

SUSTAINED BY SOVEREIGN GRACE ALONE

by

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Good Morning!

What a joy it is for me to preach for you again this morning. Thank you, Pastor Matt!

The last time I preached here was on Valentines' Day. The day we had the snow and it was recommended that everyone stay home and join the worship online. There were literally 5 people in here that day, I think, so to see you all here today is a delight.

I'm only mentioning my last time preaching because I walked out of here really quite anxious. Not because of anything I may have said ... though maybe that should have been the case ... but because I felt I was going to be tested.

I spoke about "love" that day:

- Love for God
- Love for Neighbor
- Love for Enemy, and
- Love for One Another

For the sake of context of what I'm about to say and you didn't hear that message, I would invite you to at least read it – you can find it on the church's website under the sermon title "Grace For Lovers".

I mention this only because the testing I anticipated began in earnest just a couple of weeks after that sermon. Frankly, I'm not through it yet, but God's grace has sustained me despite my state of mind, lack of joy, sin, anxiety, exhaustion, and just plain worry.

Yes, I'm still a sinner very much in need of grace.

Then, who on earth am I to dare stand here and preach to you this morning?

But that's just it, isn't it? As the old adage says: "God doesn't call the equipped, he equips those whom He calls". It's true.

Well, why even mention this?

Because, in my last sermon, I talked about loving one's neighbor, and especially our enemies. That's been the battle-ground for me for the past several months. Learning afresh how wicked

the sinfulness of humanity really is. From personal attacks, vindictiveness, spite, back-stabbing, and just plain evil, sinful behavior.

And as I mentioned back in February, when pointing outwards – preaching to you – there’s always three fingers pointing back – preaching to myself.

There’s a reason – isn’t there? – that Jesus told us to take out the plank from our own eye before pointing out the specks in another’s eye...Matthew 7:5.

And as I’ve reflected back on the past few weeks and months and seeing my own lack of Christian love for those who would seek to harm me has been troubling – at least in my own eyes.

Again, why even mention this?

Because those of us who are Christians have a duty – a command – a responsibility to love those around us: our neighbor, our enemies, one another, and especially God Himself.

So, we have to ask ... how well are we doing?

Really, when you take a good hard look at your own life, how well are you doing? I have no doubts whatsoever that some of you are doing a **whole** better than me, but seriously, how well are we doing?

I’ve got to tell you; it really troubles me that the lack of compassionate agape-love from professing Christians to others – whether to other Christians or not – just abounds in our society today. From the reckless, selfishness of drivers on the road ... and yes, including those with Christian bumper stickers ... to the abject rudeness and hostility found everywhere on the sewer that is social media.

The political scene ... oh, Brother!

You name it! It’s in-your-face and you can’t escape it.

And this is not a small thing.

I’d like to take this time to dig just a little deeper on this matter with you, looking at what God has to say about it, how to pray through it, and most of all, to trust God and walk with Him as He sustains us by His Sovereign Grace alone.

We all know the warnings in the New Testament – don’t we? – about the end times, from Jesus Himself as well as the Apostles Paul and Peter:

- Jesus in Matthew 24 ... nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom ... false prophets ... “And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold” (Mt 24:12)

- Paul in 2 Timothy 3:1-5 ... “But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves ...” and so on
- Peter in 1 Peter 4:7 ... “The end of all things is near; therefore, be self-controlled and sober-minded...”

But what sat with me and resonated with me most in my reflections was Paul’s commentary in Colossians, Chapter 3 together with my favorite prayer.

Here now the reading of God’s Holy Word from Colossians 3:1-17

COLOSSIANS 3:1-17

The Word of God ... For the people of God ... Thanks be to God. Amen.

Join me in a word of prayer, will you?

Almighty God, to Whom all hearts are open,
 All desires known, and from Whom no secrets are hid.
 Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
 By the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit
 So that we may perfectly love You
 And worthily magnify Your Holy Name
 Through Christ our Lord,
 Amen.

