

Paul's Letter to the

COLOSSIANS

LESSON 9 COLOSSIANS 4:2-18

COLOSSIANS 4:2-18 (NLT)

An Encouragement for Prayer

² Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart. ³ Pray for us, too, that God will give us many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ. That is why I am here in chains. ⁴ Pray that I will proclaim this message as clearly as I should.

⁵ Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. ⁶ Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone.

Final Greetings and Instructions

⁷ Tychicus will give you a full report about how I am getting along. He is a beloved brother and faithful helper who serves with me in the Lord's work. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose—to let you know how we are doing and to encourage you. ⁹ I am also sending Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, one of your own people. He and Tychicus will tell you everything that's happening here.

¹⁰ Aristarchus, who is in prison with me, sends you his greetings, and so does Mark, Barnabas's cousin. As you were instructed before, make Mark welcome if he comes your way. ¹¹ Jesus (the one we call Justus) also sends his greetings. These are the only Jewish believers among my co-workers; they are working with me here for the Kingdom of God. And what a comfort they have been!

¹² Epaphras, a member of your own fellowship and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends you his greetings. He always prays earnestly for you, asking God to make you strong and perfect, fully confident that you are following the whole will of God. ¹³ I can assure you that he prays hard for you and also for the believers in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

¹⁴ Luke, the beloved doctor, sends his greetings, and so does Demas. ¹⁵ Please give my greetings to our brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church that meets in her house. ¹⁶ After you have read this letter, pass it on to the church at Laodicea so they can read it, too. And you should read the letter I wrote to them.

¹⁷ And say to Archippus, "Be sure to carry out the ministry the Lord gave you."

¹⁸ HERE IS MY GREETING IN MY OWN HANDWRITING—PAUL. Remember my chains. May God's grace be with you.

COLOSSIANS 4:2-6

Pray, Live Wisely, and Speak Graciously

Paul has talked a great deal about wisdom, thanksgiving, and Jesus. He's talked about who Jesus is, what he's done for us, and what it means to live in him and for him. Now, as Paul draws the letter to a close, he gives a word about prayer, wise living, and gracious speech.

Paul begins this section by urging readers to pursue a life characterized by prayer: "Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart" (4:2). Jesus told parables about this very idea. The point of his parable in Luke 18, for example, is about how we ought to always continue praying and not lose heart. Likewise, Paul is determined to encourage the Christians in Colossae to devote themselves to prayer with thanksgiving.

And while they're at it, Paul asks them to pray for him and his colleagues too, "that God will give us many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ. That is why I am here in chains" (4:3). Even there in prison, there will be people who know that Paul is there because of his faithfulness to Christ. And Paul sees this as yet another opportunity to share the good news of Jesus. The prayer to be offered, moreover, is not just for opportunities to share this good news but also that the message is made in the proper way: "that I will proclaim this message as clearly as I should" (4:4).

Along with calling them to prayer, Paul wants to instruct the people in Colossae about how to interact with those who are not believers (4:5). And here, as in Romans 12, Paul says that we must behave wisely toward outsiders. What are they going to see and think when they see how we live our lives? Paul says to "make the most of every opportunity" (4:5).

We need to take thought in advance for how to speak with the people we meet. As Paul says, "Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone" (4:6). Our speech should always be gracious – that is, attractive, persuasive, and beneficial; not bland, but salted with wit and wisdom. Paul implies that in each conversation, the "right response" might be a little different depending on who we're talking to.

We can imagine Paul in his tent-makers shop in Ephesus (or Corinth) before he was put in prison. Different kinds of people would be coming in from all over – Roman soldiers, servants buying things, travelers wanting him to do a job. All of them have stories to tell, and certainly all of them would have their own fears, hopes, dreams, and desires. Paul's task was to learn about their situations and to find the appropriate ways to say what he wanted to say to them.

After all, this is part of life – learning to look at another person and to see them as God sees them, as people who are also called to reflect the very image of God into the world. When we look at people like that, all the things that Paul is saying here will start to make sense: living wise, thinking of how we're acting toward outsiders, making the most of each opportunity, speaking with gracious words, and knowing how to give each person an appropriate answer.

What would the world look like if in our ordinary lives these simple aims were adopted, prayed over, and lived out?

COLOSSIANS 4:7-18

Final Greetings from Paul's Companions

Some of Paul's letters have very brief closing greetings. But in letters to people in places he has yet to visit, such as Colossae, this section is a bit longer. As he's reaching out to people who have never seen him before, he wants to stitch together some bonds of friendship that otherwise hold them together.

