

Distinguishing Marks of the Christian Mind

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Vision for Life: Seeing the Big Picture (Colossians) Series

Colossians 1:1-8

I'm going to start a new series today from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians. Let me begin with a little introduction about the letter and the people he wrote to. The ancient city of Colossae was situated about 100 miles east of Ephesus along the River Lycus in what is now the country of Turkey.

Colossae was a cosmopolitan city with lots of ethnic, cultural, religious, and racial diversity. We know from ancient documents that Colossae had a large Jewish population along with Greek settlers and indigenous people from the area. It was a city that was filled with diverse people, who had diverse viewpoints and philosophies.

The apostle Paul spent 2 ½ years in Ephesus preaching and teaching every day in a lecture hall there. Paul's evangelistic efforts through the dialogue that he was carrying on in the lecture hall was so successful that not only did the people of Ephesus hear the gospel, but as it says in Acts 19:10:

Acts 19:10

This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

Paul was assisted in Ephesus by a number of coworkers including a man named Epaphras. Apparently, Epaphras, who may have become a Christian during the early part of Paul's ministry in Ephesus, went back to his home town of Colossae and planted a church there.

Let me just pause here and say that God may put it in your heart to go back to your home town, or your college town, and plant a Vineyard church in your home or college town. Often God does this. He calls us back to our former cities to minister to our own people. You may have a different idea of what God wants you to do with your life. But Jesus may say to you what he said to a man in Mark 5:19:

Mark 5:19

Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.

In any case, the apostle Paul didn't plant the church in Colossae. Epaphras, his coworker, planted the church. But Paul had a fatherly concern for the church and cared about how it was doing. I feel the same way about many of our church

plants, and particularly the plants that we have overseas in Amsterdam in Tanzania, Amsterdam, and Brazil.

Well, five years later in about 60 AD, the apostle Paul found himself in Rome as a prisoner waiting to have his case heard by the Roman emperor. He spent his time in Rome under house arrest. He was free to receive visitors and friends without much restriction. One of the people who came to visit Paul in Rome was Epaphras. Apparently, Epaphras told Paul some disturbing news regarding the Colossian church. The church was in danger of succumbing to some type of false teaching. Paul calls the false teaching a “philosophy.” We read in Colossians 2:8 these words:

Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

He calls the false teaching “fine sounding arguments” in Colossians 2:4:

Colossians 2:4

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

So in about 60-61 AD Paul writes from his prison cell in Rome the letter to the Colossians to correct the philosophy that was corrupting the church.

Now, we don’t exactly know what the philosophy was that Paul was so concerned about. We don’t know if the false teaching was coming from outside the church and bleeding into the church as it was, for example, in the Galatian church, or if the teaching was emerging from some people within the church as we see false teaching emerging from within the Corinthian church. We don’t know where this philosophy was coming from and we don’t know if the teaching was one coherent system, or a grab-bag of different ideas, a kaleidoscope of different errors. But as one scholar put it:

Although the prescription for the cure comes across reasonably clearly to the present day reader of Colossians, the ailment defies a really detailed diagnosis.

We know some of the features of this false teaching. It created a kind of spiritual elitism. Some people claim to be in the know and held themselves above ordinary Christians who weren’t in the know. The false teaching had a kind of super-spirituality to it. Some Christians were the really spiritual ones and were distinguished from ordinary, run-of-the-mill Christians. The philosophy catered to people’s pride. It also seemed to be shot through with Jewish legalism. Rules and regulations about what you could eat and what you could eat.

But worst of all, it took people's focus away from Jesus and put people's focus on themselves and their own religious performance.

We're going to find as we go through the book of Colossians that it contains a mix, a hodge-podge of different religious errors. But I think in some ways it is helpful that we don't have the false teaching entirely nailed down, that scholars really can't agree on all the contours of the false teaching that was so dangerous to the Colossian church. Because we can apply Paul's description, his antidote, to a variety of settings. Wherever we see spiritual elitism – this Christian teaching is only available to spiritual masters, who are in the know; wherever we see religious pride – we're the unique, we're the chosen; wherever legalism and performance-based religion raises its ugly head; wherever a super-kind-of-spirituality – prophetic newsletters from folks who claim they have a secret hotline to Christ, folks claiming that they are uniquely blessed and whenever people take their eyes off of Jesus– the book of Colossians has relevance.