Oh, how I love that prayer! I grew up with it being read in the Church of England every week as part of the litany of every worship service.

It’s not in the Bible, but then again, neither are our confessions and creeds. But it is a very godly prayer, nonetheless. And when I’m the pit, God has used that prayer to sustain me and keep me sane.

It’s addressed to our Almighty, Sovereign, Omniscient, Omnipresent God. The God of the Bible. Not the imagined idea of who I want God to be – who would be nothing more than an idol. The Father knows us through and through. He knows every one of our thoughts, words and deeds. From the day we were conceived, to today, to the day we will die and beyond.

Nothing about me is beyond His knowledge. My heart is an open book. Every desire, every hope, every feeling ... whether godly or sinful ... He knows them absolutely. And yours, too. Nothing is hidden.

So there’s no place we can go to hide the wicked thoughts, desires and sins of our heart.

Psalm 139 makes that abundantly clear, doesn’t it?

Psalm 139:1-4,7-8

And it certainly does no good to deceive ourselves to think our hearts are really not that dirty.

They are!

As Jesus says in Matthew 15:19-20a ... “For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person...”

All we can do is plead with God to cleanse us from the inside out. By the inspiration of His Holy Spirit.

By His Word. By regular, deep immersion in His divinely inspired Word. (2 Tim 3:16)

And by prayer. Knowing that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness (Romans 8), interceding for us with groanings too deep for words.

And by the accountability from godly friends. That is, the working of the Holy Spirit in the communion of the saints, where iron sharpens iron.

Back to our Scripture passage for today...

Verse 5 ... it’s essentially the same as what we just read from the lips of Jesus in Matthew 15, isn’t it?

Colossians 3:5 ... “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”

So what?

Verse 6 ... “On account of these the wrath of God is coming”.

And I can just hear it: “...oh, there he goes again!”.

I once preached a sermon back in Colorado the week after Easter and I took the opportunity to look back at Jesus on the cross being exposed to the wrath of God on our behalf ... you know, a core truth of the Gospel message ... and I was all but rebuked after the service to be told, in essence, “we just like to focus of the love of God”. Translation – don’t talk about the wrath of God.

I was stunned. This came from some of the leadership and hired staff at the church.

But I’ve since found that this is very common, even amongst ourselves.

We like the “nice”, “loving”, “gracious” things about God, but not the “undesirable” things about God – holiness, justice, and wrath. It’s in our DNA. Just like at a smorgasbord restaurant, we pick what we like and leave out what we don’t. Trouble is, when we do that, we’ve just created an idol for ourselves.

The God we imagine Him to be ... the God we want Him to be ... not the actual Holy God of the Bible.

Where does that come from? That’s right, our sinful hearts.

...because of these things, the wrath of God is coming.

I don't want to stay here, but it has to be addressed. It's in the text and was written for our good.

Paul is literally splitting the issue clearly down the middle. On one side we have sin and evil, and on the other we have holy living. He's just following Jesus' example in Matthew 25 of the sheep and the goats: goats on the left, sheep on the right. The goats being the evildoers, the sheep being the righteous. And the goats are ultimately sent off to hell.

So here in our text, verses 1 and 2, we have a clear directive to SET our hearts and minds on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God – and don't miss the imagery here ... Jesus is **seated** as Judge and Sovereign Ruler of all Creation.

Compare that with Jesus **standing** at the right hand of God as defense attorney when Stephen was about to be stoned to death in Acts 7.

SET or FIX your heart and mind on things above. A deliberate, intentional act. Using our hearts and minds – the very act of loving God, right?

What's the greatest of all commandments? To love the Lord our God with what? ALL our heart, ALL our soul, ALL our mind, and all our strength.

Hebrews 12:2 says the same thing: Let us FIX our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...

And in 2 Corinthians 4:18: "So we FIX our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen..."

