul has never been to visit the church in Colosse as far as we can tell. Likely, a man named Epaphras started the church. Most people think that Epaphras was converted by Paul when Paul was in Ephesus, not far away, starting a church there. So Epaphras went home to Colosse and planted that church. Apparently, now there is some sort of bad doctrine creeping in and Epaphras needs help. There is some debate on what exactly this doctrine is. Some people think it's more Jewish in nature and some think it is more pagan in nature. I don't think we have enough information to know for sure, but we do know one thing. Whoever these bad influences are, they were telling the Christians in Colosse that Jesus wasn't enough. Whether they are adding circumcision, angel worship, mysticism or some other tradition doesn't really matter. At the end of the day they are saying, "Jesus isn't enough."

So, Epaphras takes this news to Paul who is in prison at this point (likely in Rome), tells Paul what is going on and Paul sends him back with this letter. This letter that not only says that Jesus is enough, but that Jesus is everything.

So in our text today, we have what our uninspired paragraph titles call Paul's thanksgiving and prayer. It's easy when we read our Bibles to just skip over this part of the letter thinking that Paul is just working his way through some obligatory opening before he gets to the meat of the letter. But that isn't at all what is going on. Paul is deliberate from the very start. From the start he is telling them that they are on the right track. That they don't need to add anything to their faith. So what was it that Paul saw? What gave him confidence in the direction of this young church?

Let me ask the same question a different way. What is the primary mark of a maturing Christian? Not a perfect Christian, because there is no such thing. A maturing Christian. The mark that someone has everything they need for their faith to flourish? Love. They are growing visibly in love. This is what Paul sees! This is why he says in verse 8: **He (Epaphras) is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.**

He doesn't say, "Epaphras has told us about your Bible memory." Or, "Epaphras has told us about your good church attendance." Or even, "Epaphras has told us about how many times you have shared your faith." All these may fall under the umbrella of a maturing Christian, but we have to know that the umbrella itself is love.

Love in the Spirit. And if there is a more confusing word out there than love, I don't know it. You can love food and your children in the same sentence. Over here you can have a man married to woman for 50 years saying he loves here and over here you can have a college guy saying he loves a girl he hasn't even been on a date with. How can that be the same thing? Then you have the marriage debate. Same sex marriage activist have

whole campaigns with slogans like “Love Wins” or “On The Side of Love.” How is that love different than Christian love?

So we need to do two things. First define this very versatile word ‘love,’ then identify what it is that Paul sees in this church that different than the love we see everyday.

So, I am going to use Voddie Bauchum’s definition of love that I think can be applied to all these situations. Love is an act of the will (so it’s a choice) accompanied by emotion (not led by emotion) that leads to action on behalf of its object. x2.

That’s how I’m defining love. But certainly you don’t need to be a Christian to be able to love something or someone. What is different about this ‘love in the Spirit’ that Paul is so thankful for?

Natural love has limits. We have have different limits because we were all wired differently and had different upbringings. That gives us different capacities to love. But natural love has limits. We all have wells from which we draw buckets of love and those wells have limits.

But love in the Spirit is different because it is supernatural. It comes from somewhere beyond nature and goes way beyond our natural limits. This is the defining mark of a maturing Christian and this is why Paul is so encouraged and thankful.

So I want to look at this kind of love. Supernatural love, and answer two questions: 1) where it comes from and 2) what it produces. So we will look at the sources of supernatural love and the signs it is in your life.

I. Sources of Supernatural Love

Where does this supernatural kind of love come from? It comes from looking backward and looking forward at the same time.

First, looking backward. Look at verses 3, 4 and part of 5:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus....Of this you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you...

Supernatural love is only produced by first looking back at the gospel. Another way to say this is by putting your faith in what Jesus *did*. They heard the word of truth, the gospel, and they put their faith in Jesus..in what he did.

It’s different for all of us, but there was a point for all of us if we are believers that Jesus going to the cross in our place ceased to be a piece of history to be studied and began to have relevance in our lives today. I have been at Grace for five years this summer and I don’t think I have ever talked up here about the moment this became true for me. It was my last year at Florida State. My plan at that time was to be Governor of the state

of FL. I think I told you a few weeks ago that optimism has never been hard for me to find:) I remember looking at my resume as a senior and seeing everything I needed on that resume to launch me in to that world. But as I stared at it, it didn't satisfy me. And the fact that it didn't satisfy me began to frustrate me.

I was realizing that I wanted that resume to do something for me that it couldn't. I wanted that resume to make me feel better about all my flaws, all my shortcomings...all my sin. But that resume could never do that. So, I began to pray. I told God that I didn't have faith and I didn't have joy and I was open to the idea that those two things went together. A very short time later a guy with Cru walked up to my fraternity house (he was actually an Ole Miss grad), took me to lunch and shared the gospel with me. And then, for the first time what I had always heard that Jesus had done over 2000 years ago began to matter to me. I was flawed. I was right in thinking I needed something to cover over my sin. I was wrong in thinking that my resume or any future career could ever do that. But Jesus could! That day a huge weight was lifted and ironically, I found more satisfaction out of my resume after that because I wasn't asking more of it than it could give me.

