

Fruitfulness on the Frontline Sermon Outlines

Reflections on Fruitfulness at Colossae

This is one of three sample sermon series outlines
prepared by Antony Billington & Neil Hudson
to support the Fruitfulness on the Frontline DVD course
The others are:

The Central Texts used in the Course

Fruitfulness in the Bible

They can be found at
www.licc.org.uk/fruitfulness
together with further supporting material



FRUITFULNESS
ON THE FRONTLINE.

A Word of Orientation

We are preachers. We've been doing it for a long time now. After all these years, we've found our own voice. It took a long time, but it was worth the wait. It means we can preach out of who we are, not trying to imitate others. It means we can preach from our own engagement with Scripture, supported by the reflections of others.

So if we were reading these outlines as preachers, we would be suspicious and intrigued. We'd be suspicious because we don't want to pass other people's material off as our own - too much guilt lies that route! On the other hand, we'd be intrigued. We would look through the texts - many well-known - and wonder whether there was anything new there. We're aware there is still much to learn, and so would be interested to see how someone else was reflecting on them.

What follows is not a series of polished sermon outlines. They are not crafted as a finished product ready for preaching. Instead, what follows are the sorts of notes we might write for ourselves during sermon preparation. As such they are offered as part of a conversation with preachers - the kind of thoughts we would have shared with you if we had been able to sit together over a coffee and an open Bible. What are missing are your thoughts, the ones that start, 'Yes that's great, but did you see...' with the prospects of opening up further exploration. That's our hope anyway.

Overall, we trust that there are kernels of thought here that will enable you to engage with the biblical passages in fresh ways - for the sake of those to whom you minister - in ways that stir up the enthusiasm of the Spirit, the one who both makes possible the prospect of fruitfulness and promises that this will be the normal Christian life for all who remain in the vine.

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Introduction to These Reflections on Colossians

This sermon series allows a congregation to explore some of the main passages in Paul's letter to the Colossians alongside the sessions in the *Fruitfulness on the Frontline* DVD. This might be particularly helpful for those churches which would value a central biblical focus for their Sunday gatherings whilst going through the course. The suggested scenario would be for small groups to work through individual sessions of the DVD during the week, and then for the preaching ministry to reinforce the material by a sermon on a passage from Colossians - probably best done on the Sunday after groups have done a DVD session during the week before.

In order to track with the 6Ms in the DVD, passages from Colossians are not treated in order (if only Paul had worked with us here!). For this reason it might be useful to devote some time to setting each passage within the immediate flow of the letter. Moreover, what's proposed here is not a traditional expository series on Colossians so much as an opportunity to see how what Paul says might augment what is covered in the *Fruitfulness on the Frontline* course.

The outline for an eight-week series looks like this:

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Clothed with Christ (Colossians 3:12-17) p.6
3. Making Good Work
Working for Christ (Colossians 3:17-4:1) p.8
4. Ministering Grace and Love
Growing in Christ (Colossians 1:3-8) p.10
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6. Mouthpiece for Truth and Justice
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1. The Big Picture

Reconciled through Christ (Colossians 1:1-2 & 1:15-20)

Jesus Christ - the ruler, agent, goal, and sustainer of God's creation - and the head of the church - is the one through whom God reconciles all things through his death on the cross.

Reflections on Colossians 1:1-2

The opening verses provide an opportunity to introduce or reinforce the concept of 'frontline'.

The title of Derek Tidball's book, *In Christ, In Colossae* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2011), helpfully describes the nature of Christian existence in the world - with Christians taking their identity from the place where they live and work (in Colossae) as well as their identity as those who are 'in Christ'. By this time, Colossae was a town of faded glory, and the majority of those living there would have been ordinary men and women who farmed crops, looked after sheep, dying wool, selling wool and textiles, some of whom would have been slaves, essentially scraping a living.

It's possible to draw lines between members of the Colossian church with their various 'frontlines' and the 21st-century congregation - and to encourage them to see that Paul's letter orients us (as it did the Colossians) around the word of the gospel and the lordship of Christ, showing who Jesus is, what he has done, and how that works out in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

Reflections on Colossians 1:15-20

- Note the significance of this passage in the flow of the earlier thanksgiving (1:3-8) and prayer (1:9-14), which leads directly into verse 15 (which begins with the words 'who is' as part of the same sentence, continuing from verses 13 and 14).
- The significance of Jesus as the Lord of all in a religiously competitive marketplace.
- The significance of Jesus as Lord for the many different contexts in which members of the congregation find themselves when 'scattered' during the week.

