

It just so happens that we are finishing both of our sermon series on the same day. We started them both on the same day almost exactly one year ago – January 12, 2020. No doubt that was God’s plan since a sparrow does not fall of the ground apart from his will, but from my side it is completely by chance. Anyway this evening we will be considering the last few verses of Paul’s letter to the Colossians. This last section is called “Final Greetings” in the ESV. And it is actually quite interesting because it gives us a glimpse into the personal relationships between Paul and his fellow workers and the members of the Colossian church. This final section of Paul’s epistle to the Colossians shows the importance of personal relationships in the life and mission of the church as well as giving us a number of other insights into the life of the first Christian churches. I will be commenting on some of the highlights and not every detail.

In verses 7-9 Paul tells them that Tychicus, the bearer of the letter, will bring them news about Paul and his fellow workers. ⁷Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, ⁹and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here."

Paul obviously thought that it was important that the Colossians be informed about the activities of the missionaries and how they were doing. What Paul is describing here is the equivalent of a missionary newsletter. Paul’s letter to the Colossians had a lot of instruction in it, but he is also interested in maintaining a relationship with the members of the church at Colossae through keeping them informed about his life and ministry and that of his fellow workers.

This is an important part of church life. It is important for us to know some of what is going on beyond the borders of the local church community. An important part of the mission of the church is to proclaim the gospel throughout the world and Paul here demonstrates the importance of news about what other Christians are up to. The assumption is that the Colossians will be interested to hear about Paul’s situation and different aspects of the work that he and his associates were doing.

But was not just the news. It was Tychicus’ personal presence. Paul had sent Tychicus with the letter and with news “that he may encourage your hearts.” Tychicus coming to them – spending time with them – bringing the news – interacting with them – Paul expected that to be an encouragement to the Colossians. The encouragement would come from the letter itself. It would come from the news that Tychicus brought. It would come from the personal presence of Tychicus and his interaction with the congregation.

Christianity is about many things. It is about love. It is about caring for one another. It is about caring about the ministries and witness of missionaries and other churches. We are part of a movement that is much greater than any one congregation. And so news of what is going on in the lives of other believers and personal interaction with them is an important part of the Christian life. Knowing and caring about what is

going on in the broader church community is an important part of the unity of the church and Paul here teaches us that that is a great encouragement for us in the Christian life.

This is an encouragement for us to read the newsletters and reports of fellow believers who are engaged in various ministries. It is an encouragement to attend some of the meetings where we can interact with fellow believers from other congregations. The principle behind Paul sending Tychicus with news is that Christians are intended to be interested about and care about what God is doing through other believers outside of one's own congregation.

How Paul refers to Tychicus and Onesimus is also significant. Tychicus is "a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. Onesimus is "our faithful and beloved brother." Paul loves these brothers. He speaks about them with warmth and affection. He speaks of both of them as faithful. He is eager to speak well of them. He honors them. They are faithful followers of Jesus. They are true to their confession. They are living the life that Jesus has called them to live. And Paul does not hesitate to mention that. Tychicus is a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. He is a fellow worker with Paul. One of his tasks was to travel between Paul and the churches – to facilitate the relationship between Paul and the churches.

In those days the only way to get a letter to some one far away was to bring it to them. The only way to bring news of how things were going with Paul and for Paul to get news from the churches was through people travelling between them. Tychicus is mentioned 4 times in Paul's letters and each time he is described as having been sent to one of the churches. No doubt he had other responsibilities, but this is the one that is mentioned.

Onesimus is the subject of the letter to Philemon. He was a slave who had run away from his master Philemon, somehow connected with Paul, and was converted. Paul was sending him back to Philemon with the request that Philemon receive him as a brother. Onesimus was not a fellow worker with Paul, but Paul does refer to him as a "faithful and beloved brother."

So what we see here is the love and warmth that is the goal for Christian relationships. In Romans 12:10 Paul wrote, "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." We see an example of that here in the way that Paul refers to Tychicus and Onesimus. And indeed this is one of the great joys of belonging to the church of Jesus Christ. As we will see in a moment, sometimes there are tensions between Christians, but thankfully we also know the joy of brotherly and sisterly affection – warm and friendly relationships and they are a great delight and encouragement to us as we serve our Lord and Saviour together.

But the reality is that this side of return of Christ there will sometimes be tensions. We are to do what we can to alleviate those tensions and have unity and love. And we see a little of that in the verse 10. "¹⁰Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him)"

We see an indication of tension in what Paul writes here about Mark. “Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions – if he comes to you, welcome him).” Paul gives special instructions concerning Mark because Mark had been the occasion for controversy between Paul and Barnabas and from this verse it looks like that had affected Mark’s reputation and that the Colossians might not welcome him if he showed up among them. It appears that the relationship between Paul and Barnabas had been restored, but this verse shows that the incident had not been forgotten and so Paul feels the need to urge the Colossians to welcome Mark if he came to them.