And the way that the apostle Paul combats this philosophy, this false teaching is by offering the Colossians an alternative worldview.

The cure for a false philosophy: a Christian worldview

Colossians is a worldview book. It gives us a comprehensive perspective on the way that we ought to approach all of life. Paul doesn't answer, in other words, each and every aspect of this false philosophy point by point. Instead, he does something bigger and better. He says, in effect, "Here is the mental framework by which you can approach any philosophy which you encounter and any important question in your life."

"What I want to do, Paul in essence say, "I want to give you a pair of Christian eyeglasses through which you should look at all of life from the mundane – should I purchase that expensive product on line, or the profound questions of life – Who am I? How can I have hope? What is God like? What happens to a human being when we die? How do I know what's true? A worldview is a sketch of reality. It describes what we see and it determines what we should see. A worldview is the mental universe you live in.

For example, as you look out at life, do you fundamentally believe that this world and this life is all that there is, or that we are destined to live in a new, in a renewed, in a renovated, a restored world? When you experience pain and tragedy, do you say, "Well, of course, I'm going to experience pain and suffering because the world that I live in is absolutely random; it makes no sense; there is no plan; there is no purpose; there is no one in charge." Or this tragedy, this pain, this suffering is a test for me of whether I can trust in the goodness of God even in the midst of this; whether I can continue to hope in God for a better tomorrow; whether I will continue to believe that God is in control of the world. A

worldview is how you look out at life and some of the things that happen to you in life.

Nearly 50 years ago an Englishman named Harry Blamires wrote one of my all-time favorite books titled *The Christian Mind*. In it Blamires writes this:

There is no longer a Christian mind. There is still, of course, a Christian ethic, a Christian practice, and a Christian spirituality. As a moral being, the modern Christian subscribes to ethics different than that of the non-Christian. As a member of the church, he [or she] undertakes obligations and observations ignored by the non-Christian. As a spiritual being, in prayer and meditation, he [or she] strive to cultivate a dimension of life unexplored by the non-Christian. But as a thinking being, the modern Christian has succumbed to secularization. A Christian accepts religion – its morality, its worship, its spiritual culture; but he [or she] rejects the religious view of life, the view that sets all earthly issues within the context of the eternal, the view that relates all human problems – social, political, cultural – to the doctrinal foundation of the Christian faith, the view that sees all things here below in terms of God's supremacy and in terms ultimately of Heaven and Hell.

Now, in starting this series from the book of Colossians, I decided to call my series "A Vision for Life: Seeing the Big Picture." I've called this introductory talk, "Distinguishing Marks of the Christian Mind." Let's pray.

Now, you may not even know you have a worldview. This is a phrase that is not used a great deal in popular media. You won't hear about it on Must-See-TV. The word "worldview" doesn't show up on anybody's Top Ten list. We don't read that much about worldviews in the newspaper. No one ever sat down and taught you, "Honey, this is our worldview." Your mama and daddy didn't sit down with you and say, "Now, this is the way that we in our family interpret all of life – how important money is to us; what money is for; how important our relationships are; how important is it for you to save face in every situation; how to keep yourself from being embarrassed; here is the entire way that we relate to suffering, or the future; is there a God, what is God like."

Our worldviews are made up of largely unspoken assumptions, a whole set of presuppositions that we osmose from our families by just living in our homes. We drink in our worldviews with our mother's milk. It is the whole set of assumptions and lenses we wear just from living in 21st century America, or from living in Columbus, Ohio. Drip...drip...drip from marketing and from media and movies there is a worldview of what sex is for; what sex is like or should be like; what love should be like; what marriage should be like; what relationships should be like. Here is the way the world works. Here is what's really valuable. Here is what we're supposed to live for.