One approach would be to explore the passage in three parts:

1. Christ and the creation (1:15-17) - the ruler, agent, goal, and sustainer of creation.
2. Christ and the church (1:18) - the head of the body.
3. Christ and the consummation (1:19-20) - the one through whom God will reconcile all things, a reconciliation which comes about through the cross, which is then applied personally to the Colossians in 1:21-23.

Implications/applications

- The comfort that comes from knowing Christ - that the Christian faith is not a particular way of being religious, or a particular system of morals, but about *Jesus*, the firstborn over all creation, the head of the church, and the reconciler of the universe. Again, this amazing picture of Jesus was given to people in a city of fading glory, to people in ordinary manual work contexts, which may be significant for Christians today who struggle to see that their lives are significant.
- The challenge that comes with serving Christ - seeing ourselves as part of the bigger story of creation and reconciliation, and the whole-life implications of that. Here, it might be possible to gesture towards some of the things Paul will write about in chapters 3 and 4 of the letter, as well as flagging up the 6Ms to be covered in the DVD.



2. Modelling Godly Character Clothed with Christ (Colossians 3:12-17)

God's people are to 'put on' a new set of characteristics which bear the marks of a new humanity recreated in the image of Jesus.

Reflections on Colossians 3:12-17

- Paul has already called the Colossians to 'put off' certain qualities (3:9), and now he calls them to 'put on' certain characteristics (3:10, 12a), which - like the fruit of the Spirit - show us what modelling godly character looks like.
- The 'clothing' analogy lends itself to quips about poor dress sense, bad fashion choices, or stories about wearing wrong clothes in particular situations.
- There is an *intentionality* about 'clothing' ourselves, which requires conscious daily decisions about what to wear - clothes which are to be appropriate for our new life in Christ.
- The passage can be looked at for two main principles of being clothed with Christ - living the characteristics of Christ and following the pattern of Christ, as follows:
 1. Living the characteristics of Christ - the qualities/virtues/characteristics can be listed and looked at in the order they appear in the passage, with brief definition and example of the characteristic in action: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, love, peace, thankfulness, wisdom.
 2. Following the pattern of Christ - our life and our relationships are *marked* by Christ, and *motivated* by Christ. Note how many times Paul appeals to the pattern set by Jesus:

3:12 - Paul addresses us as 'God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved', which are titles of privilege. The qualities we are called to 'put on' are qualities associated with our calling.

3:13: 'Forgive - *as the Lord forgave you.*' His forgiveness becomes the motive for us to turn our bitterness into forgiveness.

3:15 - it is the peace - of *Christ* - which should rule our lives.

3:16 - it is the word - of *Christ* (i.e., the message which centers on Christ) - which dwells among us in order for us to teach and admonish one another in wisdom.

3:17 - we do all - in the name of *Christ*.

Implications/applications

- In case we think Paul is writing just about set times of worship (e.g., the 'singing' of 3:16), he reminds us that he's writing about the *whole* of life, in 3:17: 'And *whatever* you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'
- It's worth comparing how many of these characteristics overlap with the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23.
- Most of the qualities imply the significance of *relationship*. We can't be a person like this in holy and glorious isolation.
- In the first place, the passage is about relationships within the community of faith (which, in part, is a valuable incubator of such qualities). But the passage can be applied by extension to relationships in *other* arenas of life *outside* the body of Christ - encouraged by the 'whatever you do' of verse 17 and the flow of the passage into the household code that follows, as well as Paul's counsel in 4:6-7.
- Christ's people will want to keep Christ central. He provides the strength and motivation for how we clothe ourselves: his characteristics become our characteristics, his forgiveness is the basis of our forgiveness, his peace rules our hearts, his word dwells in us richly.
- The passage provides a focus on *character* - not a set of rules or holiness by numbers - taking our cue from Jesus, with what he has done for us, and asking what sort of people we should be as a result, reminding us that every aspect of our life is transformed by Christ.

3. Making Good Work Working for Christ (Colossians 3:17-4:1)

The commitment to Jesus as Lord is to be worked out in the daily life of Christians - in the home and the workplace - in relationship with others, and as bound up with our service of Jesus himself.

