

Colossians: Jesus Our Ministry

Colossians 4:2—4:18

Last week's lesson. A Christian lifestyle reflects the victory Christ has won for us. Every aspect of our personal, family and community life and relationships will be changed..

The Big Idea. When the gospel bears fruit in our lives, we will be dependent on God through prayer, actively seeking opportunities to proclaim the gospel to the world around, and working together and standing firm as a body of believers.

Summary. These final paragraphs are no afterthought. While they might, at first, seem to be a random collection of greetings and advice, there is a common thread. They all illustrate real life for those who trust the full revelation of God in Christ and the finished work of Christ on the cross. At the very least, they remind us that the Christian life is about living together as a community of believers. There is no escapism here, since, clearly, life has its struggles and problems (for example, Paul's imprisonment (4:3)), the implicit challenge of speaking to non-believers in 4:5-6, and Paul's acknowledgment of the need of friends and colleagues in 4:11.

Despite this, there is real confidence—confidence that praying to God makes a difference (4:2 and 12), and confidence that Christian ministry is, in essence, about serving the “kingdom of God” (4:11). Most significant in the light of the whole letter is the subject of Epaphras' prayer in 4:12: “that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.”

Talk about: Who are the people who have influenced you most in your Christian walk? What aspects of their lives and ministry made them such an influence?

Investigate: Read Colossians 4:2-6.

Having spent some time teaching about building authentic Christian communities. Paul now turns to our relationship with God and the world beyond the church.

1. How do these verses give us guidance in our prayer priorities and our outreach?
 - a. Prayer: “Being watchful” points to the need for dependence on God for both the opportunities and challenges of living in an unbelieving world. Being “thankful” reminds us that, whatever our circumstances, there are always things to praise God for.
 - b. Paul asks for prayer for gospel opportunities, but also he prays for preaching clarity. This was a challenge and an encouragement. Paul needed it, and so do we.
 - c. Outreach: Look for God to open a door. Be prepared to proclaim the gospel clearly. Be prepared to suffer for it (Paul was “in chains”). Live a godly life and be “wise” toward outsiders (think about how they think, so you can relate the gospel to them effectively). Be a good conversationalist.

2. What is the significance of Paul's use of the expression "the mystery of Christ" (compare **1:27**)?
 - a. This is the profound privilege of the Christian—Gentile or Jew—knowing God in all His fullness in Christ. With false teachers on the prowl undermining this, no wonder Paul prays for clarity when he proclaims this. It suggests that the content of our message must be primarily about the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.
3. Despite the costs involved, why can we be confident when we share the gospel with others?
 - a. God is the one who opens doors (**v. 3**). God is the one whose message is being preached—He kept it secret until the right time to open up the "mystery of Christ" to the Gentile world (**v. 3**); He gives the opportunities to proclaim it (**v. 5**) and by implication is the one who provides answers to every question (**v. 6**).
4. **Apply:** What practical steps can we take to ensure:
 - a. we pray with these priorities? It is helpful to keep prayer lists and prayer diaries, as well as to work systematically through the Bible, so that we are challenged by its wide scope. If we are not praying for open doors or gospel opportunities, it is not likely that we will either notice or make the most of them when they come.
 - b. we are proclaiming the mystery of Christ clearly? As well as praying like this, we need to work hard at our clarity. Learning a gospel outline can help us to explain the gospel clearly, as does being prepared for different questions.
 - c. we fill our conversation with the salt of grace? Again, prayer is the key—so that we are depending on God for what we say. But it also means being proactive and looking for those opportunities to speak grace—which means both being gracious and speaking of the gospel grace of God.

Investigate: Read Colossians 4:7-18.

While we might find a passage like this harder to relate to than some others, we should remember that it would have brought real encouragement to the Colossians. Even here, though, there are many things to learn.

