

Colossians: The Incomparable Christ – Exposition of Colossians XVII

Colossians 4:7-18

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[Colossians 4:2-6 not transcribed]

Turn with me in your Bibles to Colossians, chapter four. We've come to the final exposition in this book. In verse 7, Paul begins his final words, his epilogue, his selection of greetings, and final directions, and words of appreciation.

Throughout our study, we have noted that the great theme of this book is that believers are complete in Christ. It's very interesting that Paul works that theme even into his final words of greetings. And we've probably outlined this book enough together over the last few Sundays that you can probably do it in your sleep. In chapter one, the apostle tells us who Christ is, and what He has done. And he tells us that if we will understand those things, we will understand the supremacy of Christ in His person and work. It will revolutionize the way we approach the Christian life, because if we understand His supremacy, we will understand that He is sufficient for growth in grace, and we'll stop looking for gimmicks. We'll stop looking to works righteousness. We'll stop looking to other sources of spiritual strength, which are not in Him, because in Him is everything that we need for growth in grace and fellowship with the Father.

In chapter two, he defends that idea against five misunderstandings that were being propagated in the church in Colossae, which actually undercut the truth that believers are complete in Christ, and which actually implicitly undercut the supremacy of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And so he gives five separate warnings in chapter two against teaching which is not in accordance with the truth.

Beginning in chapter three, and running down through chapter four, verse six, he applies the truth that believers are complete in Christ and that Christ is supreme, into five areas of day to day existence. Five practical areas of living. We saw them. Beginning in chapter three, he applies them to our hearts, our own personal relationship with god. Then he applies them to the area of the local congregation, how we get along with one another and work with one another. Then he applies those truths to the area of our home and family life. Then he applies them to the area of our work, our vocation. And then finally, last week we

saw, he applies them to our attitude and our position in the world. What should our attitude be towards the world? What is our posture to be toward the world? How are we to pray for the world? In each of those areas he shows just how practical his theology is. And let me just say in passing, though for us it's always easier to understand Paul in the second half of his letters when he is applying his truth, if you will get hold of what he says in the first half of those letters, it will revolutionize the way you look at the world, because his theology is tied together with practical issues of Christian living which confront us every day of our existence.

And so we come to his epilogue, his final words. Let's hear the word of the living God, beginning in Colossians, chapter four, verse seven.

Colossians 4:7-18

Our Father, we thank You for this word. We thank You for the truth of Your word. And we thank You for the power of Your word and the applicability of Your word. And now, we ask that You would open our eyes that we might behold wonderful things from Your word. And we'll give You all the praise and all the glory. For we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

This concluding word, this afterword, this epilogue, is among the richest in all the Apostle Paul's letters. Only the book of Romans has a longer list of personal greetings and directions and words of appreciation and encouragement. And in this epilogue, the Apostle Paul reveals something of his own heart, his concern for the church there at Colossae. The personal references tell you that this church is more to Paul than simply someone, or some body of people that he is interested in, in terms of advancing the numbers of his cause. He's concerned about them individually. He speaks of individual people. He gives individual words of encouragement and instruction and admonition. Paul is concerned about the people in this congregation, and there are many themes in this passage which we're not going to be able to explore. You may think that this is one of those passages, when you first look at it, kind of like the genealogies in the Book of Chronicles. How in the world can you learn anything from a passage like this? But the fact of the matter is, that this passage is so rich, there are many themes that we're not going to be able to look at today.

Let me tell you some of the themes that we're not going to be able to look at and explore today. We're not going to be able to explore the implications for the doctrine of the communion of saints, which are found in Paul's wonderful little phrase in verse nine about Onesimus, where he calls him a faithful and beloved brother, and he says that Onesimus is one of them, one of their number. Think of this. Paul is returning this runaway slave, Onesimus, who he's written about in the Book of Philemon. His master was a Christian from the congregation at Colossae, and Tychicus, the man who is returning to Colossae with this letter from the Apostle Paul is being accompanied by this runaway slave, Onesimus.

And the Apostle Paul calls this bond slave his 'beloved friend and fellow servant of the Lord.' Think of that, faithful and beloved brother, a runaway slave. And think of how he sends this slave back to the congregation and he says, 'he is one of you.' Think of the prestigious people who were in that congregation, not the least of whom was Philemon, who was wealthy enough to own slaves, and Paul says, 'this slave, he is one of you.' Think of the implications for the communion of saints. We're not going to be able to explore that this morning.

