

Colossians 2:1-5 (1984 NIV)
Portrait of a Strong Church

1 I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.

2 My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ,

3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

4 I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.

5 For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

Introduction

I want you to think about our church for a minute. When you think of our church, do you see a strong vibrant church either now or in the making?

As you have paused and pondered on that question, by what criteria did you use to come to your conclusion? What did you base your thinking on?

In Col. 2:1-5, Paul painted a portrait of what a strong church would look like. First, he hinted to us that ...

I. A strong church is undergirded by fervent prayers (v. 1).

As we read the book of Colossians, we see that Paul was very passionate about the church. In Colossians 1, Paul said in v. 24 that he rejoiced in his suffering for the sake of the Colossians. And in v. 29 he said that he was toiling and struggling to present everyone mature in Christ.

Paul continued with the theme of struggling as we make our way into Chapter 2. Now, when Paul spoke about his struggles in v. 1, he was speaking about his struggles on behalf of people, some of whom he had not even met. At this time, Paul was imprisoned in Rome and the news he had about these congregations came to him by way of Epaphras who was with him as he wrote.

Question: "If Paul was in prison, how was he struggling on behalf of the Colossians and other congregations?" Note that Paul was writing this letter to protect the Colossians from some false teaching that's creeping its way into the church (see 2:6-23). And this false teaching had to do with Christians needed more than what Christ had done for their salvation. It pained him to

know that God's people were being led astray, and he was in prison and could not confront this false teaching head on.

And so out of this concern, Paul worked and struggled in the best way he could to put an end to this false teaching. But again what did this struggling involve? Well, obviously it involved his writing this letter to the Colossian believers from prison. So Paul was struggling for the believers' sake in this sense.

Also, I think it is safe to say that Paul struggled for them in his prayers too. In fact, this was what he asked fellow believers to do for him as well. Paul said in Rom. 15:30—"I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me."

To pray fervently is hard work. You who have prayed for someone who needs strength from the Lord to live on bravely in his difficulty/struggle know what I mean.

When I was a young pastor, I remember an occasion when I had to visit two people who were wardened in the same hospital.

The first person was a lady who had given birth to her first baby after seven years of marriage. As I entered the room, she was there on the bed with her baby. Her husband and some family members were with her too. I congratulated the proud parents. There was such a huge mood of celebration and joy. The husband kept saying, "God is good!" The others kept saying, "Praise God! Praise God!" Before I left, I said a prayer for the family. It was so easy—the words of thanksgiving, joy and celebration just flowed out not only from me, but also from everyone who spontaneously joined in prayer.

Next, I went to visit another person who's wardened in another part of the hospital. As I passed by a mirror mounted along the hallway to the sick beds, I noticed that I was still carrying a happy face. I stopped and reminded myself, "Cut off that smile." Why? It is because this time I was visiting an elderly man who had undergone a major surgery, developed complications, slipped into a coma, and his life was in danger. As I entered the room, I saw many family members were there. Some with teary eyes, some sobbing softly, and everyone was heavy hearted. After some time of ministering to the family, I offered to pray.

I could have prayed, "God, be merciful and relieve this man of his suffering. In the name of Jesus, make him rise up and walk!" But I didn't feel led to pray this way. I could have prayed, "God be merciful and relieve this man of his suffering. May he go quickly and peacefully to be home with you." But I didn't feel led to pray this way. Somehow, it was a challenge to pray this time. The words of comfort and hope didn't

seem to come forth so easily and readily as I tried to compose myself at the same time.

These two visits taught me one of the occupational hazards in the pastoral ministry—i.e. when you truly identify with the joy and pain of others, it can make you feel like your emotions are riding on a roller-coaster. To pray for people in their joy and celebration is very easy. But to pray for people in their pain and difficulty can be a great struggle.

So, how did Paul struggle for the Colossians? He did so by working to spread and protect the true Gospel which included writing and sending a letter to them, and by praying for them fervently. Among other things, he was praying that they would be protected against the false teaching they were being confronted with.

A strong church is undergirded by the fervent prayers of those who have her best interest at heart. Put in another way, these prayer warriors pray FOR the church and FOR one another, and not AGAINST the church and AGAINST one another.

The devil can deceive God's people to pray fervently, but in a divided manner. E.g. some may pray fervently for ABC to happen while the rest of the church may be praying for XYZ to happen. However, a strong church is one where God's people gather not only to pray fervently, but also to pray in a united manner FOR the church and FOR one another. This is what Paul meant when he said, "I am struggling FOR you; join me in my struggle by praying to God FOR me."