He begins with **Tychicus**: "Tychicus will give you a full report about how I am getting along. He is a beloved brother and faithful helper who serves with me in the Lord's work. I have sent him to you for this very purpose—to let you know how we are doing and to encourage you" (4:7). In other words, Paul says that they can trust him. In the ancient world, when someone appeared unexpectedly in a community, people were never quite sure why they were there. Can they trust him? With that in mind, Paul's words should be read as a letter of recommendation for **Tychicus**. They can trust him, and he will give them all the news and tell them what's going on.

"I am also sending **Onesimus**, a faithful and beloved brother, one of your own people. He and Tychicus will tell you everything that's happening here" (4:9). A quick reading of the letter to Philemon tells us what we need to know about **Onesimus**. He was a runaway slave who had left his master (Philemon) in Colossae, found his way to Ephesus, and met up with Paul in prison and became a Christian. **Onesimus** had become a dear and faithful brother. As Paul says in the letter to Philemon, **Onesimus** had become like a son to him (1:10). **Onesimus** has to go back to Philemon, and as a result, perhaps one of **Tychicus**' roles is to link arms with **Onesimus** and make sure he stays the course, because going back to the master from whom you've run away was a scary and difficult thing for a slave to do.

Onesimus has a number of large tasks here, one of which is to take Paul's letter to Philemon, the letter that says **Onesimus** is a brother and that Philemon should receive him just as he would receive Paul. To write and send that letter is a great risk for Paul, and Paul is asking Philemon to take a great social risk as well. Paul is also asking **Onesimus** to take a great social, cultural, and personal risk. So perhaps part of **Tychicus**' vocation at this point is to look after **Onesimus** and to make sure that all is well. As an aside, regarding Paul's plans to see them in the future, Paul doesn't say here what he says in Philemon – that he hopes to come in person soon – but the letter to Philemon says that (1:22), which may have added a degree of accountability that could stir and soften Philemon's heart.

In 4:10-14 there are greetings from various people who are with Paul. If someone was in prison in the ancient world, whether in Ephesus or Rome or somewhere else, the authorities wouldn't feel any obligation to feed you. They would assume you had friends or family who would bring you food and drink, which may or may not have happened. But Paul has friends around him, including one friend who seems to have been in prison with him.

Aristarchus, who was originally from Thessalonica, has been traveling with Paul and working with him, and Paul describes him as being in prison with him (4:10). There's also greetings from **Mark**. Paul describes him as Barnabas' relative and asks that they welcome him if he comes their way. **Mark** went with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13), but when they arrived at the shores of Asia Minor, **Mark** got cold feet and went back to Jerusalem. When planning their next journey, Barnabas wanted to take **Mark**, but Paul refused, perhaps because he thought him to be unreliable or untrustworthy. So what we might be seeing here is long-range reconciliation, as Paul asks them to welcome **Mark** if he arrives.

COLOSSIANS 4:7-18

Jesus (the one we call Justus) also sends his greetings. And Paul says that these three are “the only Jewish believers among my co-workers; they are working with me here for the Kingdom of God. And what a comfort they have been!” (4:11). There’s something comforting about these people who are fellow Jews and who are working for God’s kingdom. They are living in the same tension as Paul and wrestling with the same issues. **Paul is a man of great faith, but he also needs people around him who will encourage him.**

There are also greetings from non-Jewish friends of Paul. We remember **Epaphras** from Colossians 1, the person who had come back to Paul from Colossae and told him about the community in Colossae who is following Jesus, loving one another, and being a family. And so Paul says, “**Epaphras**, a member of your own fellowship and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends you his greetings. He always prays earnestly for you, asking God to make you strong and perfect, fully confident that you are following the whole will of God” (4:12).

There are things that God wants this community in Colossae to do and **Epaphras** is praying that they would realize what those things are. Maybe there’s something they could be doing down the street. Maybe when they get together for worship, there are neighbors they could invite in for a meal. There are all sorts of things they could be doing, quietly and slowly perhaps, to advance from where they are to the next step. And **Epaphras** is praying that they will realize that, and that in the process, they will stand firm and mature. As Paul says, “I can assure you that he prays hard for you and also for the believers in Laodicea and Hierapolis” (4:13).