Then we're not going to explore the beautiful prayer of Epaphras that the Apostle Paul records for us in verse twelve. John Calvin says, that this is "a good pastor's prayer." He tells us that Epaphras, who has been ministering to this congregation even though he is now ministering to Paul in his imprisonment, has not forgotten the congregation, in fact, he engages in wrestling with the Lord daily, Paul tells us. And what does he pray? He prays that this people would be perfect in Christ, that they would be complete in Christ, and that they would be assured and fulfilled in the will of God. Why, in Epaphras's little prayer, he sums up the whole Book of Colossians, the whole emphasis of the Book of Colossians, that believers would be complete in Christ and that they would know what it is to be assured of that, and fulfilled in the will of God. And Paul says, 'he's praying that for you daily.'

Oh, that we had time to explore the beauty of that prayer. We're not going to have time to meditate on the fact that in this afterword, the Apostle Paul tells him that among those that are with him in his imprisonment were Mark and Luke. Think about it. Two of the four authors of the Gospels of our Lord Jesus Christ fellowshiping with Paul during his time of imprisonment. Can you imagine what their conversation must have been like, recounting the life and the deeds of our Lord and Savior? Paul, who had been carried up into the heaven of heavens; Mark, who had been with our Lord on the night in which He was betrayed; Luke, who had investigated these things for himself. Can you imagine the exalted prose of their conversation as they meditated together on the life and the history of our Lord and Savior? We're not going to have the time to think about that together today.

And we're not going to have time to think about the sad warning which Paul gives in one word in verse fourteen. The word is a name; the name Demas. Demas is mentioned as being with Luke, Paul's good friend and physician. Demas is mentioned again with Luke in the book of Philemon in verse twenty-four. Demas and Luke are mentioned, in both of those passages, they are mentioned as ongoing, faithful servants of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But I'm sad to tell you, friends, that the last word in the scriptures on Demas is a very sad one, because in the last book that Paul wrote, in Second Timothy, chapter four verse ten, he tells us that Demas fell away from the faith. Could Demas have been one of those Christians who rode the coattails of the more mature Luke, and who depended on him too much for his own spiritual maturity and growth in grace, and then, when the challenge came, he found just how empty his commitment to

Christ was, and he fell away? I don't know. But the sad thing is that the very mention of his name reminds us that we must take care to make our calling and election sure. We're not going to have time to talk about those things today.

What I'd like to do is, I'd like to point to what this passage teaches us about the character of the Apostle Paul. Because the characteristics worked in the Apostle Paul, and evident in these passages, are transferable characteristics which God expects of all fulfilled Christians. These are principles and aspects of our character which each of us ought to possess, and which each of us need to cultivate, and we see them very readily in this passage.

We see in this passage that Paul has a great capacity for people. We see in this passage that Paul has a great capacity for shared ministry. We see in this passage that Paul has a great capacity for supporting his co-workers, and we see in this passage that Paul has a great capacity for single-mindedness. Each of those things are things that ought to characterize our lives living in the grace of Christ. And so I'd like to look at those things as they are set forth and evidenced in the epilogue with you this morning.

I. The fulfilled Christian has a genuine concern for people.

And the first principle is this. The fulfilled Christian has a genuine concern for people. Note that Paul not only remembers the names of these folks, he is genuinely concerned with them. He is genuinely concerned about their well being. Now there are many ways that I could demonstrate that to you, just from this passage, but let me just choose one way. Notice why he says he is sending Tychicus and Onesimus. Look with me briefly at verse eight, "For I have sent him to you for this very purpose..." Paul says this is the reason why I am sending these men to you. And he tells us in verse eight that he wants them to tell the people at Colossae about his situation. "I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances." He repeats that idea again in verse nine, where he says when Tychicus and Onesimus arrive, "they will inform you about the whole situation here."

Now Paul is not telling this church about his situation because he wants them to have sympathy for him. He's not desiring to engage in a pity party and have some company in his misery of imprisonment. Paul wants to tell them something about what is going on with him because he knows that they are concerned about him. Paul knows that these people are desperately interested in what his condition is: 'Paul, are you going to be taken to trial? Paul, is there a possibility that you will be released? If you are going to be taken to trial, will this mean the death penalty? And if so, how can we help you?' They have dozens of questions in their minds that they wanted answered about the beloved Apostle Paul whom had brought them the gospel. And Paul, even though in a letter where he is going to minister the majestic truth of our Lord and Savior Christ, he does not omit to

deal with the human concerns that they had for him. It was not for a selfish reason that Paul was going to convey to them his situation. It was because he was concerned for them, and he knew that they were concerned about him, and that is why he sends word back giving specific details about himself.

