

Introduction: People of Faith, Love, and Hope

Key concept
Discipleship

Bible study
Colossians 1:1-14

Memory verse
2 Timothy 1:7

Objectives

- ❖ Understand how a New Testament letter connects believers today with a community of believers in the early church
- ❖ Understand the meaning of Christian discipleship

Bible Study

For an introduction to our Followers Forming Followers series, it seems fitting to draw upon the work of a great author of introductions. The Apostle Paul knew how to write a good letter, and an important part of his letters was always the introduction. One of his greatest is found in the opening lines to the church at Colosse. In it, he expresses gratitude to God for these believers who are characterized by faith, love, and hope.

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints—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 that has come to you.”
(Colossians 1:1-5)

Before email, cell phones, and text messages, people wrote letters. I got to know my great-grandmother long after she died through letters she had written to my mother years earlier. The letters date from the late 1960s and early 70s, and the envelopes bear 6-cent Eisenhower stamps. Some of the letters were written from the old family house in Scituate, Massachusetts, and some from the cottage on Cape Cod. My mother received them in those years like a drink in the desert. She had married and moved across the country, far from those cherished places and family members.

I learned about my great-grandmother through what she wrote in her shaky, barely legible handwriting. There is timeless significance in the ordinary details she includes. She walks outside with the dog and feeds the

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birds. She recommends an author, James Thurber, whose writing I also enjoy. And in the face of technical difficulty she finds a way to honor a friend. She writes: “My favorite pen has blinked out; I’ll use this one for Ethel Mitchell.”

But I also get to know her through what she doesn’t include, as when she writes: “It’s 5:30a.m. where Russ is—wonder what they have for breakfast. At first the rations were sort of uncertain.” No need to say it, her grandson, my uncle, was in Vietnam in 1970. In the end, it is her wit and grace that convince me that I would have liked this woman. She relates a grammatical error in a letter she received from my aunt, and then concludes: “She does abuse the tense now and then, but she is such a splendid person we won’t worry about the verbs.”

More famous letters give us personal access to historical figures and events. Letters to and from soldiers on the battlefield provide a perspective on war that we seldom get through the official historical record. Ken Burns, the accomplished documentary filmmaker, gained fame when his series on the Civil War aired on television in the fall of 1990. At that time, millions of viewers were deeply touched by the stories of the people and events of the war as they were told through black and white photos, handwritten letters, and music.

Ken Burns explains the effect of these stories on people today as “emotional archaeology,” a process of unearthing the emotion within the black and white photos of people from the 1800s. We don’t at first see anything we can relate to in the photographs. The men and women are strangers to us, often stiff and unsmiling. But these people come to life when a voice begins reading the letter he wrote to her (and maybe it was his last), or from her to him about daily life at the home or farm and with the family he left behind.

Suddenly, through the letters, we can identify with the lives these people lived. The figures in the photos almost seem to move. We forget that it’s a boring documentary, and we now know that these people loved and grieved, they were witty, and they talked about ordinary as well as momentous things. Their letters, their words, have connected us, and their story becomes meaningful to us; it becomes our story too.

In a similar way, we can connect with the believers in the New Testament churches through letters. The stories of people believing the gospel of Jesus Christ, loving their neighbors, and trusting in the promises of God become our stories too. We are the spiritual descendants of the people in Colosse who received Paul’s letter. This is one way to find out who we are

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meant to be as people of Christ. As Paul describes them in verses 3 to 5, they are people of faith, love, and hope: faith in Jesus Christ, love for all the saints, and hope for new life with God both now and forever.

In verses 5 and 6, Paul points out that the faith and love he sees among the Colossian believers come from hope: *“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 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.”* This hope is not merely a glass-half-full optimism for a bright future. It is a specific hope for a transformed life in Christ that starts now and never ends.

Paul says that this hope is found in the gospel, and we have it because of God’s grace. Grace here refers to being shown favor or receiving a pardon that you don’t deserve, that is unexpected given the circumstances. For example, Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years during apartheid in South Africa. When he was released, instead of taking revenge on his captors, he gave them grace. Mandela forgave them and called for reconciliation between the races and a fresh start for the nation. In the New Testament, a woman caught in adultery expected to be stoned by her accusers, but Jesus gave her grace. She received forgiveness and a higher call to a better life instead (John 8:3-11).