Two others that Paul mention are **Luke** and **Demas**: “Luke, the beloved doctor, sends his greetings, and so does Demas” (4:14). We don’t know much about **Demas**, but **Luke**, by tradition, is a companion of Paul’s in his journeys. And since Paul had a number of ailments, it was probably handy to have a doctor around with him. At any rate, **Luke**, “the beloved doctor,” has been joining in the hard work of prayer, hope, faith, and love – of doing in the present the things which we are already anticipating – the work that God will do once and for all in the future. **This is what it looks like to be part of the new creation project. Sometimes it’s dramatic and extraordinary, other times it’s as tedious as putting one foot in front of the other, regularly praying for churches and individuals by name, asking that God will show us and them what God wants us to do.**

Final Greetings from Paul

Having given greeting to the Colossians from people who are with him, Paul now passes on greetings to **the family in Laodicea** and to **Nympha and the church in her house**. Interestingly, in verse 16, Paul says, “After you have read this letter, pass it on to the church at Laodicea so they can read it, too. And you should read the letter I wrote to them.” In other words, Paul is writing two letters at the same time. He’s sending one to Laodicea and one to Colossae and he wants them to swap and read the other as well. On this point, numerous scholars have argued for decades that the letter to Laodicea is what we refer to as “Ephesians.” Ephesians and Colossians go very closely together. They’re not identical, but they certainly look like companion pieces based on their similarities.

COLOSSIANS 4:7-18

Finally in 4:18 Paul signs off with his own hand (as he did in Galatians). Up until now he had been dictating, and as many people in the modern world do, he takes the pen to sign off in his own writing. And being Paul, he can't help but add a few more words, "Remember the chains I'm wearing." In other words, this is not just another friendly letter – Paul reminds them that he's in prison and he's there for his service to the gospel.

He closes by saying, "May God's grace be with you." Rather than being a formality, it's perhaps the deepest prayer one can pray for another: May God's unmerited grace and love be with you, surround you, and sustain you. That very grace will enable us to be people of thanksgiving and thanks-*living*, with our focus on Jesus (as Colossians 1:15-20 reminds us). When we realize that the wisdom by which the world was made has become human, and has lived among us, and has given his life for us, how then can we not be thankful?

Reflections

In a letter that has treated the church as the body of Christ and has dealt with the cosmic scope of Christ's work and its implications for the lives of believers, the ending provides a further reminder that this same church is made up of particular individuals and local groups on earth and is dependent on social relationships.

The body of Christ fulfills its cosmic role in the midst of concrete, everyday relationships. Team work, loyalty, praying for one another, and sheer hard work are indispensable. People need the reassurance of being greeted and made welcome. They need words of approval for what they have done and reminders about the work that still needs to be done.

In this way, the contents of the letter's closure reinforce one of the main themes of its message: A right relationship to the exalted Christ manifests itself not in isolation or otherworldliness but in and through the real human relationships and structures of life in this world. It is here that we are most in need of experiencing the reality of the letter's final benediction: grace in the ordinary.

As we close this series, let us remember the message of the letter to the Colossians:

- In Jesus the Messiah, we already have everything that we need.
- Jesus is the one who has died and has been raised – and who, as the Messiah, represents his people, so that what is true of him is true of them.
- He is the one whose death means we have died and whose new life means we have come to life.
- Therefore we put to death our old ways of life and we come alive, putting on new clothes of kindness, forgiveness, mutual service, and mutual love.
- Above all, as renewed humans, we are renewed in knowledge according to the image of the creator. With this renewed knowledge, we go on learning the rest of our lives to reflect God's love, kindness, generosity, and forgiveness into the world to all those we meet.

May God's grace be with you all.

DISCUSSION

1. Is it easy or difficult for you to ask people to pray for you, and why? What does it say about Paul that he asks the new Christians in Colossae to pray for him?
2. What are the situations in your life where you need vigilance to “live wisely among those who are not believers” (4:5)? What does it mean to “make the most of every opportunity” (Col 4:5)? How does this relate to the notion of ‘redeeming the time’ God has given us?
3. Describe what it means to “give each person an appropriate answer” (Col 4:6). How does seeing another person the way God sees them enable us to speak words full of grace?
4. List some ways that we might put 4:5-6 into practice in our everyday living. How can we do this well?
5. Can you recall a particular instance when someone commended you and the way it made you feel? With that in mind, as you read the closing of this letter, what does Paul’s network of support – and his gracious words for specific people – tell you about the nature of Christian community?
6. How does the closing this letter speak to individual Christians who feel that they can go it alone and have nothing to gain or learn from other Christians? What does this teach us about the mission of God being a community effort?