5. What virtues do the individuals Paul mentions have in common?
 - a. Being part of the Christian family is a key theme:
 - i. Tychicus is a dear brother (**v. 7**) as is Onesimus (**v. 9**).
 - ii. Yet most of the people are mentioned because of their faithfulness in gospel ministry, often at great cost: again Tychicus (**v. 7**), Aristarchus (**v. 10**), Mark and Jesus Justus (**v. 10-11**), Epaphras (**v. 12**).

- b. The coming just judgment of God (**v. 6**) and the fact that He has chosen us and demonstrated His love for us in undeserved ways (**vv. 12-14**), should motivate us to change from our old ways.
6. We learn from **verses 12 and 13** that Epaphras was persistent in prayer. Paul's word for "wrestling" describes the intense wrestling matches of the ancient world. There are connotations of Jacob wrestling with God (**Gen. 32:22-32**)—yet here Epaphras was doing it on the Colossians' behalf. It points to the urgency of their concern in the face of these false teachers.
7. Paul signs off with a reminder of his chains. This reminds the Colossians that the message he preached cost him a great deal—but in Paul's mind was still worth it. Such is the wonder of the gospel of the Christ, who is fully God, dying to reconcile His universe. It is something, therefore, that the Colossians should also be prepared to suffer for.

Explore more. Read **verse 14 and 2 Timothy 4:10**. We can learn from the story of Demas that some people may desert you. These verses serve as a sad reminder that even active believers who are close to great teaching, enjoying Christian fellowship, and in the thick of active Christian service, are still vulnerable to falling away.

Getting Personal: Is there a person or a group that you are wrestling in prayer for? If not, start now! Determine to pray regularly, passionately and persistently for them.

8. **APPLY:** Paul's description of his friends focuses on their hard work and service for the gospel. How can we encourage one another to persevere in our service of the Lord, His people and those who do not yet know Him?
 - a. We need one another—teamwork and gospel partnership are vital. Prayer triplets are a great help for this—perhaps with a couple of others from the same office or neighborhood. It is also good to have a close friend to be accountable to, who has permission to ask us the difficult questions about our personal walk and perseverance. Above all, we need to be part of a local Christian church to serve and be served.

Investigate:

9. The prayer of Epaphras (**v. 12**) sums up the big message of the letter to the Colossians. Paul has been trying to convey to them:

- a. “Stand Firm”: Paul’s main aim in writing this letter is to ensure that believers stand firm on the only solid rock there is: a full understanding of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done for and in us.
- b. “In all the will of God”: a shallow grasp of the gospel will leave us open to false teaching, as it will create a dissatisfaction in our lives that others will seek to exploit.
- c. “Mature and fully assured: by appreciating the greatness of Christ, and the fullness we have in Him.

10. **APPLY:** What advice would you give the following people from Colossians? These will revise what people have learned in Colossians. The answers might include:

- **A timid young Christian who wants to be more confident as a believer.**
 - This Christian needs to understand exactly who he is following. Jesus is the Creator and Lord of all creation, who has died and risen again for Christians. We are already secure and safe in heaven with Him.
- **Someone who claims to have discovered “something new” in the Christian life.**
 - You will need to question this believer. If it is something that tries to add to, or subtract from the work of Christ, then they need to know it is wrong. If it is a “technique” they have discovered, they need to understand that it will have no power to change their hearts and lives. Only by sticking to the gospel and growing in an appreciation of it will they be truly changed and brought to maturity.
- **Someone who wants to know how to grow as a Christian.**
 - To grow, we need to focus on Jesus and the gospel. Perhaps suggest they work at the three marks of **3:15-17**. Letting Christ’s peace (i.e., the gospel that has saved you) be the motivation for growing in godliness and relating to others. The word of Christ should be growing in you, as you read and study scripture to know God and His will better. And a growing thankfulness to God for all things is a mark of maturity.

Pray

Thank God:

- for the open doors God has provided us with for passing the gospel on to others.
- for the individuals who have made an impact on your own Christian walk.

Ask God:

- for watchful and thankful prayer lives.
- for opportunities to explain the mystery of Christ.
- to give you the desire and strength to work hard and sacrificially in the work of Christ.