Is your own life reflected in one of these stories? “I expected God to be angry with me for [fill in the blank], but I found in Jesus Christ forgiveness and a higher call to a better life instead.” This is *“the gospel, the word of truth”* (v. 5). It is the good news that Paul says is the source of our hope and, ultimately, of our faith and love. God has reached out to us in grace, in an unexpected, surprising way; a way that is undeserved in the circumstances of human sin.

Toward the end of his introduction, Paul talks about the forgiveness of sins. He describes the gospel as a rescue mission: *“For he [God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves [Jesus Christ], in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins”* (v. 13-14). We need to be rescued from our sinful human nature. Jesus Christ saves us by forgiving our sins (redeeming us) and making it possible for us to become like him: loved as sons and daughters by God the Father.

Paul also includes a prayer for the Colossians in his introduction. It is a prayer that encourages these believers to live fully in the reality of their new life in Christ. *“For this reason [because you have believed the gospel],*

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since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” (v. 9-12).

We have seen that these believers are people of faith, love, and hope. From this prayer, we can add that they will be people of *increasing* faith, *living* love, and *active* hope. It is clear that the people of Christ are not meant to sit around dreaming of their future inheritance; they are to live fully in the power of God, spreading light wherever they go.

The people of Christ will have to endure, and they will have to be patient (v.11). This is not an easy way to live in the face of life’s many challenges. As Paul acknowledges by writing this letter to them, the believers will need sound teaching and a supportive community in order to walk worthy of the Lord and live according to their true identity in Him.

We at Mid-City are spiritual descendants of the Colossian believers. Through this letter, we can begin to identify with these people who have put their faith in Christ and who experience daily joys and struggles as they grow in that faith. Paul could have been writing this introduction to us as we begin our series of lessons on Followers Forming Followers. This series is an invitation to get to know Jesus better and deepen relationships with other followers of Jesus through discipleship.

Christian discipleship essentially means to be in a community of believers that meets regularly to study God’s Word and walk closely together in our spiritual journey. Discipleship really is about friendship—allowing ourselves to know and be known by God and fellow believers.

Timothy Keller, in his book *The Prodigal God*, wrote: “It takes a community to know an individual.” At first glance, this is a surprising claim. Many people tend to fear that their individuality will be lost or overlooked in a group. Yet, what Keller means is that the many facets of an individual’s personality show up more brightly when reflected by interactions with a variety of other people. We each bring out aspects of others that would otherwise remain hidden.

Keller draws on the writing of C. S. Lewis about friendship to make this point. When Lewis wrote the following thoughts, he was reflecting on the

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death of his friend, Charles Williams. He also refers to his friendship with J.R.R. Tolkein, whom he calls Ronald. This is what Lewis wrote (as quoted in *The Prodigal God*):

“In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all the facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never see Ronald’s reaction to a specifically Charles joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him ‘to myself’ now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald.”

This description of friendship is what Keller means when he says that “it takes a community to know an individual.” C.S. Lewis goes on to compare this phenomenon to how we know God more fully in community as well. He says that we have a foretaste of heaven in friendship and Christian community because believers contribute uniquely to each other’s understanding and comprehension of God. Lewis says, “For every soul, seeing Him in her own way, doubtless communicates that unique vision to all the rest.”

Each one of us knows and understands more of God in community to the degree that other believers around us convey their perception of him to us. In other words, the more we are in community with believers, the more likely we are to be deepening our relationship with God.

To know God better and to know each other better, in all of our uniqueness, calls for more individuality and creativity among believers in community, not less. Followers of Jesus relate to and reflect Him in multi-faceted ways. Through Christian discipleship, individuals are strengthened and encouraged and, together, the people of Christ grow in faith, love, and hope.

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Memory Verse

*For God did not give
us a spirit of
timidity, but a spirit
of power, of love
and of self-
discipline.*
-2 Timothy 1:7

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Individual Study and Group Discussion

Opening Questions

Based upon the reading, what did you find most helpful? Was anything confusing? What was most challenging?

Study and Discussion Questions

1. What is the “word of truth” that Paul refers to in his introduction to the letter to the Colossians (v. 5 & 6)?
2. What specific practices and characteristics does Paul identify to describe a life that is “worthy of the Lord” (v. 10-12)?
3. Paul prays for the Colossian believers to have the life that he describes. Which of these practices or characteristics will you ask your discipleship group to pray about for you?
4. Based on what you read in this lesson, how would you define Christian discipleship?
5. What does it mean to you personally to be part of a community of believers who are people of faith, love, and hope?