Reflections on Colossians 3:17-4:1

This is one of those places where we have to acknowledge that the social conditions assumed in the passage are not exactly the same social conditions most of us face today. However, this does not mean the passage is of no use to us, providing we're careful to recognise the *principles* which flow from it which are applicable now as much as then.

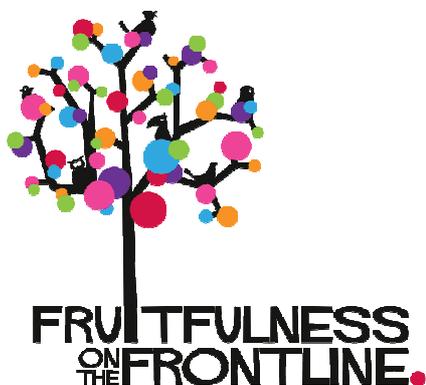
1. Discipleship that is whole-life - whatever we make of all the details, this passage shows us that Christ's rule extends to every area of life. 3:17 finishes the thought of the previous section, but also effectively provides a way in to the next section, reinforcing the 'whole-life' nature of Christianity in (1) the 'whatever you do', (2) the 'whether in word or deed', and (3) the reference to the lordship of Jesus in 'do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus'. All this is further reinforced with similar-sounding language in 3:23, along with the (unusual) reference to the 'Lord Christ' in 3:24.
2. Relationships that are two-way - there is a reciprocity, in the various duties described here - between wife and husband, between children and parents, between slaves and masters.
3. Motivation that is Christ-centred - every aspect of our everyday life and relationships, including family and work life and relationships, is redefined in relation to Christ (see the many references to 'the Lord' in 3:18, 20, 22, 23, and 4:1).

Implications/applications

- Here is an opportunity to reinforce the 'In Christ, in Colossae' dimension. Colossians 3:1 says that we have been raised with Christ to the right hand of God, but Paul is equally clear that our feet are planted on earthly places too - with others, in the humdrum of everyday life, in the home and at work.
- This might also be the moment to remind those who are not married or no longer married, or have no children, or whose children have left home, or don't have a paid job, etc. (i.e., any reason why people might exclude themselves from what Paul says!) that for *all* of us, our following of Christ embraces the whole of our lives - *wherever* we find ourselves on a daily basis, living out our faith in the midst of specific relationships and specific

duties, our Christianity being rooted in these places - with specific people and specific tasks in everyday life.

- In the first-century context, much of what Paul says is counter-cultural. His call to wives to submit to their husbands wouldn't raise many eyebrows, but what he says to the husband would have sounded out of kilter with society and culture at the time. Slaves too are treated as members of the community, and the fact that they are addressed at all is significant. They share in the common responsibility of the community of faith and wider society.
- Our working for Christ requires us to be in relationship with others - not just in the church and not just on Sundays, but in the home and at work, on Mondays to Saturdays.
- This passage is not just about how to have a better marriage or raise better kids or be a better worker. It's about demonstrating to society that there is a way out of the mess we tend to make as human beings, and it's through Jesus Christ who restores lives and reorders relationships. Paul is not trying to give detailed advice. Instead, he gets us to think about our current role *in relation to Christ*, and to see how Christ redefines our role - whether we are husbands, wives, parents, children, employers or employees, or some combination of those things.



4. **Ministering Grace and Love** **Growing in Christ (Colossians 1:3-8)**

Paul thanks God for evidence of the growth of the gospel in the lives of the Colossian believers - seen in their faith, love, and hope.

Reflections on Colossians 1:3-8

- Many commentators point out that the language of ‘bearing fruit and growing’ (1:6) alludes to God’s command to the first humans to ‘be fruitful and increase in number’ (Genesis 1:28; cf. 9:1, 7). Here, that original mandate to be fruitful is finally being fulfilled in the growth of the gospel and in people who have been created anew in Christ (cf. 1:15-16; 3:10).
- Our ‘ministering grace and love’ in everyday life flows out of the grace and love we have first received from God, and is rooted in the gospel.
- The reference to the gospel ‘bearing fruit’ throughout the world and among the Colossians (1:6) provides two main thoughts around which a sermon could be constructed: people growth (1:3-6) and gospel growth (1:6-8)

People growth (1:3-6) - Paul is grateful to God for signs of the Colossians’ faithful acceptance of the gospel, and the evidence of the gospel being worked out in their lives - in faith, love, and hope (1:4-6).