Paul painted a portrait of a strong church, and he first hinted to us that a strong church is undergirded by fervent prayers. Next, we see that ...

II. A strong church has a strong heart for God (v. 2).

In v. 2, we are told that Paul had been working hard to the point of agony so that the hearts of those in the church would be encouraged. The word "encouraged" literally means "to come alongside". Because a person can be called alongside for many purposes, the word has a wide range of meanings. They include to appeal, to comfort, to encourage. In the present context, however, it could be translated "to strengthen" because the Colossians were threatened by false teaching and needed spiritual strengthening rather than comfort.

Paul wanted to strengthen their hearts and gave them courage to withstand the false teaching and remain firm in their faith. And so Paul wanted the Colossians to have a strong heart for God.

How do we develop a strong heart for God?

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

- One, be humble even in our success. One can be successful and still have a heart for God. But in order to keep success from crowding God out, the heart must be kept in check. The antidote is humility. Humility is not lowliness, or to be humiliated, or to be abused. One does not have to be a piece of doormat to be humble. Humility is simply recognizing the grace and mercy of God. When it comes to success and accomplishment, humility recognizes where these things come from. Perhaps the ultimate test of a heart for God is this question—“How do you handle success?” The greatest test of our character is often not adversity, but prosperity. When things are going well, do you pray as often? When you are enjoying recognitions, promotions and bonuses, do you recognize God as the ultimate source of these blessings? When we manage our God-given success with humility, we learn to do away with many things in life—things that are only used to showcase our success, but otherwise, really unnecessary. When more unnecessary things are removed from our lives, it creates more room for God in our heart.
- Two, be available to serve. Unless we give of ourselves in service, we will become spiritually dry. It has been said that God wants our availability before He wants our ability. The truth is that He wants both. But the fact remains that He can’t use our ability unless we have first made ourselves available to Him. Have you made yourself available to God? I believe the greatest aspiration statement in life must be this—“I want to be used by God.”
- Three, be repentant of sins. Sin stains and hardens our heart. But the great antidote is repentance. Repentance occurs by not just feeling sorry for sin, but when we turn away from sin. I don’t have to ask if there is sin in your life. The more relevant question is this—“Are you turning away from your sin?” David prayed, “God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). He wanted a heart that was clean before God. This represents an individual who has a strong heart for God because he is after the heart of God.

Thus, to nurture a strong heart for God we need to:

- Be humble.
- Be desirous to be used by God.
- Be pure in words, deeds and thoughts.

(<http://m.lifeway.com/Article/sermon-inner-workings-1-develop-heart-for-god>)

Moving on, the third mark of a strong church that Paul painted for us is this ...

III. A strong church has a unity based on love (v. 2).

Paul also wanted the believers to be “united (knitted together) in love”. But what did Paul mean by that?

A tightly knit community looks out for one another. Paul knew that one of the best ways to strengthen the hearts of the Colossians would be for them to know that they had one another standing side-by-side, looking out for one another. This does not mean we are to be an exclusive community, shutting out others who are outside. Rather, we can only be an inclusive community when people who are outside are truly attracted to us because they see the strong oneness and love we have for one another.

Thus, it is important for Christians to be a part of a church body; a part of a group of people who love and care for one another, and who want the best for one another. That is why a church is also referred to as a family/household of God’s people in the Bible (1 Tim. 3:15).

You cannot be a strong and healthy Christian apart from being part of a body of believers. Those who believe that being a part of a church family is not important are mistaken. Christ founded the church. If the church is of no benefit/importance to us or something that is not necessary, why then did Christ even give Himself up for the church (Eph. 5:25)?

In John 13 when Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, He was trying to get His disciples to see that if an individual Christian does not show love towards other Christians, he gives the world a reason to reject that God is love. John 13:35 says, “By this all men will know you are disciples if you have love for one another.” A church that is not united in love is a church that will not be credible in the eyes of the watching world.

Sometime in the 15th Century, two young friends, Albrecht Durer and Franz Knigstein, were struggling young artists. Since both were poor, they worked to support themselves while they studied painting.

Work took so much of their time and advancement was slow. Finally, they reached an agreement—they would draw lots, and one of them would work to support both of them while the other would study painting. Albrecht won and began to study, while Franz worked at hard labour to support both of them. They agreed that when Albrecht was successful he would in turn support Franz who would then study painting.

Albrecht went off to the cities of Europe to study. He had both talent and genius. When he had attained success, he went back to keep his bargain with Franz. But Albrecht soon discovered the enormous price his friend had paid. For as Franz worked at hard labour to support his friend and himself, his fingers had become stiff and twisted. He could no longer execute the delicate brush strokes necessary in fine painting. Though his artistic dreams could never be realized, he was not embittered but rather rejoiced in his friend's success.