Notice Paul's concern for people there. I was having lunch with a man who faithfully ministered in this congregation, impacted the lives of many, and he was telling me about a young man that he had been meeting on a number of occasions that greatly distressed him. The young man, every time that he got with him, wanted to argue points of theology. This young man thought that he understood theological truths that the entire rest of the world didn't understand, and all he would do, would be to rattle on theologically for two hours. And the brother who I was talking to at lunch said, "I couldn't get him to tell me about how his family life was. I couldn't get him to tell me about how his wife was doing, how his children were doing, or talk about anything 'normal.' All he wanted to do was argue." That was not the spirit of the Apostle Paul. Paul knew how to talk both about the great truths of scripture and those things that concern us as human beings created in the image of God. He had a balance in his conversation, and Paul here shows his interest in people, by conveying to them these life situations in his imprisonment.

Notice also in verse eight that he sends them this servant Tychicus because he wants to comfort and strengthen them. He says, "that he may encourage your hearts." Paul is not only concerned to tell them about his condition, but also to encourage them in their own place. They may have been downcast, thinking that 'if Paul is in prison, surely our imprisonment is coming soon.' And yet, Paul wants to encourage them. Think of this. Paul in his bondage, desiring to encourage those who were free. Paul had a concern for people. It's very evident in this passage before us.

Do we have that same kind of concern for people? Anne and I have experienced your care and concern in prodigious measure over these last weeks and months. I wonder if the whole of this congregation ever experiences that type of outpouring of concern and love? I hope to God that you do. It's a wonderful thing to know that type of love and concern. Is our fellowship characterized by that type of mutual concern for one another, not just for our ministers, but for one another in the congregation? Do we show that type of an outflowing concern for people? If we did, my friends, as we ought, this city would not be able to stop its tongue in speaking of how the love of Christ is manifested at First Presbyterian Church. I know that God will do great things in your hearts as He expands your concern for one another, and in so doing there's a witness to the world for Christ.

II. The fulfilled Christian shares his ministry

Notice, secondly, in this passage, we learn that the fulfilled Christian shares his

ministry. Paul willingly shares his ministry, and he acknowledges those who work with him, notice fellow servants in verse seven, fellow prisoners, verse ten, and fellow workers, verse eleven. The apostle Paul is no lone ranger. Yes, he is gifted by God, above the ordinary, in an extraordinary way, supernaturally by the Holy Spirit, so that he can prophesy and he can speak in tongues, and he brings the very revelation of God. But notice that his ministry, he sees, to be a corporate ministry. He is not off on his own. He is willing to share that ministry, and he is willing to acknowledge that other people play integral roles in the work that he does. Isn't that unlike some people that we know? Do you ever have a tendency to sort of protect your turf in your area of ministry? You've got something that you do well for the Lord and you don't want anybody else in on it. You're going to do it yourself. Not Paul. Paul is always sharing the ministry that he does, and acknowledging those who are involved in the ministry, acknowledging them with the glorious titles of fellow servants and fellow prisoners and fellow workers.

III. The fulfilled Christian appreciates and supports his co-workers

Notice also, that in this passage we learn that the fulfilled Christian appreciates and supports his co-workers. Notice in the passage how Paul is sincere in his compliments to those who are working with him in the gospel. Notice how appropriate he is in those compliments. Look at some of the compliments that he gives. First in verse seven he speaks of Tychicus as his beloved brother, his faithful servant, his fellow slave. What a beautiful ascription to this man, what a beautiful word of appreciation of his character and his service. He's a beloved brother. He's a faithful servant. He's a fellow slave of Christ.

Notice his words about Mark and Jesus Justus, two Jewish Christians who were serving with Paul. Of them, he says, "these were the only fellow workers from the circumcision." In other words, he says, everywhere I've gone, I have upset the Jews. They have gotten upset with the message that I'm preaching, but these Jewish Christians encouraged me and they worked along side me and I'm thankful to God for them.

Notice in verse twelve his words about Epaphras. He says that Epaphras is a bond slave of Christ. On the tombs of the prophets were the words, 'Servant of the Lord.' What better title could one have than to be called a servant of the Lord? And Paul says that Epaphras, you are a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. And he furthermore says, that this man Epaphras is always faithfully laboring in prayers. He is a man of prayer. Think of being called a faithful servant of the Lord and a man of prayer by Paul. What a compliment. How encouraging, how supportive, how appreciative was Paul as he labored.

Think again in verse fourteen, where Paul's even going to mention his doctor. In his greetings he speaks of his beloved physician. We perhaps don't always think of our physicians in that way, do we? But Paul speaks of his beloved friend and

physician, Luke.