Gospel growth (1:6-8) - the Colossians’ growth in faith, love and hope as Christians is connected to the growth of the gospel (1:5b-6), the message of what God has done in Christ to restore the world, which is bearing fruit and growing all over the world.

- Before the gospel can grow and bear fruit in our lives, it must be heard and understood (1:6c). Both hearing *and* understanding are important.
- How do people get to hear the gospel? Answer - through faithful messengers of the gospel (1:7-8).

Implications/applications

- Paul regularly thanks God for the churches to which he writes. What might we learn from this about our own practice of giving thanks for others?
- The faith for which Paul gives thanks is not faith in general but *faith in Christ Jesus*. Nor is faith mere head knowledge, but that which expresses itself in love for God's people. Faith directed toward Jesus Christ is embodied in love for others, and motivated by hope in the life to come. There is plenty of scope here for reflection on what faith, hope and love might look like as signs of personal and corporate growth - things for which we should give thanks - which then flow out to others on our frontlines.
- Before the gospel can grow and bear fruit in our lives, it must be heard *and* understood (1:6c). How do people get to hear the gospel? Answer - through faithful messengers of the gospel (1:7-8).



5. Moulding Culture Raised with Christ (Colossians 3:1-11)

Christians will reflect something of their identity and status as those raised with Christ - in how they think and how they live and relate to each other.

Reflections on Colossians 3:1-11

There is a new life that comes from being raised with Christ. Freedom from the law doesn't mean freedom from any moral obligation (which some might mistakenly think is the upshot of the previous section, 2:16-23). There is a way of living *as* people who have been made alive in Christ, which involves new minds, new life, and new community.

1. New minds (3:1-4) - this whole section is premised on the reality that we are united with Christ. 'Since, then' (3:1) is a linking phrase, relating what Paul is *about* to say with what he's *already* said. So, 3:1 picks up the theme of Christ's resurrection and victory that Paul has written about in chapters 1 and 2, and develops the fact that we have been made alive in Christ, where it becomes clear in 3:1-4 that the basis of our new life is our union with the risen and exalted Jesus.
2. New life (3:5-10) - note the 'therefore' at the start of 3:5 - there are some implications that go with our new status in Christ, which have to do with being renewed in Christ. There are certain things we are to give up: 'put to death' (3:5) and 'rid yourselves' (3:8).
3. New community (3:11) - renewal in Christ extends to bringing together a new people whose identity unites them to each other and transcends (though without destroying) traditional social, religious, and ethnic divisions (cf. Galatians 3:28).

Implications/applications

- As we seek to 'mould culture' on our frontlines, we do so from the basis of deep security in our identity as those raised with Christ, who are being remade in his image, and who are united with fellow believers. We 'have taken off our old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator' (3:9-10). Again, this relates back to what Paul has said earlier. They have put on the new humanity which is being renewed according to the image of the one who created it - Christ himself, who is the image of God (1:15).

- There is plenty of scope for exploring how ‘putting off’ practices that are self-seeking, divisive, and harmful to others, might over time shape the various contexts in which we live and work.
- It might be helpful to revisit the positive counterpart to ‘putting off’ in what follows in 3:12-17 - putting on compassion, kindness, humility, etc.



6. Mouthpiece for Truth and Justice Fruitful for Christ (Colossians 1:9-14)

Paul prays for the Colossians to be filled with the knowledge of God's will so they can live lives worthy of the Lord, seen in bearing fruit, growing, being empowered, and giving thanks.

Reflections on Colossians 1:9-14

Paul has already given thanks because of the gospel bearing fruit in the world and in the church (1:3-8). Now Paul prays for them, including that they will bear fruit in every good work (1:10). His prayer offers some hints as to what such fruitfulness might look like.

1. Filled with knowledge (1:9) - the focus of which is God's *will* (1:9c), which comes 'through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives'.
2. Living for God (1:10) - filled with the knowledge of God's will so that they will live a life worthy of the Lord, to 'please God in every way' - which is fairly comprehensive - leading to bearing fruit in every good work, and growing in the knowledge of God.
3. Strengthened with power (1:11) - in order to have great endurance and patience, to be able to carry on when things are tough.
4. Giving thanks to God (1:12-14) - where endurance is accompanied by joy and thankfulness (1:12a), because he has qualified us to share in the inheritance of his people, which is possible only because of what Jesus has done in bringing about release from bondage and forgiveness (1:13-14).