Again, instead of answering every detail of the false teaching spreading through the Colossian church, Paul does something bigger. What he offers us here in the book of Colossians is an antidote to any kind of false philosophy. The answer is the all-encompassing implication of Christ coming to the world. Paul, in effect, says, you Colossians are living in the wrong mental universe. You aren't seeing the world the way God wants you to see it. Take off the glasses you are wearing that have been to you, handed to you, by your culture, by marketing, by Hollywood, by people with an entirely foreign worldview to the Christian worldview. Take off the glasses you are wearing and start trying to look at life through the glasses that God supplies.

The biblical notion of repentance comes from the Greek word "Metanoia."

Metanoia = Change your mind

And to us, the book of Colossians should sound like the only way you Central Ohioans living in the 21st century, can ever do life well, or ever hope to achieve God's intention for your life, is if you have a thoroughly converted Christian mind. Unless you begin to approach all of life, not just religious life, not just prayer and Bible study and church going, but unless you start approaching all of life – life's problems, life's sufferings, life's temptations, the loss of your job, the loss of your wealth, unless you start approaching it with a fairly converted mind, you will never really know what Christ meant when he said, "I came in order to give you life and that more abundantly."

Let me drill in here just for a moment before we talk about the contours of the Christian mind. It is so important that you understand the importance of a converted Christian mind.

The vast majority of us, even if we received Christ years ago, and even if we have devotions, the vast majority of Christians do not think Christianly – we have not changed our minds - about almost any topic. So, if you asked the average Christian: Tell me what you think about the recession, or the economy, or the environment, or the war in Iraq, what you will almost certainly hear is a political answer whether conservative or liberal, or an economic perspective, or a pragmatic response. But I have found in my conversations with Christians over 35 years, it is the rarest thing to talk to a Christian about current events and here a Christian mind at work in response. I have found it to be the rarest thing to hear someone offer a deep reflection on biblical truth as they're approaching almost any major question in life.

Colossians trains us to think Christianly, to accept God's glasses in looking out at the world.

So what are the contours of a Christian worldview? What does a Christian mind look like? Let's read together Colossians 1:1-8:

Colossians 1:1-8

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father. 3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all his people— 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true word of the gospel 6 that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world— just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. 7 You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, 8 and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

First of all, we discover that:

Christians look at life differently than everyone else in the world

Jesus, as well as the New Testament writers, take it as a given that we followers of Jesus are wearing, or should be wearing a different set of glasses when we look at life. In verse 2 the apostle Paul says:

Colossians 1:2

To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

Christians are called to be God's holy people, in some older versions, God's saints. Now, a holy person, or a saint, according to the Bible is not a special class of Christians – a person who is heroic, who is uniquely close to God, a model Christian. There are Christian heroes; there are model Christians; there are people who are incredible examples to the rest of us, but the Bible doesn't use the word "saint" to describe them. The word "saint" is applied to all Christians. All Christians are called holy people. Saint or holy is not in the Bible generally a reference to a person's character. Saint refers to a person's calling. A saint or a holy person is simply a person set apart, or separated to God, as being one of God's treasured possessions. And so we read in Exodus 19:6 these words:

Exodus 19:5-6

Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

Saint has less to do with purity and more to do with position. The bottom line is that to be called a saint means that we are to do life differently than the rest of

the world does life. We are to think about life differently than the rest of the world thinks about life.

Now, lots of Christian groups have tried to distinguish themselves from the world. They get this idea of saint; they see that the Bible says that followers of Jesus are to be different than other folks living in 21st century America. So if you are a woman raised in certain Pentecostal churches, you were told that wearing makeup or wearing jewelry, or cutting your hair, or wearing pants was worldly and no Christian woman should ever wear makeup, jewelry, pants, or go to movies. And if you were raised Amish, your church district decides a couple of times a year a list of rules to demonstrate how separated from the world you are. Here are the kinds of colored clothing you can wear, and the sort of fabric the clothing can be made from and the patterns, and what your furnishings in your home should be like, your farming equipment, and what you are allowed to do in your leisure time.