Let me give you a bit of the background. Paul and Barnabas had been sent out on a missionary journey by the church at Antioch and Mark, who was Barnabas’ cousin, went with them. At one point on that journey Mark had left Paul and Barnabas. Acts 15:38 says Mark “had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.” Because of that, when Paul and Barnabas were planning their next missionary journey Paul did not want to take Mark with them, but Barnabas did. And that disagreement led to Paul and Barnabas going their separate ways. Acts 15:39-40 says, “And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed....”

This story shows the sad reality that even though the followers of Christ are called to live and work together in peace and harmony, there still are disagreements and disharmony. The account of this story does not say who was right and who was wrong in the split between Paul and Barnabas. And both Paul and Barnabas continued to be respected leaders in the church. But there was this disagreement between them that led to a separation.

Now the NT does not describe a reconciliation between Paul and Barnabas, but it does indicate that later on Mark became a helpful fellow worker with Paul. In 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul wrote to Timothy, “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.” This is towards the end of Paul’s life. It indicates that Paul and Mark were reconciled and that makes it likely that Paul and Barnabas were reconciled as well.

The way that Paul speaks about Mark here in Colossians 4:10 indicates that when Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians, he had been reconciled with Mark, but it also indicates that there were ongoing tensions in the church concerning Mark. That seems to be the reason that Paul says that the Colossians had received instructions concerning Mark and why the Colossians are told that if Mark did come to them, they were to welcome him.

What this all shows is that peace and harmony in the church is a delicate thing and once it is disturbed, it is difficult to fix. There can and ought to be reconciliation, but even if there is, there are often lasting tensions. The lesson here is that it is much better and in many cases easier to avoid the disharmony in the first place. In the case of Paul and Barnabas we do not know how each of them might have handled their disagreement better than they did. But we do know from Paul’s writings how peace is to be maintained.

By his list of the virtues that we are to cultivate as we are being renewed in the image of God and of Christ, Paul shows us the kinds of qualities that contribute to peace and harmony. Colossians 3:12-15, "¹²Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful." Growing in these virtues through the enablement of the Holy Spirit will help us to contribute to and maintain peace and harmony in the church.

The next person that we will consider briefly from this list of greetings is Epaphras, who is mentioned in verses 12-13, "¹²Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. ¹³For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis."

It seems that Epaphras had a special concern for the church at Colossae. He was the one who had brought them the gospel. In Colossians 1:7-8 Paul mentions that the Colossians had heard the gospel from Epaphras and says of him, "He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit."

The way that Paul describes Epaphras in Colossians 4:12-13 is striking. He is "always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God." And "he has worked hard for you." Since Epaphras is with Paul and not with the Colossians, it seems that the way that Epaphras worked hard for the Colossians is through his prayers for them.

This is an amazing reflection on the importance of prayer. Epaphras was working hard for the Colossians by struggling on their behalf in his prayers. Epaphras was putting great effort into his prayers for the Colossians and what he was praying for was that they may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. This is a great encouragement for us to consider how we might work hard for the church through our prayers.

I say it is an encouragement because it shows how much prayer for the church matters. It is significant. It is a way to work hard for the church. It is also an encouragement in that the terms "struggle" and "work hard" not only convict us of the weakness of our prayers, they also point us to the way to become better pray-ers. What we see here is that Epaphras put a lot of effort into his prayers for the Colossians. Prayer was not some peripheral part of his life. He worked at it. He took it very seriously. He cared about the growth of the Colossian church so much that he struggled for them in his prayers.

This is both convicting and encouraging for pastors and elders because it shows how important prayer is for working hard for the church. It convicts us of the weakness of our prayers, but it also encourages us think of

our prayer as one of the ways to work hard to serve the church. But Epaphras' example is an inspiration for all of us. One of the ways to work hard to serve the church is to work harder at our prayers.

This is not something out of reach. It is not out of reach, because the same Holy Spirit that equipped Epaphras dwells in us and makes it possible to grow in ways that we could never do on our own. But it is also not out of reach because if we see how important prayer is, we can put in the effort it takes to making prayer a bigger part of our life. And that does not mean just deciding that we will spend more time in prayer, it also means giving thought to how we might realistically make prayer a more significant part of our relationship with God and our service to his church.

There are lots of ways that we can be more engaged in prayer for the church. We might consider our schedules and see where we might add in some extra time to pray. We can be more organized about our prayers through making prayer lists and collecting the newsletters and other sources of prayer-requests such as the prayer requests that appear in the bulletin. We can read a book about prayer that will give us ideas about how to be more intentional and organized about our prayers. The example of Epaphras is an inspiration for us because he shows us someone who understood that prayer was so important that it was something to be worked at.

What Epaphras prayed for is also significant. He was struggling in prayer for the Colossians that they might "stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God." Maturity is an important goal for Christians. Paul writes earlier in Colossians "Him (Jesus) we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." Christians are expected to grow toward greater and greater maturity. What that looks like is growth in the kind of life Paul urges Christians to live in his letters. The mature have made progress in being the kind of people that Christ is calling them to be. They are settled in their understanding of the truth. They have made progress in living for Christ rather than living for themselves. They are humble. They are patient. And so on. Epaphras was also praying that the believers at Colossae be fully assured in all the will of God. Paul had described his prayer for the Colossians as including the request that they might "be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." So this is about knowing the will of God as it is revealed in the Bible, but also having wisdom and understanding in applying biblical principles to the everyday decisions of life.