Do you see what looking back at the gospel did? It gave me a new way to love my resume and career. An appropriate way. Now, that's just a resume, but what happens when you apply this to marriage? What if you are looking to your spouse to cover over your shortcomings? To give you joy and peace and security that sin has robbed you of? Your spouse will never be able to do that because your spouse is not your savior. So your spouse will begin to let you down and frustrate you. But....when you see that Jesus is your Savior and can cover over your sin, then you are freed up to love your spouse without heaping unrealistic expectations on them.

Do you see what just happened? In that moment, your ability to love your spouse just went from the natural realm to the supernatural. The well you draw love from just got deeper.

Let's look at it from a different angle. One aspect of loving is forgiving. We all have limits on our ability to forgive. The wells we draw from have bottoms. And when we hit the bottom of our well, we begin to be distorted in a way.

Here's an example. If you can't forgive your parents for something they did to you, it distorts you. It twists you. It distorts your whole attitude toward authority and may distort quite a bit of your relationship with your children. Or, if you can't forgive the person who broke up with you, it's going to affect your entire relationship with the opposite sex. Hitting the bottom of our well distorts the way we see things.

Think about it this way. A cartoonist, if they really want to make you look stupid, creates caricatures. And if they don't like you, they just take something about your facet that's a little weird, maybe your eyes are a little bit too close together or too far apart, maybe your chin is a little big or your ears are on the small side. They take that thing and they exaggerate it. They take the thing that is a little wrong about you and they make it so big

that no one can ignore it and they make you look stupid. That's exactly what your heart does automatically when someone wrongs you and hit the bottom of your well of love to forgive.

You now think of them only in terms of the one thing they did to wrong you. If they lied, they are a liar. When you lie, that's different though because you're complex. Their were extenuating circumstances when you lied. There's grace for you, but not them. Do see what's happening? You are distorting them.

But when we look back at what Jesus did, everything changes. When we realized that we have wronged God more than anyone on this planet could possibly wrong us, that we have a debt to pay so big that nothing short of an eternity in hell will do, when we realize that and see that Jesus paid *that* debt for us on the cross, the result is supernatural love. Our well gets deeper. It gets deeper because it's easier to forgive when we have been forgiven more. It's hard to be upset about the \$100 owed you when someone has just canceled a \$10,000 debt of yours.

Or what about loving needy people? We all have bottoms to that well. Do you remember when Jesus was walking through a crowd and the woman with a flow of blood touched him? What did he say? "Power has gone out from me." You can't change a person's life without engagement. And you can't engage without power going out from you. I know if I have 2 serious counseling appointments in an afternoon, I'm spent. That's the bottom of my well. The love and the joy are gone and we detach. Where do we go to get more love and joy to be involved in peoples' lives? Where did Paul go? The gospel!

Our ability to love is supernaturally increased when we look back what Jesus did for us. And there is one huge implication here. There is this tendency for people to say, "I've heard the gospel, now I want to move on to deeper things: deeper doctrines, more practical applications." When people say that they want to move 'past the gospel' it shows me that they don't get the gospel. They simply see the gospel as the entry point. But clearly Paul is saying that it is so much more. The gospel is the whole of the Christian life. From which we can draw buckets of supernatural love.

I want to finish by offering one test. One diagnostic to see if you are looking back at the gospel the way Paul is saying the Colossians were. Do you see Christianity as primarily a hard task? Does it feel like Christianity piles a bunch of regulations and rules and responsibilities onto your shoulders? If the answer is yes, you don't get the essence of the gospel. The gospel is supposed to take weight off, not add more.

So we gain supernatural love first by looking back at the gospel. Secondly, we get supernatural love by looking forward. Look at verse 5. This is the reason they now love differently: **because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.**

We don't just look back at the gospel, we also look forward to what is awaiting us at the end of our race. Hope in Greek is different than hope in English. We use the word to say things like "I hope Ole Miss is good next year" or "I hope Jim finishes in time to get a

good table for lunch.” Hope in Greek is different. It’s an assurance. If you have ever been to a graveside burial, as the body went into the ground, the likely said something like, “We therefore commit this body to the ground: earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes; in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to come.” Sure and certain hope. That’s way the Greeks used the word.

We have the assurance of something laid up for us in heaven. Not some elusive jackpot or prize that maybe we will win if we work really hard. It’s a guarantee. So what is this hope? Jesus! Now, I know that is so easy to say and so hard to comprehend. Think about the most peaceful you have ever been. The most excited you have ever felt. The deepest you have ever been moved. The safest you have ever felt. The most significant love you have ever experienced. Combine all that into one moment and then you but taste the hope laid up for you heaven.