I'm not intending to be critical of Pentecostal people or the Amish. At least these groups understand that they are supposed to be different than the world. But Paul begins his letter by setting forth totally different criteria for distinguishing between Christian saints and the rest of the world. He says being worldly has nothing to do with what farm equipment you use, or whether you as a woman wear makeup, or the color of clothing you wear. What distinguishes the Christian mind from the mindset of others?

The distinguishing marks of the Christian mind

In contrast to 21st century America's "everything is a matter of opinion," the Christian mind is characterized by submission to the authority of God's revealed truth

Look at me at verse 1:

Colossians 1:1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother

And verse 5:

Colossians 1:5

the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true word of the gospel

Right off the bat, Paul tells us that this letter is not a personal opinion of Paul's that he is offering the church for their consideration. Paul is not writing as a consultant to the church. Paul doesn't begin the letter with "Paul, a church consultant," or "Paul, a writer for the New York Times." It is not "Paul, a talking

head on Fox News,” or “Paul, a talk show host on AM radio,” or even “Paul, elected by an overwhelming majority from the church of Antioch.” It is Paul, an apostle by the will of God.

Paul is saying I am an apostle, one of those chosen by Jesus Christ to have the awesome privilege of being a witness to Christ’s resurrection and as an apostle, I was appointed to meaning of the appointed and authorized messengers regarding the meaning of Christ coming. In the opening phrases of the book of Colossians, we are immediately confronted by a claim of ultimate authority and absolute truth.

Now we 21st century Americans operate in an entirely different mental universe. The way we approach the truth is not by authority, or by a claim of revelation from God, unless you are some megalomaniac, or a person suffering from mental illness. The way we approach truth is to do opinion surveys. We take a poll, text message our response to a speaker; and if 51% of Americans thinks something is the case, it is the case. Everything is a matter of personal opinion; everything is a matter of individual perspective, individual preference, and individual taste. No one has the right to tell us what we should do in any situation. So if Jesus, or the apostle Paul says something about the permanence of marriage, or the appropriate context for sexual relationships, we 21st century Americans take a poll. How many churchgoers agree with Jesus? How many agree with the apostle Paul about sexuality and sexual expression? Yes, for 2000 years the church has always thought this way about family life, about marriage, but the times, they are a’changing and we take a poll to figure out what is true for 21st century Americans. We deeply believe that truth is something that we human beings construct after we’ve heard all sides of an argument. We pull out the best features of all the best opinions and we build the truth.

Just look at how many newspaper articles or TV news stories about a moral issue – gay marriage, abortion, stem cell research, contains an opinion poll.

But Paul says to the Colossians: don’t construct the truth from opinion polls and market research. In fact, the truth doesn’t come from any of us even 300 million of us. The truth comes to us.

Colossians 1:5-6

the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true word of the gospel 6 that has come to you.

In other words, the truth is outside of us and it comes to us in a personal way in Jesus Christ. The truth runs us down; it chases after us. The truth corners us, hems us in, and confronts us. It doesn’t come from us. It comes to us. It comes to us through the announcement of the gospel. We hear the truth; we see the truth; we taste the truth, we love or hate the truth; we respond to the truth; we

stumble into the truth; we obey or disobey the truth. What we don't do is construct the truth by polling data. We don't look inside of ourselves to find out what's true. We don't examine our hearts or test our feelings to determine what's true. We don't look inside, or take an opinion poll of all of our fellow Americans and come up with a better idea of what God has announced in Christ.

Friends, we are never going to come up with a better way to do life than the life that God offers us in the gospel. The Christian mind is always concerned about submitting to God's authority. The Christian mind is concerned about responding to the truth we find in Christ.

In contrast to 21st century America's single identity the Christian mind is characterized by a dual identity.