And then, of course, we have Romans 8:5 "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds SET on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds SET on what the Spirit desires".

A clear separation between good and evil, right and wrong, godly living and wicked living.

And you'll notice that the list Paul begins with here in Colossians ... it's almost like he's knows a thing or two about today's society – rampant sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which amounts to idolatry.

You know what I'm talking about ... every sexual proclivity you can possibly imagine, and then some. Read Romans 1 again which concludes with sinful people literally inventing ways of doing evil. It's happening so fast today we can't keep up with it.

I mean, really, we can't call mothers "mothers" any more. No, no ... they are "chest feeders", reducing motherhood to merely feeding an infant from the lactating organs on the chest.

What? What??

...because of these things, the wrath of God is coming!

And Paul says, in our natural sinful selves, we used to walk in these ways, in the life we once lived ... verse 7.

But there it is, in black and white: sin and evil, and because of these things, the wrath of God is coming!

But for the true believer, that's our former self. We have now been saved from the wrath that is to come.

How often do we really contemplate the dreadful, awful, reality of the wrath of God from which we have been delivered?

I don't mean morbid fascination. I mean a real, contemplative reflection on exactly what it is we have been saved from...

Our salvation is not just being "saved from our sins" as our language goes. No. It's being saved from the consequences of our sin.

For the unbeliever, for the unrepentant sinner, the horror that awaits them is nothing less and nothing more than the wrath of a Just and Holy God:

Romans 2:5 ... "But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath..."

Romans 2:8 ... "...for those who are self-seeking and reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger".

Loved ones! The wrath of God is precisely what God rescues us from. God rescues us from Himself!

How?

Well, that's exactly what Jesus came to do, isn't it?

He came as the lamb without blemish, lived a perfectly sinless life and then in the Garden of Gethsemane, looked into the cup. Remember that? And He prayed with such a fervent intensity in His humanity that He sweat out drops of blood.

Luke 22:42-44 ... "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not what I will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed all the more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground."

What was that cup?

It was the Cup of Divine Wrath mentioned several times in the Old Testament as well as in Revelation:

Job 21:20

Psalms 75:8

Isaiah 51:17

Jeremiah 25:15, 27

Revelation 14:10 ... "he too will drink of the wine of God's anger, poured undiluted into the cup of His wrath..."

What a dreadful thing!

But this is precisely what our Lord looked at in the Garden. He knew what it meant. And He knew perfectly well that this was why He was here.

If He was to save the sheep – His sheep – all who would believe in Him – He HAD to drink it. And He did.

He was the lamb without blemish but became the Scapegoat. For me. For you. And for anyone who would turn away from their sin and believe in Him.

On the Cross, my sin, your sin, the sin of the world was laid on Christ.

And just like the Old Testament High Priest on the Day of Atonement used to lay his hands on a goat (the scapegoat) – symbolically transferring the sin of the people to the back of the goat – and drive it outside the camp, so, too, Jesus was driven outside Jerusalem – outside the camp – where He took sin upon Himself while He was nailed to the cross.

2 Corinthians 5:21 ... "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us..."

At that particular moment in space and time, and in His humanity, Jesus Christ was quite literally the most concentrated mass of sin and evil the universe had ever known. And then Almighty God, who had been deliberately holding it back, unloaded His wrath and fury against that sin and evil.

And for three hours in the middle of the day with the lights quite literally turned out, graphically demonstrating the curse of the outer darkness – Our Lord Jesus, lovingly and willingly – received the wrath of God that I deserve. That you deserve. Full strength. And as He did, He howled from the pit of hell: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Because He really was forsaken.

Do you notice what He wasn't doing?

He wasn't gnashing his teeth at God.

In the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly warned people to repent and turn from sin, lest they be cast into hell where there would be "weeping and gnashing of teeth". What does that mean?

We weep for all kinds of reasons, don't we?

We weep for joy, in distress, while mourning, and so on. Those in hell are obviously weeping in distress.