The aging John Piper was asked recently if he thinks about heave more now that he’s old. I’ll never forget his response, “Sinlessness, I can almost taste it!” No more strife, no more jealousy, no more anxiety, no more addiction, no more depression. Only love and joy.

We have a hope that is hidden in the future, currently out of reach, but guaranteed. And people have pushed back on this and said, “But if it’s guaranteed then what motivation do we have to work hard at the Christian life now?” And this question gets right to Paul’s main point! The guarantee gives us the ultimate motivation! Love!

Tim Keller once told a story about a girl in his church who signed up for AP English in high school. But soon after signing up she was seized with anxiety about the class. She was losing sleep and even having trouble eating because she was so scared of failing the class. So she went to her dad and asked him if she could withdraw from the class. He said yes and the next day they went to the teacher together to request a withdraw. The teacher told her, “Yes, you can withdraw from my class, but would you consider staying in if I guaranteed you an ‘A’?” Well, she said, “Of course I would!” So she took the class, now with the knowledge of a guaranteed ‘A’ and do you know what happened? Not only did she work harder and go on to receive the highest grade in the class, but she enjoyed it! Once the fear of failure was removed and the guarantee of an ‘A’ was secured, she was freed up to love the class. And love is always a better motivator than fear which is why she did so well.

We all have wells from which we can draw love for others, to serve others, to pray for them or to just listen to them. These wells have natural bottoms, but when we look forward to the hope laid up for us in heaven, these wells can become bottomless.

We look back at Christ and the gospel and we look forward to the hope laid up for us in heaven. Do you know the difference between imperatives and indicatives? Imperatives are things you are supposed to do. Indicatives are true facts. Every imperative in the Bible is fueled by two indicatives. Everything we are supposed to do, is fueled by two truths: What Jesus did and what is awaiting us either when we die or he comes back.

If any part of the Christian life seems hard, if we feel like we are hitting the bottom of our wells, we need only look backward and forward. This will produce a supernatural love and this is what Paul sees happening in the church at Colosse.

How though exactly does he see it? What are the signs that supernatural love has come into this church? Second point.

II. Signs of Supernatural Love

Paul gives us four signs that this supernatural love has come into your life. The first sign is a love of the church. Paul says, **“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of ...the love you have for all the saints.**

Saints is a way of describing all believers. It has nothing to do with our morality or how great of a Christian we are or if we have performed any miracles. It does though have everything to do with what God is doing in us. He is making us holy. The word ‘saint’ comes from the latin word for ‘holy.’ So we aren't talking about a small group of super Christians, but about all Christians.

So how in the world do you love *all* the saints? By loving the church. It doesn't mean you love everyone equally, it means that there is a special place in your heart and in your actions for the church. Supernatural love draws you to other Christians. You can't explain it, but people who maybe you just thought were weird before all of a sudden became interesting and even fulfilling to be around. You begin to carve out time in your week to make sure you have deep Christian relationships that can spur you on. You begin to actually look forward to worshipping on Sunday.

Every year I talk to a parent of a college student who is upset because their child went off to college and church wasn't a priority to them. And almost every time, that happened because church wasn't a priority to the parent. The parent didn't love the church, they just went when they weren't traveling, fishing, hunting, playing sports, catching up on yard work or just up late the night before. If we don't love the church, it's unreasonable to really expect that we are somehow going to pass on that kind of love to our kids.

But if I'm honest, this is an area I overflow with thanksgiving for at Grace. In the short life of this church, we have had some difficult seasons, some difficult situations and, let's be honest, some difficult people. But the harder the season, the more difficult the situation and the more difficult the person, the more brightly the love you have for the saints has shined. There are places God wants a church to feel convicted, but I think this is one of those places He wants us to feel very encouraged.

So first, there is a love for the church, second, there is a visible change. This is what Paul is talking about in verses 3 and 4: **We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus.**

We have heard about your faith! We have heard about your life change! There wasn't just a verbal affirmation of following Jesus, there was a public fruit that your wells have been deepened. They were fulfilling Matthew 5:16 **Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.**

Supernatural love isn't a private affair. It always involves others and so it always becomes public! Since I told you a bit about my conversion, I'll tell you this story too. When I was a senior in high school, my parents were more than a bit worried about the direction of my life. And then had reason to be:) So, my dad had someone come into my house and give me personality test. Their hope was to assess how I was geared and maybe what kind of a job I might enjoy one day. This is no big deal today. You can just do it online for free, but back then, this new technology and I can't imagine very cheap. So the results came in and this person told my parents that given my disposition, I would be most happy one day as a salesman, politician or preacher. My parents looked at each other and said, "Well, preacher's out!"

My life looked very different back then. I certainly have a long way to go, but there was a noticeable change, not because I was disciplined or special, but simply because the fruit of supernatural love is a public one.

The third sign of supernatural love is thanksgiving. This whole passage is Paul giving thanks. Thanksgiving is a powerful thing! It's very easy to be thankful for temporal things, material blessings God has given us...and they are real blessings...we should be thankful for them. But so often we can forget all the spiritual blessings that have been heaped on us. This is the kind of the kind of thanksgiving Paul is talking about.

We are naturally bent to pat ourselves on the back when things are going well spiritually. But, when we do that, we aren't recognizing that any amount of faith is a gift from God. Nowhere in the New Testament does Paul say, "Well done for believing! You should be proud of yourselves!" No, he thanks God for their faith. We aren't believers because we are more spiritual or more moral or wiser or had a better family. Those would be works we could boast in. We are believers because Christ began a good work in us. And that should make us thankful!

But if we aren't thankful and pat ourselves on the back when things are going well spiritually, the opposite will be happen when we experience down seasons. We won't pat ourselves on the back, we will blame ourselves. We will struggle with assurance and ask questions like: Was my faith perfectly pure when I first believed in Christ? Was I 100% sincere? Can I be absolutely sure that my faith then was enough? Should I be rebaptized? I can tell you the answer! No, your faith wasn't perfectly pure. No, your heart wasn't undivided. No, your faith wasn't strong enough to save you because faith can't save you. Christ saves you. Faith is simply laying hold of Christ.

Here is how Charles Spurgeon describes faith. He tells a story of two men in a boat caught in severe rapids being swept toward a waterfall. Some men on the shore tried to save them by throwing a rope. One man caught hold of it and was pulled to safety on the shore. The other, in the panic of the moment, grabbed hold of a seemingly more substantial log that was floating by. That man was carried downstream, over the waterfall and was never seen again. Faith, represents the rope linked to the shore, connecting us to Jesus and safety.

And here is my point. If we are trusting in our ability to see a log and hold on, we will boast in our wisdom and our endurance. We will look down on everyone else around us. But if we see that we were as good as over that waterfall when the rope connected to Christ was thrown, then we become thankful. And this kind of supernatural thanksgiving is the main source for unity in the church. Without it we have feuds and gripes and one day splits. But thanksgiving will unite us and push all our petty differences to the side.

So, we have three signs so far: love for the saints, a visible change and thanksgiving. Finally, supernatural love produces disciples. Look at verses 6 and 7: **the gospel, ⁶which has come to you, as indeed ⁴in the whole world it is ⁴bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you ^mheard it and understood ^rthe grace of God in truth, ⁷just as you learned it from ^oEpaphras our beloved ^pfellow servant.**

When supernatural love, produced by the gospel comes into even the smallest, most insignificant group of people, it can't help but spread. It can't help but bear fruit and increase. When Luke wrote what we call the Book of Acts he was actually writing a letter to a man named Theophilis. We don't know much about him. I wonder if he was maybe Paul's defense attorney in Rome. Who knows? But the question Theophilis is asking is "How in the world did this small insignificant Jewish sect become this new religion literally conquering the Roman Empire in just one lifetime? And do you know Luke's answer? Because Jesus said it would. Look at Acts 1:8. Jesus is talking: **But you will receive ^rpower ^owhen the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and ^pyou will be ^qmy witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and ^rSamaria, and ^sto the end of the earth."**

You will go to Jerusalem, Judea/Samaria and then to the ends of the earth and you will do so with power. Do you know what that power is? Love. Supernatural love. That's the power. And supernatural love can't help but multiply. It can't help but draw people in. They won't be drawn primarily by how eloquent or studied you are, but by your love. But that love is only possible if we are looking backward and forward at the same time.

So, what is the mark of a maturing Christian? Love. Not just any love, but supernatural love. And this kind of love can only be ours if we are daily looking back at the gospel of Jesus Christ and forward to the hope laid up for us in heaven. Supernatural love requires a supernatural source. Every other source is like a floating log. Only Jesus will deepen our wells.

My prayer for us is the same John prayed so many years ago in 1 John 4:7: **Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.**

I'm really glad that a text like this just 'happened' to fall on the day we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Jesus gave us this ordinance, this sacrament to help us look backward and forward. We don't believe that the bread and juice literally become the body of blood of Jesus, but we don't believe nothing happens either. It's more than just a memorial. Jesus has blessed this ordinance and there is a special grace that comes upon us when we remember the gospel corporately as the bread is crushed between our teeth and the juice spilled out. There is a special blessing when we come together and contemplate the hope laid up for us in heaven. And do you know what that blessing is? Love. Supernatural love from a supernatural source.

Let's pray.