One day Durer visited his friend and found him kneeling with his deformed hands intertwined in prayer. Albrecht Durer hurriedly sketched the folded hands of his friend and later painted a great masterpiece which is what we now know as "The Praying Hands".

Today art galleries everywhere feature Albrecht Durer's works, and this particular masterpiece tells a moving story of oneness and love.

(<https://sacredwindows.com/the-inspiring-story-behind-the-praying-hands/#:~:text=It%20is%20said%20that%20Albrecht,to%20create%20for%20a%20patron>)

We cannot expect the world to believe that the Father sent the Son, that Jesus' claims are true, and that Christianity is true, unless the world sees some reality of the oneness and love of Christians for one another. So the strengthened heart is a heart that has learned to love God and love others as oneself. Indeed, a strong church shows a strong unity based on love.

Finally, there's a fourth mark of a strong church and that is ...

IV. A strong church has a strong understanding of Christ in Scripture ... and a strong feel of His heart for sinners (vv. 2-4).

From the middle of v. 2 and into v. 3, Paul said that all the wisdom and knowledge the Colossians would ever need were found in Christ.

Though the false teachers in Colossae might talk about mysteries filled with wisdom and knowledge that would lead the Colossians to a higher level of faith, Paul said very clearly that Christ Himself was God's mystery. The mystery of God's redemptive purpose for the world was revealed in Christ alone. And Paul's desire was for the Colossians to find a settled assurance in this revelation.

The false teachers were aiming to lure men and women away from the true Gospel with lies they called wisdom and knowledge. But Paul said that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge were hidden in Christ. Indeed, everything we need to know about God has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ—from

His love to His power, from His wisdom to His compassion, and from His patience to His justice. There is no need for us to look anywhere else.

The true Gospel is that Jesus did what we could never do. He came to earth and paid a price we could never pay. And in doing so, He reconciled us to God. That is the true Gospel, and that is the one we need to acquaint ourselves with.

A strong church has a strong understanding of Christ in Scripture ... and a strong feel of His heart for sinners. This strong understanding and this strong feel must go hand-in-hand. What do I mean? Let me illustrate.

Two men were talking. A said to B: "My church has decided that our pastor must go."

B asked: "Why?"

A replied: "He would say to us almost every Sunday without fail, 'The Bible says that God will judge you for your sins if you don't repent.'"

Sometime later after that conversation, A and B met again. A said to B: "My church has found a new pastor. We are very happy with him."

B asked: "Now, what does this new pastor say to you all on Sunday?"

A replied: "He would say, 'The Bible says that God will judge you for your sins if you don't repent.'"

Puzzled, B queried: "How then is he different from the previous pastor?"

A explained: "The difference is this—the previous pastor spoke biblical truth to us with a smug face. He knew the Bible, but showed nothing of the heart of God for us as sinners. The new pastor speaks biblical truth to us with tears in his eyes. He knows the Bible, and he also feels strongly the heart of God for us as sinners."

A strong understanding of Christ in Scripture is important. But we need more than this. We need also a strong feel of Christ's heart for sinners in order to be a truly strong witness for the Lord.

Very naturally, we want our church building to be attractive to the world so that those outside the church will be interested in us. Even more importantly, the Lord wants our lives (not merely our church building) to be attractive to the world so that those outside the church will be interested in us. In fact, if the attractiveness of our church building is not matched by the attractiveness of our lives, people will be very wary of us.

We demonstrate a strong understanding of Christ in Scripture ... and a strong feel of His heart for sinners when our lives before others reflect the presence of Christ in us, with us, and through us.

Conclusion

What Paul had heard about the Colossians and others made him rejoice in v. 5. He had heard from Epaphras that in spite of the false teachers, they had remained “orderly” and “firm” in their faith in Christ.

The terms “orderly” and “firm” at the end of v. 5 are military terms. The image is that of a group of soldiers in a military formation ready for the attack of the enemy by having built a solid defence around themselves. So the picture is one of a well ordered army able to hold their ground in battle.

And I think this is a helpful picture for us as a church today. We need to be a battle-ready church, building up our defence against the many enemies of our faith.

Is our church a strong church? How can you tell?

- Do we constantly commit ourselves to pray fervently?
- Do we have a strong heart for God?
- Do we have a strong unity based on love?
- Do we have a strong understanding of Christ in Scripture ... and a strong feel of His heart for sinners?

If we grow in these areas, we will become a church that will do even more and greater things for God.

I pray the Lord will help us grow individually and collectively in these areas. Amen!