And notice his exhortations in verse ten and in verse thirteen. He tells the congregation, 'welcome Mark,' and he tells the congregation, I want you to know about how deeply concerned Epaphras is for you. Can you imagine the pressure of these two young pastors, going into a congregation where Paul had served? Think of the pressure, and Paul says, 'Well I know, but I want you to welcome this young man, Mark, if he comes, and I want you to know what a faithful man and how deeply concerned for you Epaphras is. These are men worthy of your esteem. Paul is encouraging of all those who work with them. What a generous spirit he has. He doesn't have to hoard the glory to himself. He isn't trying to build up his own name. He's desirous of encouraging those who work with him. Do we encourage one another in well doing that way? Are words of appreciation and encouragement frequently on our lips? Do we build up the saints by those types of words of encouragement? Paul did. And so ought we.

IV. The fulfilled Christian is single-minded in his spiritual focus

Finally, we see in this passage that the fulfilled Christian is single-minded in his spiritual focus, and Paul is the great example of this. Note how Paul never lets up on a theme. Paul began this epistle in chapter one, verse two, initiating the theme of loyalty to Christ, faithfulness to Christ, and even in his epilogue, even in his acknowledgments, he's still on the theme of loyalty and faithfulness and Christ. It's the theme of his letter and it continues to be mentioned in his epilogue. For instance, when you see what Paul says he appreciates about these various people in the epilogue, what comes immediately to mind? Faithfulness, commitment, and loyalty. Those are the things that are high on his list.

In verse seven he says what about Tychicus? He is faithful. He is loyal. What does he say about Onesimus? He is a faithful brother in verse nine. What does he say about Mark and Jesus Justus in verse eleven? They have been loyal to him, even though the others of his own race have not. And in verse thirteen, what does he say about Epaphras? He has been loyal to his flock, praying for them fervently, even while he was away, with a deep concern for them. Paul highlights the loyalty of each of these people, and it represents the single-mindedness not only with which he has written the book, but with which he conducted his life. The Apostle Paul always desired to promote loyalty to Christ amongst the congregations that he serves.

And when he compliments these workers, he precisely compliments them for their loyalty to Christ. There are so many applications of the truths found in this passage that we couldn't possibly survey them all, but let me just mention a few, as we conclude today. First of all, after looking at this final word of Paul, in the Book of Colossians, we're reminded again of the truth that all Scripture is given by inspiration. Only God could have written an acknowledgments section so filled

with gospel truth and practical, day-to-day guidance.

Have you ever read the acknowledgments section of a book? It's not usually the most scintillating reading. It's usually something you skip over, but this acknowledgment is full of practical teaching. Only God could write acknowledgments as practical as this. "All Scripture is given by inspiration," Paul says, "and profitable for our correction and training in righteousness." And this passage proves it. Notice again Paul's great message to us. We are complete in Christ, and we should not look for fullness in anyone or anything else from him. And it's repeated. That theme is repeated in his recording of Epaphras's prayer in verse twelve. Epaphras has been praying that these believers would know that they are complete in Christ, that they would find their assurance in Him, and they would find the freeing power of the grace of Christ to unleash a holy life. And Paul doesn't want us to forget that message.

Finally, we should close with Paul's own closing words, found in verse eighteen. I direct your attention to them. He says, "remember my imprisonment." Remember, literally, my chains. Remember my bonds. Why would Paul tell these people to remember his chains? Not to gain sympathy. Paul wanted these people to remember why he was in prison: for preaching the message that we are complete in Christ and in Him only. And furthermore, he wanted them to remember who he was imprisoned for, the Master, the Lord and Savior. He was not at last the prisoner of Caesar. He was not the prisoner of Rome. He was the prisoner of Christ. He wanted them to remember the message and the Master who had put him in that prison, because he wanted them to cling to the truth of that message and always to be loyal to the Master who had given them that message.

There is a famous painting of the Apostle Paul in his prison. In that painting, light is falling through the window and falling upon Paul in prayer. There are bars in the window, but the painter does not draw shadows of the bars in the light which is reflecting on Paul, symbolizing that though Paul was imprisoned in his flesh, yet he had been freed by the grace of Christ. And though he was the prisoner of Rome, he was at last the prisoner of no one save Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ had set him free. Remember my bonds. Sweet bonds of Christ, the Puritans used to say. Paul was a man set free, and he desired the Colossians to be free as God desires us to be set free, only in Christ. Let's look to him in prayer.

Our heavenly father, we glory in the teaching of this book. We pray that it would not only be something that our minds and hearts relish to contemplate, but that it would become a practical reality of our living. We desperately need our priorities to be reordered in light of your word. This is Your word. By Your Spirit reorder those priorities and bring a revival born of the Spirit which renovates this congregation and this world. And we'll give You the praise and the glory. For we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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