Look at this with me in verse 2:

Colossians 1:2

To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

See everyone outside the Christian faith is located only in Colossae. Or to update this we would say that everyone else is located only in Columbus, or only in Westerville, or wherever they happen to be. But we Christians find ourselves not only in Columbus right now, we find ourselves in Christ. It is this second identity of being in Christ that has been stolen from the Christian mind. In fact, I think that we Christians almost universally have been victims of identity theft.

See, Paul continually tells us that we are not only located in our particular geography, we are located in Christ. And the apostle Paul loves this phrase "in Christ," or "in Christ Jesus." He uses it 170 times in his letters. Christians are said to be in Christ many, many more times that Christ is said to be in us. It's true that to become a Christian, Christ's Spirit has to enter your heart. But just as importantly as Christ entering you is you entering Christ. You live in Christ; Christ is the atmosphere, if you will; Christ is the environment. Christ is the constant influence in a Christian's life. Everywhere we go, whatever we experience, we Christians are always united with Christ. We're joined to Christ. We're connected to Christ. We live in a Christ-drenched, Christ-satiated, Christ-filled world. You may be down in the dumps, or on top of the world; if you are a Christian, you are in Christ. You may be over the hill, or under a pile, out of your mind or in a funk beside yourself in prison, or at a spa, but you are in Christ.

Now, do you realize that? Do you look at life and say, "I am in Christ! Wherever I am at the office, in a funk, at a bank, in a plane, in a wheelchair, I'm in Christ. It doesn't matter what I'm experiencing or what I'm going through, or what a family member is going through, I am in Christ. I live in a Christ-dominated, Christ-drenched world." Your spiritual identity doesn't change based on your

geography, or your occupation, or your health, or your mood or mental state. The mental universe you live in is not determined like everyone else simply by what we see or experience in this world. We don't have a singular identity: you're just a home school mom, or a wife, or store manager, or executive vice president, on the golf course, or in front of your TV. No, you are in Christ!

Because you are in Christ, you have an impact and influence that goes beyond you. You wonder why your life can make a difference – well, it is just stumbling, bumbling little me – no, it is not just little you. It is you in Christ. The influence of Christ is being carried with you wherever you go. And you are always in Christ. You are not only in Christ when you do devotions at home, or you are in church, or you are listening to worship music. But then you go back to your workplace, or to the dentist. You are in Christ all the time, amazing, in Columbus, in Christ.

Paul goes on to write in verse 3:

Colossians 1:3

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you

In contrast to 21st century America's pride, the Christian mind is characterized by humble gratitude to God

In all of Paul's letters and the dozens of times when he offers thanks, I think I've found only one instance where Paul may thank someone directly instead of thanking God for the person. At least 30 other times the apostle Paul writes things like:

Romans 1:8

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.

1 Corinthians 1:4

I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 1:2

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers.

As I meditated on this, I thought what a wonderful church Vineyard Columbus would be if we regularly said to each other, "I thank God for you. I thank God for the worship at the Vineyard. I thank God for your influence on my children as you teach them in Children's ministry. I thank God for the meals that you brought us when we were in the hospital having a baby." You know, thanking God for something good that someone does reminds you and reminds the other person

that God is the ultimate source of all blessing. Churches can become so enamored with ourselves and Christian leaders can be enamored with ourselves. But when we say “thank God” then we remind ourselves and the person we’re thanking that it is only the open hand of God, the generosity of God, the willingness of God to give that it the source of all of our success. It’s never been us; it’s always been God’s blessing.

The distinctive marks of the Christian mind are faith, love and hope. Let’s go through these quickly.

Colossians 1:4-5

because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all his people— 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true word of the gospel

The New Testament brings together faith, hope and love repeatedly as the ultimate distinguishing marks of the Christian mind. Faith, love and hope are the glasses that God gives you to look through as you look at the world. You always ought to be looking at the world through eyes of faith, through eyes of love, through eyes of hope, if you have a Christian mind. The New Testament brings faith, hope and love repeatedly together in verses like:

1 Corinthians 13:13

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Thessalonians 1:3

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We know that the Spirit of Jesus Christ is at work in someone’s life when they exhibit faith, when they exhibit love, when they exhibit hope when everyone else around them would not have these qualities in their situation.

