

November 19/20, 2022

## **Community in Christ**

*Rooted in Christ Series*

**Colossians 4:7-18**

Pastor Ryan Harmon

Before we turn our hearts and our minds to the reading and the studying of God's word together, we did want to give you an end of the year update. We do this every year when it comes time to close out the calendar. We try to give you an update on where we stand financially, and you know we have an incredible team of people from this body that serve on our business team. They gather each month, and they look at where we stand, and they help us think about how to steward what God has given to us, and how to steward that well. And every year, around this time, they look at where we stand, and then they project where we need to finish and what we are asking God to bring in, in terms of giving in order to finish the year well. So, we wanted to give you an update. They've crunched those numbers, and the number that they have given to us is on the screen there, \$2.2 million. That's by the end of the calendar year, and so that's just something that we want to update you on. As we move through December, we'll continue to give you an update on where we stand. But we would just ask you to join us in praying about where and how you could be involved in the work in the ministry that God has called us to here at Lincoln Berean Church.

So with that, we have already said—Natalie already told you—that we are finishing our study in Colossians today. We've been in this study for a number of months now. We started in September and here we are, right before Thanksgiving, closing it up. And if you have looked ahead at all in Colossians, you might be aware that today the passage that we are studying is mostly just names—a lot of names! You may have noticed we've been reading the text together as we've gone through this series, but I spared you this morning. I said, "Let's not read these names, okay?" And so you guys owe me for that. (*laughter*) So, twelve verses, ten names. I'd venture to say that when we are in our private study, this would be a portion of Scripture we'd be tempted to breeze right past, just turn the page and get to the next book. But we believe that God gave us just the right words when He gave us the Scriptures. So we believe there's something in here for us this morning.

So because we're looking at names and we're going to talk about these names, I actually would like to ask you to think about a few names in your life right now...kind of keep them before you as we walk through this text. I want you to think of names, of faces, and not just kind of people that are far off, but the people that are closest to you—your family, your spouse certainly, your kids, if you have roommates, your roommates, or just your closest friends, and certainly your co-workers. I want you to think of them—of these people that God has brought into your life—and you know what? It's even better if some of them are frustrating for you or hard for you because that's right where the theology that we've been studying in Colossians is. That's right where God calls us to live that theology out, right in the mix of messy relationships.

Now, if you have your Bibles, turn with me to Colossians, Chapter 4. We're going to be in verses 7 to 18 this morning. You remember that these last few weeks we've been dealing with some really practical matters, all grounded in the theology that we studied at the beginning of the book—that God in Christ has made us sufficient, not by any doing of our own, but purely by the grace of God.

*We have been transferred from the domain of darkness*, Paul said, *into the kingdom of His beloved Son*. And that has freed us to live a completely different kind of life. Paul says that we have been granted the freedom to put on new clothes. We can put off the world's clothes, he says in Colossians 3, things like anger, and strife, and malice, and envy. We're free to take those clothes off and to put on Christ's clothes, to put on love, to put on peace. And then, as we continued, we got very practical and just talked about how that should impact, and how it will impact the way we live in our homes with our families, and the way that we engage with our co-workers.

And then last week, Josh reminded us that that impacts the way we operate in the world at large, wherever we go. That is who we have been freed to be. And now as we come to the end of this book, in verse 18, we learn that Paul wrote these last verses—these last 12 verses—with his own hand. He tells us that in verse 18. And I think what we have here is an incredibly practical, incredibly personal closing to this book of Colossians. So, beginning in verse 7, let's dig in and learn about some of these people. So, Colossians 4, verse 7:

**As to all my affairs, Tychicus, *our* beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you information. For I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts;** (\*NASB Colossians 4:7-8)

Tychicus. That's the first name that I shall stumble over here this morning. I thought I'd reflect on a few things that I see here in these two verses. The first thing is I think we need to wrestle with the names, the listing of names. You ever wrestled with that when you're reading Scripture? It's all these names. I had a professor that kind of wrestled with this out loud with us once and he said something like this. He said, "You know, there is no being wiser than God. He knows everything there is to know. It's just astounding, the depth and the vastness of His knowledge." You know, if you walked down to UNL and went to the library and asked them how many books are on their shelves, they'd tell you 1.6 million books. I know that's true because I looked it up on the internet. *(laughter)* And we know, you can count on that. 1.6 million books! Well, let's go larger. I looked up the total number of books that have been published, the total number of books that are officially published in the world. 156 million books! And God is so wise, and His knowledge is so vast that there is not an "i" that is dotted or a "t" that is crossed in any one of those books that escapes His notice. He knows all of it, inside and out.

When you think of the incredible vastness of His knowledge, we have to admit that when He gave us His word, He gave us a relatively small book, didn't He? I mean, I see your Bibles. They're small. You can hold them in one hand. And it's not only that, but when you start digging into His words, some of the parts of it are just lists of names, like these 12 verses. But that's a small part of Colossians. If you've ever read through the Bible in a year, maybe you've come to that moment when you get to 1 Chronicles, and you start reading, and in chapter 1 it's a list of names. And that goes on for 9 chapters, 9 chapters of names all that God knows. And He gave us all these names. Why did He do that? I'll never forget when my professor continued and he said, "Then it occurred to me these aren't just names to God. These are people, people that He knew, people that He loved, people that He walked with, people with whom He was involved in the very intimate details of their lives." So let's remember these are people God knew and loved, and God loves people. These aren't just names. When we read these 12 verses, these aren't just names. These are people that

God loved. These are people that Paul loved. Not just that, Paul is calling the people, the community in Colossae, to also extend love to these very people. The specific details of their lives matter. You know, we all know that we're supposed to be people of love. We know that. We kind of understand that as a banner idea for us, but sometimes we forget that that's a very specific calling in the messiness and the details of people's lives. We're called to love them right there.

The second thing I think about in these first two verses is just the quality of love that we see between the Colossians and Paul and his team. Remember all the way back to the beginning of September when we opened this book, we talked about how Paul had not met these people. This is not a church that he had planted, and yet we see in them a great concern for Paul and for his situation and for his team. They are so concerned that they have become discouraged. And then Paul, reciprocating that concern, is so concerned about them that he decided to write them a letter and dispatch a team of people to them, that their hearts might be encouraged. They love Paul. They care for him, and so Paul sends them this first person, Tychicus, in order to encourage their hearts and tell the Colossians exactly what's going on with Paul. Tychicus, Paul makes very clear, was a member of his team, a full and faithful member of his team. He uses these three little descriptors. He said: **a beloved brother, a faithful servant, and fellow bondservant**. In other words, Tychicus was sold out for Team Jesus. He was all in. And even though the Colossians had never met him, and maybe he's the one reading them the letter right there in their presence, and they're just getting to know him, Paul says, "You can trust him as a full member of the team. He is one of yours. He is a trusted member of the Christian community."

Have you ever noticed how, in Christ, we make fast friends, and the unity of the Spirit of God brings that about? When I think about all this, I'm moved. I'm challenged, in fact, by the love that the Colossians have. I'm moved by how they care so much for Paul, care so much that they're even discouraged by his circumstances. They've never met him. Think about them for a second. They're never met the guy and they are just heartbroken at what's going on. I have to ask myself, "What is it in me that maybe struggles to stir up that capacity of care and concern for other people?" And the only answer I can really come up with, as I reflected on it this week, is that I think I'm a pretty distracted person because we live in a pretty distracted age, don't we? We have a lot of entertaining distractions. You think back to these people living in Colossae, right? Two thousand years ago, we have to admit that their lives had to be much freer of distractions than ours. Their lives were simpler, not easier. I think they probably lived a very hard life, not an easier life, but a simpler life. I have to ask if the Colossians had maybe, oh, three or four different series that they knew they needed to catch up on in Netflix or on Hulu or whatever, would they have had the emotional capacity to care about someone they had never met that was a hundred miles away? Would that even have occurred to them? Would they have lingered long enough, or would they have hurried up and gotten to the next thing they needed to watch, the next thing to distract them if they were emotionally consumed with who's going to make the top 12 on "America's Got Talent," or "American Idol," or whatever the latest talent show is? Would they have had the margin emotionally to care about Paul and his team? So, when I think about that, it makes me ask, "Do I have the margin? Do I have the margin to be concerned, the margin to care? Or am I just quickly moving on to the next thing, just from distraction to distraction to distraction?"

You know, one of the reasons we relaunched Life Groups, and we are going to remain committed to them, we believe they create an environment for very personal, connected care in our

community. You know, you have to admit that if the wheels fall off in life, and someone's really going through a tight kind of moment in life, but they are only engaging in Christian community here either on Saturday night or on Sunday morning, or they're just engaging online, we have to admit that our capacity to care for them, the capacity for the Christian community to come around them and care for them, is extremely limited. Community is an environment of enacted love and enacted personal care. Paul says in Colossians 3:14, **to put on love**. We're to be a community of love. And what we see here in the Colossians' hearts is love, an act of love that is embodied.

So Paul dispatches to them Tychicus, but not him alone. We learned about another member of the team in verse 9:

**...and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number. They will inform you about the whole situation here.**

Not just names, these are very personal details. And these are stories, each one of them, and that could never be truer than it is about Onesimus. If you know your Pauline epistles, you might be familiar with that name, Onesimus, because when we turn to the book of Philemon, that book is primarily concerned with Onesimus and his situation. Onesimus was a slave, or a servant, in Philemon's household. But what we know about him is that he ran away; he fled, something he wasn't legally allowed to do. It was a horrible situation, but we do know that servants or slaves would be considered people certainly, but also the property of the person that they worked for. And Onesimus ran; he fled. And over time, God did something incredible because Onesimus came across Paul, and somewhere in the midst of that interaction, God did what He does, and Onesimus got saved. He was a runaway on the run, fleeing a situation in Colossae and that surrounding community. But here God saves him, and he is no longer just a runaway; he is now a saint. He is a faithful brother, a member of Paul's very team...not an outsider.

So, we have to ask as Onesimus comes back to the community from which he ran, "Will they embrace him?" I think Onesimus and his situation presented a very real challenge for this community. We know that the church met in Philemon's very house. In other words, all of these people knew Onesimus. Maybe he was a bit of a pain in the neck. I don't know. But now he's coming back to them, and Onesimus would have been completely justified to be somewhat concerned about what it was going to be like when he came back. In fact, I wouldn't question if he said to Paul, "Do I really have to go back there?" See, Philemon would be absolutely legally justified to treat Onesimus harshly. And even if he didn't do that, Onesimus certainly would be right to be concerned that maybe this community wouldn't embrace him, maybe he would remain an outsider, maybe they wouldn't take him back. But Paul calls them to do much more than just take him back. Paul, in fact, links him with Tychicus and he is now someone that has been commissioned by Paul, not just to return, but to return as a member of his very team to encourage their hearts. This is a member of Paul's team. "Don't just let him come back but embrace him. Care for him. Love him." I think it's completely reasonable to think that maybe they would have struggled to do that. Maybe they would be tempted to hold a grudge for their brother Philemon. You know, Onesimus did something wrong. Maybe we could hold a grudge for Philemon. But holding grudges, refusing to forgive, that has no place in the community of Christ, does it? And Paul calls them to embrace him, to forgive him, to live out an active love with him, by forgiving him.

See, this theology we've been camping in for months now, is incredibly practical. We have dwelled on the fact that we have "in Christ" been forgiven. And so then in Colossians 3, Paul turns and he says, "Therefore, you should also forgive." We come to Christ, and we offer nothing. We are saved by His grace alone. There's no room for pride. And because of that, we are then freed up because we stand in His very sufficiency. We are freed up to forgive others. We are freed up to release them from the burden of our wrath and our judgment.

As we go through life, will we be wronged? Of course, we will. But will we be okay? Absolutely! Why? Not because of our callousness of heart, but because of our sufficiency in Christ, we stand with Him, and therefore we stand secure. Each of us in this room, every one of us, has wronged someone. All of us have been wronged, and some of us have been severely wronged. What would it look like if we draw those people to mind that I asked you to think about at the beginning? What would it look like among our closest intimate friends and family if we would be a people that embrace a forgiving spirit, not holding things against others, to trust Christ for that? I'm not saying that's easy. I'm also not saying that to forgive means you immediately just extend loads of trust to someone. It wouldn't be reasonable to extend that level of trust to them, but, instead, to not hold it against them, to release them to God, to forgive them, something that we can grow in. To be a community in Christ is to be a community that embraces forgiveness. And the beautiful thing about community is, because forgiveness is something we have to grow in, often the community itself is what upholds us as we learn to be a people who forgive.

Well, as Paul continues, he gives us a more difficult name here in verse 10:

**Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and *also* Barnabas's cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him).**

Just a quick word about Aristarchus. We know that in Acts he was with Paul, and we learned here that he was imprisoned alongside him.

Then we get to this other name. We get to Barnabas's cousin Mark. Now Barnabas, of course, is someone that Paul was very close to. We remember, a couple years ago, we walked through the book of Acts, and we learned about Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys. And they were this incredible, dynamic team moving throughout the Mediterranean region, just proclaiming the kingdom of God, manifesting the goodness of God wherever they went. But you might remember, as their journey continued, at one point there was then conflict between the two of them, and the conflict centered on Mark. Mark had deserted them. He had fled. He had left the ministry. At one point he wanted to come back, and Barnabas, as his cousin said, "I want to take him back," but Paul disagreed severely and said, "I don't want to take Mark back." And it was such a significant rift that it caused a separation between the two teams. Paul took Silas and Barnabas went out with Mark. It's a sad part of the story. But what we see here clearly is that what God does is, He restores. And in the same way that Onesimus was restored, we see that Mark has been restored. And we know elsewhere that Paul says Mark had become an incredibly helpful member of his team. Someone who was once a cause of division is now a faithful brother, a faithful member of the team. But while Paul had accepted Mark with the broader Christian community, I wonder if everyone knew about what Mark had done, and maybe they were tempted to hold a grudge against him? I think it's quite possible they wanted to hold a grudge on behalf of Paul and say, "You know what? That guy fled Paul. Paul, of all people! How could he do that?" But Paul makes it clear.

He'll have none of that, no room for that. Love enacted does not hold grudges, and a community that holds grudges is not operating according to the Spirit of Christ. If he comes, Paul says, "Welcome him." Verse 11:

**. . .and also Jesus who is called Justus;** (All we really know is this is the only time this person occurs in the New Testament, so we can't say much about him. But then Paul continues.) **these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision, and they have proved to be an encouragement to me.**

Paul names these Jewish co-workers, and we can't say exactly why. We can speak with confidence about a lot of these people, but we don't know precisely the situation that made him want to kind of draw attention to these Jewish workers that were with him. So, I'm speculating here, but just allow me to do that for just a moment. We know that in this early Christian church, one of the biggest issues they had to face, and what I think Satan was constantly trying to do, was to cause a rift between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. Getting over the ethnic divisions was a huge problem for the early church. And we know that there was a time where the Jewish Christians wanted to demand that the Gentile Christians take on the outward forms of their faith. Things like the Sabbath and the festivals and circumcision were certainly a part of that. Now we know that the early community overcame that, and Paul spoke strongly about how, "Listen, our sufficiency is in Christ and Christ alone. That's the only thing that qualifies us and that is the only marker of what it means to be a believer as you are Christ's. None of the other stuff matters." But I do wonder whether maybe there was still a little current in that early community of maybe being frustrated with the Jewish people or with Jewish Christians. Maybe Paul was concerned that these Christians in Colossae would maybe think of these Jewish Christians as guilty by association and maybe extend some distrust to them. But Paul makes it clear, "That is not the way we are to live. That's not the way we're going to operate." Once again Paul is calling them to very specific acts of love. "Embrace them. They are fellow brothers. They are faithful workers for the kingdom of God. They are part of my team." Verse 12:

**Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. For I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.** (Vs. 12-13)

Remember Epaphras? We talked about him our very first week together. Epaphras was the one in Colossians 1 where we learned he was the one that brought word of this Colossian community to Paul. He came and told Paul about what was happening, and Paul just erupted in thanksgiving and praise. He was so encouraged that the word of God was going out. Paul hadn't stepped foot in that city, and yet they had received the gospel of God. They had received grace. They were followers of Jesus. And then Paul remarked that Epaphras was one of the people that told him about their love in the Spirit. I think Epaphras was either the church planter or part of the church planting team that helped this community first hear of the good news. And what's very clear from these few verses is that he had a pastor's heart. He had a shepherd's heart. He loved these people. Paul said that he was always **laboring earnestly** for them in his prayers. Laboring earnestly...that word, if we go back to the Greek, could just as easily be translated, he *agonizes over you* in prayer. He has an agonizing prayer life. He wrestles tirelessly for you in prayer. He struggles for you in prayer.

Draw to mind those names again, those faces, those people in your life. What would it look like to agonize over them in prayer? Families that were up here, “If you're still here,” I know a lot of the kids went to class, “what would it look like to agonize over your kids in prayer, just to pour over them in prayer, to wrestle for them in prayer, to labor earnestly? What would that look like?” To linger long enough on them, to be concerned long enough to allow enough space that you can consider all the things they're encountering, and to really wrestle with them with God? Ask God to do that which only He can do, because prayer, if we think about it, prayer is the first and greatest act of love that we can really offer someone. Because when we pray, we are turning to the only person that is capable of really giving those that we love what they truly need. God is the only one that is adequate for the greatest needs in the life of my kids, my spouse, my family...everyone. God is the only one that can do it. And so if I care about them, if I'm concerned about them, am I agonizing over them in prayer, asking God to do that which only He can do? Will we as a body lift up these families? Will we lift up one another? Will we care for each other in that way? Think about those names again. What would it look like? What would it look like if we all committed to agonize over these people that we love in prayer, to do that for the next month?

You know, last night, as I was preparing, before we had our service last night, it was impressed upon me that, you know, one of the commitments I want to make, and I'm going to ask you to join me if you would like, going back to this idea of distraction. I just have so many distractions. So what if there would be one night a week, just one night over the next month and a half here—the season of Advent through the New Year—if I would just say one night where there's no media, not going to be on my phone playing Wordle or whatever. You know, there's Qwertle, there's Octordle, all of these. So many distractions, so many little things that are so entertaining, that can take our minds and our hearts off those that we love. So, to have a night of the week where we just say, “None of that. All I'm doing is making space for God to bring people to mind, bring loved ones to mind that I might be concerned for them and that I might agonize over them...labor earnestly in prayer for them.” Church, I believe if we would do that, if we would commit to do that with the people that we know and love, God would change us significantly. I don't even think we can fathom the change that would come about if we would be agonizers in prayer, like Epaphras.

Well, as we get to these last few verses, I'm just going to make a few comments and then we'll wrap up our time together. Verse 14:

**Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and *also* Demas.**

Luke is, of course, the physician, the one who wrote both Luke and Acts. We know about him from his journeys with Paul. Demas, we don't know much about, except it's a good candidate for a name if you're expecting a child soon. (*laughter*) Verse 15:

**Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house. When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part, read my letter that is *coming* from Laodicea. Say to Archippus, “Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it. (Vs. 15-17)**

Just a real quick insight. This is the way this community and really this early church community operated in the first century, as Paul would write a letter and then it would kind of be a letter that would go on a circuit. It would move from church to church to church, and in the sovereignty of God, some of those letters were the ones that He kept over time, and we read today. But there are others that just got lost, and God didn't intend for us to have those. But that's what happened here with this letter. "Share it with the other churches, and you read the letter that I wrote to them." As for Archippus, it just appears that he's a Christian worker, and Paul is just calling him to be faithful to the call that God has given him, to be devoted to what he's been called to. And finally, verse 18:

**I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you.**

As he closes, he closes with these incredibly personal words. **Remember my imprisonment.** I think it just serves, as he's closing, as a sobering reminder of often the struggle, the cost of being engaged in the mission of God, to be sold out for Jesus Christ and the work that He has called us to do. Many of us in this room are going to experience great cost because of what God has called us to. I know it's costly. When we step foot on a plane and fly to a different country, there's cost involved in that. There's cost involved in bearing witness to Jesus Christ in our workplace, being faithful with those that don't know Him. But I think Paul would also tell us this. He would say, "Yes, there's been a cost, but there's also been an incredible gain. When you look at what I have gained against what I have lost, I got a bargain because I gained Christ. I have walked with Him. And, yes, it's been hard, but it's been an incredible journey, and I would never trade it, not for the world." But there will be difficulty. **Remember my imprisonment.** You might remember that when Jesus was finishing His time with His disciples, right before those awful days—Good Friday, and the days that followed, up until the hope of the resurrection—they were living in some darkness. They didn't know quite what was coming. But in that upper room, He looked at them in John 16:33, and he said to them: ***In the world you have tribulation.*** You're going to have trouble. But then He said, ***"Take courage, fear not, take heart because I've overcome the world."***

We live lives that are messy, don't we? As you grow older, things get more and more confusing often. We start to see tragedies all around us, and sometimes it's easy to start to say we just wish we could push that all away, push it out of mind. But that is precisely the place that God calls us to live out this theology that we have been grounded in, in this book. It's precisely the place that God calls us to live out the life of love that we have been freed up to live. We have been rooted in Christ. Therefore, because of that, we are free to live a different sort of life. We are free to live God's very life. Paul says it this way. ***Christ in you, the hope of glory...the hope of glory.*** Throughout this series, we have sought to magnify Jesus Christ, to lift Him up, to praise Him. There's an incredible hymn early in Colossians 1 where it says: ***He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.***

And we have reflected on how our sufficiency in Him then frees us up to live differently at home, at work, abroad in the world. And yes, even in the messiness of our very lives and the relationships that can also often be so difficult, so complex, this is theology that changes the way we live. ***Rooted in Christ***—we have been rooted in. Therefore, we can live resilient lives, not because of our toughness, not because of our willpower, not because of our personal strength or our gritted teeth, or our white knuckles, but because we are with Him. We have been grounded in Him. We are now



being built up in Him. Christ is enough. Christ is sufficient. We have been rooted in Him, therefore, let us seek after Him and Him alone. Will you pray with me?

*Our Father, we praise You that You have made us your own, that in Christ, You have forgiven us, You have freed us. And, Lord Jesus, we praise You for doing that which we couldn't do, that in enduring the cross and in rising again, You have set us free from the bondage of sin and death. We praise Your name. And, Lord, we ask that You, by Your Spirit, would help us as we seek after You, that we would be built up in love, that You would help us to put on the new clothes of the Christ life, that You would do all these things for Your glory. We pray these things in Your name, Amen.*

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