Implications/applications

- It's not immediately apparent how this passage might align with M5 - 'mouthpiece for truth and justice'. Perhaps a good start is in the reminder at the end of the passage that Christians have been rescued from one kingdom and brought into another one (like the exodus all over again), which constitutes our identity as God's people, and where God's forgiveness of us provides the basis for our own actions of mercy and justice towards and on behalf of others.
- Even so, some elements of the prayer might be especially applicable to situations where we or others might need to be 'mouthpieces for truth and justice' - discernment, courage, endurance, being confident of our identity in Christ.

- More generally, this prayer could be used to pray for fruitfulness across all 6Ms, praying for one another in line with Paul's requests - for knowledge, wisdom, understanding, a worthy life, growth, strength, endurance, patience, thankfulness - and in it all, bearing fruit in every good work.



7. Messenger of the Gospel Proclaimers of Christ (Colossians 4:2-6)

Paul encourages the Colossians to look outwards, to pray for his evangelistic work, and to be alert to their own opportunities - in word and in deed - to proclaim the mystery of Christ.

Reflections on Colossians 4:2-6

The word 'proclaim' is repeated twice in the passage (see 4:3-4). Paul asks for prayer that he and the other apostles would be able to proclaim what he calls 'the mystery of Christ' clearly, but his own proclamation of Christ appears to be a pattern of the way the Colossians are to proclaim Christ as well. What might this involve?

1. Praying devotedly (4:2-4) - praying with watchfulness and thankfulness (4:2b), praying for others (4:3a, 4), praying in dependence on God (4:3bc), praying that Christ will be proclaimed clearly (4:4).
2. Acting wisely (4:5) - regular, everyday Christians - not just apostles - can be proclaimers of Christ - by acting wisely towards people and making the most of every opportunity.
3. Speaking graciously (4:6) - being civil, polite, gentle, inoffensive, using speech that builds rapport with people, and with answers ready for those who challenge or are curious about our faith (cf. 1 Peter 3:15).

Implications/applications

- Colossians 4:2-6 reflects what the Bible says elsewhere - that godly walk goes hand in hand with godly talk.
- Note the assumption that Christianity is not a privatised religion, but is rather lived out before others in the public places of everyday life. At stake here is our daily way of life before outsiders, where the message of the gospel is seen *lived out* in the lives of those of us who claim to believe it and proclaim it.
- Paul expects the Colossians to be able to hold their own on their market stalls and at the meal tables and in the public baths and in the city squares. So, there is a challenge here - to be well-grounded in the faith - and it may be necessary to work on that together as a church, to help one another. But there is also the encouragement that the things about which Paul writes are not beyond us.

8. The Journey On Alive with Christ (Colossians 2:6-23)

Paul encourages the Colossians to continue to be faithful to Jesus as Lord, rather than be drawn aside by anything that would detract from the victory God has accomplished through Christ.

Reflections on Colossians 2:6-23

This final sermon could focus just on the exhortation in 2:6-7, in which case it could be called 'Continue in Christ'. Paul begins the section with an appeal.

1. The appeal (2:6-7) - they have received Christ, and are to continue to live their lives in dependence on Christ, with thanksgiving.
2. The warnings (2:8-23) - what follows are some warnings which flow out of Paul's appeal.
 - Warning against deceptive philosophy (2:8-15)
 - Warning against irrelevant practices (2:16-17)
 - Warning against empty promises (2:18-19)
 - Warning against false purity (2:20-23)

Implications/applications

- Essentially, this passage brings us back to where we started in 1:15-20 - with an amazing portrait of what God has done for us and for his world in Christ, which carries profound implications for our identity and fruitfulness.
- For the Christian, Christ is all-sufficient and all-supreme. God has put his fullness in Christ (2:9), and we have the benefits of being joined to him (2:10), which includes the stripping away of the sinful nature (2:11-12), being made alive and having all our sins forgiven (2:12-13), through the victory of the cross (2:14-15).
- In addition, we are connected with Christ (2:19), from whom the whole body - his church - draws its life, through which all its muscles and ligaments and joints are sustained.
- If dealt with, the issues of food, asceticism, special days, etc., could be presented as potential distractions from the core message that Paul thinks is vital. In the same way, we can get ourselves embroiled in concerns that keep us busy but do not enable us to be people engaged in mission.



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