Let’s break this up real quickly and show how these three qualities distinguish the Christian mind from the mindset of the rest of the culture.

In contrast to 21st century America’s cynicism and self-reliance, the Christian mind is characterized by faith in Christ

Colossians 1:4

because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all his people

America, right now, is a country filled with deep cynicism. Some of us who are older experienced being lied to by the government whether it was reasons for going to war, or corruption in the Watergate scandal. Some of us who are older have seen adultery in the White House, leaders who have regularly disappointed us, religious leaders who have been immoral. We have had corporate leaders and spiritual leaders who have no idea when enough is enough, leaders who lay off people by the tens of thousands and have no qualms about grabbing an even greater share of company's wealth.

America has become cynical as more and more of our jobs have proven insecure.

The old social contract that if you work hard and if you are loyal, you will have a job and be able to retire with a corporate pension has been completely replaced in the last 25 years as company after company has proven that they do not care about people's loyalty; they don't care about their hard work. The company has been taken over and parts of the company are sold off, or jobs are shipped overseas in order to boost the short-term profits of the company and the CEO's bonus.

And advertising and marketing make us even more cynical. Watch the ads in which companies seem to be saying things like: Don't think of us as being a multi-hundred billion dollar global Goliath that is completely profit-driven, drilling oil in every fragile ecosystem on the planet. Think of us as a friend of the earth who loves bunnies and butterflies and little girls running through wheat fields. Yes, that's what we exist for; we exist for bunnies and clean water, not for gigantic profits and multi-million dollar bonuses for our executives.

You see cynicism in organizations all over America as employees distrust the words of their employers. They distrust their employers' motives. There is a feeling in some companies that you've got to always watch your back because someone is going to take advantage of you. You can't yield yourself fully because the actions of the higher-ups are completely out of sync with their words. Cost savings works only for the lower levels. The higher-ups are still having extravagant retreats and are taking large bonuses.

Cynicism. The feeling that no one is telling you the true reason for anything. It is the Jon Stewart view of the world. It is the view of the world with one raised eyebrow. "Oh...really?" And so whenever Americans talk about faith, they talk about it terms of faith in ourselves, our self-reliance. We've got to believe in ourselves.

And over against that, the Christian mind embraces a faith in a God who never lies. In Jesus Christ we are presented with a God who has relational integrity, whose actions match his words. God doesn't just tell us to love and sacrifice. He demonstrates love and sacrifice. He just doesn't tell us to be loyal. He

demonstrates complete loyalty to us. Christians know that there is at least one person who keeps his word, who is not marketing us and spinning the truth. God doesn't have some hidden agenda to use us and then toss us aside when someone more interesting or younger, or more beautiful comes along. There is at least one person who is forever faithful, who isn't a hypocrite and doesn't have mixed motives. Jesus is the person who has no need for us. He enters relationship with us from a pure desire to do good and to give.

And so we Christians, who have a Christian mind, don't to simply withdraw into ourselves and say you can't trust anyone else. You just have to be self-reliant. We know how unreliable we are, how we give up in crises. If you honestly look inside of yourself, you will see so many mixed motives. We don't have to rest the weight of our lives on us. We can rest on God, who is faithful, who keeps his promises, who has integrity all the way through; a God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever; a God who never lies or betrays us.

In contrast to 21st century America's selfishness, the Christian mind is characterized by self-sacrificial love

Colossians 1:4-5

because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all his people— 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true word of the gospel

In 21st century America, individual self crowds out everything else in life. We are self-absorbed, self-indulgent, self-interested, self-obsessed, self-promoting, self-seeking, self-serving, and self-sufficient. One of the old definitions of sin is:

Sin is life curved in on itself

Selfishness. You see it in corporate America over the last 20 years, the grasping, grabbing, "I'm going to get mine." You see it in people's marriages. Folks fight with one another: What about my needs? Well, what about my needs? You need to listen to me. No, you need to listen to me. You see selfishness on the athletic field: Just throw me the ball; I want to take the shot. And selfishness on the road: you can't let someone into your lane of traffic; you can't let someone get ahead of you.

And the revelation of God that we find in Jesus Christ is exactly the opposite. Instead of life curved in on itself, the love of God that we find in Jesus Christ is flowing outward. It is self-giving, self-sacrificial. In fact, a good definition of love in the Bible is self-sacrifice.

Love = Self-sacrifice

That is why the apostle Paul says in Romans 5:8:

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

And why the apostle John said in 1 John 4:10:

1 John 4:10

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

And this self-sacrificial love is not just something that we see between God and us, but it is to be demonstrated in our every day relationships. The Christian mind looks at life through the lens of self-sacrifice. The Christian mind says that there is nothing better than I could ever do than to sacrifice myself for the well-being of another person. So we read that in our marriages,

Ephesians 5:25

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

To love your children means you sacrifice for them. You turn off the TV You choose to play a game you don't want to play, or got the park when you are tired. True love always involves saying no to yourself; no to your own demand for comfort and convenient; and yes to someone else's needs.

Our church's vision statement is all about Christian love. Our church's vision statement is:

We seek to be a RELEVANT church that exists not for ourselves but for Christ and for the world.

And you know, whenever you practice self-sacrificial love, you can't keep it a secret. Here is what the apostle Paul says in Colossians 1:3-4:

Colossians 1:3-4

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all his people

Paul is all the way in Rome, hundreds and hundreds of miles away from Colossae. And yet, a report of the Colossians self-sacrificial love for all of God's people has reached the apostle Paul in prison in Rome. This is the way it is with self-sacrificial love. It is always a public thing.

It is absolutely the case that we don't advertise our own good deeds. Jesus tells us in Matt 6 to not let our left hand know what our right hand is doing. I will tell you what, whoever you sacrifice for, they will tell on you. You may not say anything, but other people will say something.

Just this past week I got a call from the Dispatch about the offering we took. They said, "Is it true that you guys raised over \$600,000 to help folks who have been affected by the recession?"

I said, "It's true. Where did you hear it?"

They said, "We can't tell you, but this is amazing!"

The self-sacrificial love of individuals in this congregation for their brothers and sisters in the Vineyard Family. So the story landed on the first page of Friday's Metro Section. I then received a call on Friday morning from the Associated Press Wire Service saying, "Hey, we heard that you guys took up a \$600,000 offering. Is it true?"

"Yes, it is true. People in the congregation gave and it wasn't simply a function of a few large gifts. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people gave to help folks in the church."

They put it out over the national wire services. Right after I got off the phone, literally within minutes of getting off the phone with the AP, Channel 10 called and said, "Hey, we want to do a story on your church. We heard about the offering you took up on Palm Sunday."

You know, when you self-sacrifice yourself for someone else – you shovel your neighbor's walk in the winter, you stop and help someone change their tire at night when it is cold, you bring someone a meal, you visit someone who is sick and in the hospital, I guarantee they'll tell someone else about it. Self-sacrificial love is always public.

Finally:

Colossians 1:4-5

because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all his people— 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true word of the gospel

In contrast to 21st century America's hopelessness, the Christian mind is characterized by hope

Historically we Americans have been the most optimistic people of any people on the face of the earth. I have been to dozens of countries and I'm always amazed by the difference between the mindset of folks living in other countries and the mindset of Americans. We are inveterate optimists. We do believe in a better tomorrow.

But over the 20+ years I see a different spirit at work in America, a hopelessness that tomorrow will not be better than today; that our kids' futures will not be better than our future; that our country won't be better than it is right now; and our world won't be better than it is right now. I see hopelessness in individuals who have lost confidence that they can be fixed, that they can change. But I see so many folks who are hopeless about themselves, who have basically adopted the non-Christian mindset of "I am broken and beyond repair; nothing can change me. There is no way out of the circumstances I'm in. There is no way out of the addiction and habits that I'm trapped in. There is no way out of these feelings of despair or depression. I've lived in this for so long."