But gnashing the teeth?

We've already looked at Stephen being stoned. Let's go back there for a second...after he spoke to the Sanhedrin, what happened?

Acts 7:54 ... "When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him."

They hated him with passion. Pouring out that hatred verbally.

That's what Jesus is saying about those doomed in hell. They are in distress being there and have a hatred, a loathing of God from Whom they receive wrath. So, there's fresh sin. Which receives fresh perfect judgment. From which comes more gnashing of the teeth and wrath. A true vicious cycle.

The requirement to perfectly love God hasn't changed. Nor will it ever change.

But this time, there's no grace, no mercy, and no hope.

Loved ones, that's what we who believe have been rescued from. Jesus experienced it on our behalf as the Divine Scapegoat.

Oh, what manner of love is this!!! Stunning, amazing grace! This is a love so deep, so personal, so intense, so incredible, so magnificent, so wonderful, so gracious, it just blows the mind!

We get to escape the judgment because Jesus Christ rescued us from it. Rescued from wrath! Rescued from the curse.

Instead, we get to go and spend eternity with Him in His eternal blessing. To receive the blessing of Numbers 6 full strength:

The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
The LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.

We get to go to heaven...

...Where we will be able to see God as He is.

...Where the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb ARE the temple in the New Jerusalem

...Where there is no more night.

...Where the glory of God is all around us.

...Where the angels and the all the saints will sing His praises with joy and delight.

...Forever!

But you know what else?

...Where there is no longer any curse (Revelation 22:3)

...Where there is no more sin

...Where God wipes away every tear

...Where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Rev 21: 4)

I can't wait! Come Lord Jesus...

But He's not finished with this world yet, is He? There are people He's still bringing into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Consider this ... For the believer, this world is all the hell we will ever experience; but for the unbeliever, the unrepentant sinner, this world with all its joys and pains and troubles, will be the only heaven they will ever know.

And eternity is a very long time...



Are there any of you here today not sure where you're going to spend eternity? What about you watching remotely? If you're not sure, then please do come and talk with me after the service. Or with one of the Elders. Or with Pastor Matt.

Today is the day of salvation – the day when there is still hope. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you WILL be saved. It's that simple.

Those of us who do believe, we have a job to do, don't we? We have been given the Great Commission. Each one of us has been called to be an Ambassador for Christ in this world.

And as Ambassadors, we carry the full weight of the King behind us, supporting us.

Matthew 28:20 ... "...And surely I (Jesus) am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Which brings us right back to our text in Colossians 3, because HOW we live as Ambassadors matters.

Listen closely again to Paul's admonition:

Colossians 3:8-17

That's really hard to do, isn't it? Because although we're forgiven sinners, we still have a sinful nature and therefore we still sin.

So, we continue with our prayer: Oh, God...

... Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit
So that we may perfectly love You and worthily magnify Your Holy Name
Through Christ our Lord, Amen

Jesus said: "If you love me, you will obey me."

And the only authentic response as believers can be: "Lord, I do love you, help me overcome my lack of love."

And the promise is that He will do exactly that!

Philippians 2:12-13 ... "...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, **for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.**"

Without His Sovereign sustaining grace, I would spiral back into sin and never recover. I am as dependent on His Sovereign, Sustaining, and Preserving Grace as I am in His Justifying Grace. It's all Saving Grace. Grace Alone!

And by that same grace, my obedience will be visible to hostile, needy world. It will not be done in secret. And while we may suffer because of it – a message for another time – God is drawing people to Himself until the day He brings all of history – His Story – to a close.

Grace then. Grace now. Grace eternally. Grace Alone.

Thanks be to God!

And now, rather than close this message in prayer, let us close out the message together by singing the only song that really fits...Amazing Grace.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

*

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed

*

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
We have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead us home

*

The Lord has promised good to me,
His Word my hope secures;
He will my Shield and Portion be,
As long as life endures

*

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright, shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun