

Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts.

—Colossians 4:7–8

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.

—Colossians 4:12

LEARNING GOALS

1. To understand that a community participating in the mission of God is made up of a team, with servant hearts, consisting of men and women from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds.
2. To understand that a community participating in the mission of God focuses on prayer and the Word, with the aim of helping every member stand mature in Christ.
3. To understand that a community participating in the mission of God creates an atmosphere of constant encouragement.

REFLECTION

This text, Colossians 4:7–18, is one that we may tend to skim over in our Bible reading. The heading in my NIV Study Bible calls this “Final Greetings,” as Paul ends his letter to the church in Colossae. It’s a bunch of names of people who don’t mean much to us.

You may even wonder why God inspired these verses to be in his Word. But, actually, as you dig deeper, as so many times in God's Word, you find a true picture, with examples, of a community, participating in the mission of God. Paul gives us insight into what a Christian community consists of, looks like, participates in, and needs, to truly carry out the mission of God.

Christians Are on a Team, Devoted to Serving Christ

Even though the apostle Paul was one of the most gifted men in the history of the church, he was not, and could not be, a one-man-show. The true community of God is not designed to be a one-man-show or even sustained by a few men. Even Paul was surrounded by a team of faithful people, devoted to serving Jesus Christ. In this text we see Paul's team and learn a lot about how God wants his community to function. It's striking that in this short letter, where Paul devotes only one verse to lust and greed, one to anger, one to wives, and one to fathers, he spends the final twelve verses mentioning various people with him and in Colossae. Clearly Paul wasn't the only guy doing ministry and serving in this community. Paul's team consisted of a racially mixed group of Jews and Gentiles, which was radical in the first century. In Christ, and in true community, diversity is not a problem to be resolved. Paul's team had men from opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum, such as Luke, the doctor, and Onesimus, a runaway slave, working side by side in God's community. Paul wanted his letter read in Colossae, in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house, proving that he had further team members in all those places as well. Paul used phrases such as: "dear brother," "faithful servant," "faithful minister," "fellow prisoner," and "worker for the kingdom," to describe his team. He also talked of team members who were an encouragement and a comfort, and who wrestled in prayer for each other.

Prayer, the Word, and Maturity in Christ

In Colossians 4:12 Paul gives us a great description of what a Christian community is all about. In this verse, Paul speaks of Epaphras, and the fact that he, a servant of Christ

Jesus, “wrestles” (NIV) in prayer or “labors earnestly” (NASB) in prayer for the Christian community in Colossae. A true community of God is one that prays earnestly and fervently for each other.

Epaphras’ prayers were very focused, with his first desire being that his fellow brothers would “stand firm in all the will of God.” Christians find the will of God by dwelling in His divine Word. “The will of God” does not refer to discovering divine direction, such as, “What career should I pursue?” Rather, it refers to how God wants us to live as revealed in His Word. Paul prayed the same thing (Col. 1:9). “For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” God’s will for us is revealed in His Word.

Epaphras’ prayers also wanted all the community to stand mature or perfect and fully assured in Christ. What does this mean, that the Colossians would stand mature and fully assured? What does Christian maturity look like? Well, maturity includes being wise and discerning. Mature people are spiritually and emotionally stable, marked by the fruit of the Spirit. But there is one aspect of the fruit of the Spirit, especially, that runs as a thread through these verses: faithfulness. A mature Christian is a faithful servant of Jesus Christ. Paul mentions it specifically of Tychicus and Onesimus. It is implied of Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus Justus, Epaphras, and Luke. The Lord wants us to be faithful servants.

An Atmosphere of Encouragement

As we continue to dig into this text, Paul makes it obvious that a Christian community, participating in the mission of God, thrives in an atmosphere of encouragement. Even Paul in verse 11 states that his three Jewish co-workers have proved a “comfort” to him. Even though Paul was one of the most gifted men in Christian history, he acknowledges that these three men had been an encouragement to him. He didn’t view himself as being on a pedestal where he ministered to everyone else, but that his co-workers ministered to him also. When Paul wrote to the Romans, he said that he longed to see them so that he might impart some spiritual gift to help establish them.

But then he quickly added, “that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Romans 1:12). Paul not only wanted to give encouragement; he also knew he needed to receive it.

Furthermore, Paul shows that encouragement thrives with open communication. Paul sent Tychicus and Onesimus to inform the church of his situation so that they would be encouraged (Colossians 4:7–9). He had nothing to hide from them. Remember, he was in prison and other Christian workers in Rome were criticizing him (Philemon 1:15–17). Paul could have made it sound bleak to elicit sympathy or he could have hid the truth to try to make it sound like he was more successful than he really was. But Paul didn’t camouflage his situation by making it sound as if things were better or worse than they really were. He believed in open, honest communication. How does that relate to encouragement? Imagine that you are struggling with discouragement over some problem, and someone you know asks, “How’s it going?” You don’t want him to think you’re struggling, because that makes you look like a defeated Christian. So you say, “Everything’s great! God is faithful!” But you haven’t been honest in sharing your struggles. You just missed an opportunity for that brother to encourage you and to pray with you. For encouragement to take place in the community, we must be open in communicating the truth.

Conclusion

So Paul’s final greetings turned out to be so much more. I think, “A Lesson on Community,” could just as easily be the heading. Paul’s description of community shows a team of various races, various professions, all working as servants with one goal in mind, the mission of God. Paul went on to describe a community that “wrestles” with prayer for each other, in hope that every member will find the will of God in his Word, and reach maturity and assuredness in Christ. And finally, Paul revealed that members of any Christian community need to give encouragement, but also be willing to open their hearts and receive encouragement.

LESSON PLAN

1. Engage

- a. What is the biblical image of authentic Christian community? What adjectives would you use to describe it? What would it long for? What would its members need?
- b. Read Colossians 4:7–18. What does this have to do with community?

2. Involve

- a. Paul's team was made up of members with servant hearts. Why must any thriving community, especially a community of God, have members with servant hearts?
- b. Paul's team, or community, was made up of members from various races and socio-economic backgrounds, working in unison for the mission of God. Honestly, how are we doing at this? How can we become a better example of this?
- c. What does it truly look like, feel like, to "wrestle" in prayer?
- d. When was the last time you actually wrestled in prayer for someone else?
- e. How does it make you feel when you know fellow community members are praying fervently on your behalf?
- f. What is your description of someone who stands mature in Christ?
- g. How does it make you feel that even Paul needed encouragement to carry out his work?
- h. Is it harder for you to give or receive encouragement?
- i. Do you agree that opening up and allowing someone to encourage you is good for the community? Why?
- j. Give an example of someone who has been a huge encouragement to you in your walk of faith?
- k. How can we be more encouraging to one another?

3. Challenge

- a. Make a commitment to start a relationship with someone at Glenwood that has nothing in common with you, someone you don't really know, and make our team/community stronger.

- b. Pick out someone this week and pray fervently for them. Write them a note or let them know that a fellow community member is in prayer for them.
- c. Seek out someone this week that serves our Glenwood community or someone in our community you know is struggling and encourage them.
- d. Let someone know what an encouragement they have been to you in your walk of faith.