I think President Obama's message of hope resonated with lots of Americans who had a feeling that there was something wrong with the hopelessness that we're experiencing. We need to hope again. The only problem is we must understand what we're to put our hope in because we are constantly placing our hope for a better tomorrow on things that won't deliver. Do not place your hope for a better tomorrow in the government. Do not place your hope for a better tomorrow in people. Do not place your hope for a better tomorrow in money, or medication, or even in a certain answer to prayer that you are demanding from God. "Well, if God intervenes in this way, then I will have a better tomorrow."

Repentance often means I will stop fixing my hopes in my performance, a set of demands about how my life should work. I will stop fixing my hopes on my looks, or in men, or in a bottle of alcohol, or in someone else's opinion. I am going to fix my hope on Christ.

The distinguishing mark of the Christian mind is hope in Christ alone. The only way I'm going to have the tomorrow that is more joyful than today is if I fix my hope fully on Christ. I will have a future because of Christ. I can have goals because of Christ. I can persevere in the face of suffering, or difficulty because my tomorrow in Christ, my ultimate tomorrow, will absolutely be better than today.

It may be that before the second coming of Christ, you never get married. It may be that you are never healed. It may be that you never find a job as good as the job you had. Well, your hopes are in those things. Those things are momentary. Those things are transient. I'm reaching forward to God's ultimate goal for me – my complete salvation. The restoration of not only me, but the entire universe, I'm reaching forward for that. And I'm trying to bring into my life, my little world, my hope of a bit of the future now.

Let me close with a couple of thoughts. Hope, the belief in a better tomorrow through God fuels faith and love. Paul says in verse 5:

Colossians 1:5

the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true word of the gospel

See, I can sacrifice now in my marriage, my friendships, my child-raising, or work, or in ministry. We can give up our rights to comfort and convenience. We can decide that we are going to leave the comfort of America to go overseas and bring the gospel to some unreached people group because there is a future hope. Jesus, in fact, holds out future hope as the motivation for sacrifice. Peter said to Jesus:

Matthew 19:27

Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

Jesus answered:

Matthew 19:28-29

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

If you have no hope, you have to get yours now. If your marriage is not working for you, you've got to get out because this life is all there is. If you have no eternal hope, why sacrifice for your kids or for anyone else? But if you have hope, this life is less than a moment in the scale of eternity. That God will bless me and reward me and give me the strength to persevere even in this difficult marriage, even in this wheelchair, even as I have to fight through depression, that God will ultimately bless me, if I keep believing in him and sacrificing for other people, then we can do it. I don't have to get all mine now because in the end I get the very best – I get Christ!

Friends, the Christian life should look entirely different than every other life that we see in this world because the Christian life is lived from the Christian mind, a mind that is distinguished by faith, love and hope. Let's pray.

Distinguishing Marks of the Christian Mind

Rich Nathan

April 18-19, 2009

Vision for Life: Seeing the Big Picture (Colossians) Series

Colossians 1:1-8

I. The cure for a false philosophy: A Christian Worldview

II. The distinguishing marks of the Christian mind

- A. In contrast to 21st century America's "everything is just a matter of opinion", the Christian mind is characterized by submission to the authority of God's revealed truth (Colossians 1:1, 5-6)
- B. In contrast to 21st century America's single identity, the Christian mind is characterized by a dual identity (Colossians 1:2)
- C. In contrast to 21st century America's pride, the Christian mind is characterized by humble gratitude to God (Colossians 1:3)
- D. In contrast to 21st century America's cynicism and self-reliance, the Christian mind is characterized by faith in Christ (Colossians 1:4-5)
- E. In contrast to 21st century America's selfishness, the Christian mind is characterized by self-sacrificial love (Colossians 1:4-5)
- F. In contrast to 21st century America's hopelessness, the Christian mind is characterized by hope (Colossians 1:5-6)