So this tells us the kinds of things that we should be praying for when we pray for the church. Our prayers should reflect biblical priorities. We see in Paul a passion for the spiritual growth of the people in the churches. We see Epaphras' passion for that same thing reflected in his prayers. And that is a guide for us as we think about working hard in prayer for the church.

Verse 14 mentions Luke and Demas. "Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas." It is from this verse that we know that Luke was a doctor. Luke wrote the gospel according to Luke and the book of Acts. He was clearly heavily involved in the life and mission of the early church. Demas is a sad note in the history of

the early church. At the point this letter was written he was still involved with Paul in the mission of the church, but a few years later Paul would write of him in 2 Timothy 4:10, "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." Although there is not a lot of detail here, it appears that Demas fell away from the Lord. The reason that he deserted Paul was that he was in love with this present world.

This is a reminder to us that right from the very beginning there have been those who have lived for a time seemingly as faithful believers, who later on turned away from the Lord. Jesus, in the parable of the sower warned against this. In Matthew 13:22 Jesus describes people who hear the word, "but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful." Jesus had one of those among his own followers in Judas. Demas too was not a fringe member of the church. He was close to Paul. He has heavily involved in the work with Paul and yet at some point he deserted Paul because he was in love with this present world.

Demas is a warning for us. Paul expresses this warning in 1 Corinthians 10:12 when he writes, "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." We should never be over-confident in our own ability to remain faithful to the Lord. We need to be asking the Lord to preserve us in our relationship with him knowing that apart from his work of preserving us, we will certainly turn away from the Lord. We are no better than Demas. Those who remain faithful do so because the Lord keeps them from falling away.

In verse 15 Paul writes, "Give me greetings to the brothers at Laodicea and to Nympha and the church in her house." Laodicea was close to Colossae and as verse 16 tells us this letter was to be read to the church in Laodicea after he had been read in Colossae.

The reference to Nympha and the church in her house is interesting. The first churches met in houses and it was a couple of centuries before believers began to have buildings which were dedicated as church buildings. The churches that we read about in the NT were mostly very small churches. I find that encouraging because even today many of the congregations of Christ's church are small. I was thinking that the churches that are mentioned in the NT, that are associated with Paul, altogether might have been similar to our presbytery with some of the congregations about the size of our church plants. No doubt there were churches not mentioned in the NT, but I find it encouraging to think of these little house churches that Paul wrote his letters to. He obviously felt that a small body of believers was a very significant part of what Jesus was doing building his church. And within a few hundred years the church had grown to the point where Christianity was the leading religion in the Roman Empire.

It's encouraging to think that the entire church in NT times was a very small in numbers and that many of the individual churches were tiny. And yet Paul was willing to work passionately planting those little churches with the hope and expectation that in God's time the church would be spread through the whole world. It's a

reminder to us not to despise the day of small things and to “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord [our] labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Verse 16 give us is an insight into how Paul’s letters were presented to the churches. “And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.” So these letters of Paul were read in a gathering of these little churches. This shows us that Paul expected that the average church member would understand what he had written. His letters were not written for theologians, but for regular church members. That does not mean that they would have mastered every detail of the letter, the first time through, but it does mean that they could profit from hearing the letter read in a church meeting.

This verse also shows that right from the beginning, it was clear that there was something special about these letters. Paul is very aware of his apostolic authority and his letters from the beginning were received as coming with divine authority. This verse shows us how the letters would have been read in multiple churches. As the history of the gathering of the books of the NT makes clear, these letters were copied and collected and gradually over a few hundred years, guided by the providence of God, the books that are in our NT were recognized by the church to be inspired by God and collected and preserved as the word of God – as our NT.

Finally, Paul writes in verse 18, “I Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, Remember my chains. Grace be with you.” The letter had been dictated by Paul with some involvement from Timothy. This was standard practice in that culture. And then Paul would write out the final words in his own hand to authenticate the letter.

Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter and so he asks the Colossians to remember his chains – to remember to pray for him and perhaps to support him in other ways.

And then comes the final benediction. “Grace be with you.” That is a reminder of the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ. It is a gospel of grace – of unmerited favor. Paul has given them a lot of instruction and exhortation concerning the Christian life, but that instruction had been rooted in the good news of Jesus Christ as relayed in the first part of the letter. And it with that note that he ends his letter to the Colossians. “Grace be with you.”

And that word is for us as well. We send our worship services following Paul’s example. The Christian life is a struggle. There is lots of growing to do. There is lots of change and effort involved. But it is all of grace. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven, made righteous and adopted by God. Through him we receive the Holy Spirit who gives us life and power for change. We don’t earn it. We don’t deserve it. It’s all of grace. And so we celebrate it.