

Colossians Session #5: 4:2-18

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As we move into our last session discussing St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians, in this last unit St. Paul changes from the "I" mode speaking directly to the community to the "we" mode, once again including St. Timothy as co-author of the letter. They bring this document to a close by returning to the themes of prayer, thanksgiving, grace, God's Word and walking in wisdom.

*Devote
yourselves
to prayer,
being watchful
and thankful.*

Colossians 4:2

Walk in Wisdom 4:2-6

4:2 Persevere in prayer: What does the word persevere mean? To persevere means: *continue in a course of action even in the face of difficulty or with little or no prospect of success* (Online Dictionary). St. Paul recognizes that being a Christian in a non-Christian world is extremely difficult. Christianity has only continued because individuals held onto their faith in impossible situations. Throughout centuries Christians, many who were martyrs, held onto their faith through maintaining a strong prayer life. And in that prayer life were **watchful in it with thanksgiving**. St. Paul does not want the community at Colossae or any of us to forget the grace and freedom achieved through experiencing Jesus Christ.

4:3-4 pray for us: Here we see St. Paul leaving the individual "I" of previous chapters to the inclusive "we" and "us". It is not uncommon that St. Paul would ask his fellow Christians to pray for him (Ephesians 6:19; Philippians 1:19; Hebrews 13:19). But, St. Paul gets specific as to what he hopes will happen. **That God may open a door to us for the word.** The "word" here is the gospel already mentioned in this letter as *the word of truth, the gospel* (1:5), and *the word of Christ* (3:16). St. Paul goes on here to further describe it as **the mystery of Christ**. St. Paul is not only asking for their prayers in his mission and ministry, but hoping to arouse in them their own part in this spreading of the gospel. St. Paul ends this verse with the words **for which I am in prison**. Why is St. Paul in prison? The obvious reason is he has been arrested by Rome for speaking out placing the "godhead" on to Jesus and not Caesar. But with St. Paul there is always another meaning. St. Paul often talks about being "a slave" for Christ (Ephesians 6:5-9). He is a willing slave, giving up all to serve God through Jesus Christ. In that St. Paul is a prisoner to his responsibilities to God and cannot turn away from it. As he says in verse 4:5: **I must speak**.

4:5 making most of the opportunity: St. Paul now turns to the Colossians challenging them to step forward as evangelists. Spreading the word of God is a matter of opportunity. There are those who go out and "make" their opportunity by teaching and preaching where-ever they go. But the rest of us must wait for those golden moments. St. Paul gives sound instruction as to how we are to be evangelists. First, we are to **conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders**. We cannot in one moment be living a life counter to the gospel and expect people to take our words seriously. Conducting ourselves wisely means bringing into our lives all that God expects so that when those opportunities present themselves we can build on an already established foundation.

4:6 *Let your speech always be gracious:* As Christians we should always present ourselves gracefully and attractively, being friendly and polite. But our encounters with others (and our lives in general) should be ***seasoned with salt***, meaning that our personal testimonies where we have been touched by Christ, lifted up in faith are more powerful when communicated with the spontaneity and plain talk of the moment meaning as we talk about sports, politics, music, family, theater... Someone who can only talk about Jesus 24/7 is often a bore to be around. Live life. Love the life you live and allow your faith to inform and form your life experiences. Then when the opportunity presents itself, share how your faith has informed and supported your parenting, job choice and so on.

Coworkers for the Gospel 4:7-14

4:7 *Tychicus, my beloved brother:* We meet Tychicus in Acts 20:4. He is a companion of Paul as they bring the proceeds collected from various churches in Macedonia and Achaia to Jerusalem. Tychicus is also mentioned in 2 Timothy (4:12) as being sent to the Church in Ephesus in hopes to build up the membership there. Besides Acts, Colossians and 2 Timothy, Tychicus is also mentioned in Ephesians 6:21 and Titus 3:12. Beyond what we read in the Bible there is little else known of him other than the compliments paid by St. Paul in saying Tychicus is a ***trustworthy minister and fellow slave in the Lord***. The fact that what we read here is almost word for word what we read in Ephesians 6:21 supports the idea for many scholars that the Letter to the Ephesians was written within a short period after the Letter to the Colossians.

4:9 *together with Onesimus:* there is no reason to doubt that this Onesimus is the same slave we learned about in St. Paul's letter to Philemon. For those who don't remember. Onesimus was a slave of Philemon, (a member of the Colossae community), who ran away and whether by design (Onesimus sought St. Paul out) or by accident found himself in St. Paul's company. St. Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon so they could work out the situation. (Read the Letter to Philemon for further understanding. It's only one chapter long!) St. Paul reminds the community at Colossae that Onesimus is ***one of you***. This has a dual meaning in that Onesimus is not only from the city of Colossae but was a member of the Christian Church in Colossae.

Now we get into the usual list of people that St. Paul sends greetings from:

4:10 *Aristarchus:* He was one of those faithful companions of the apostle Paul who shared with him his labors and sufferings. He is suddenly mentioned along with Gaius as having been seized by the excited Ephesians during the riot stirred up by the silversmiths (Acts 19:29). They are designated "men of Macedonia, Paul's companions in travel." We learn later that he was a native of Thessalonica (Acts 20:4; Acts 27:2). When Aristarchus attached himself to Paul we do not know, but he seems ever after the Ephesian uproar to have remained in Paul's company. He was one of those who accompanied Paul from Greece via Macedonia (Acts 20:4). Aristarchus is next mentioned as accompanying Paul to Rome (Acts 27:2). There he attended Paul and shared his imprisonment. He is mentioned in two of the letters of the Roman captivity, in the Epistle to the church at Colossians

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4:10, and in the Epistle to Phm (Philemon 1:24), in both of which he sends greetings. In the former Paul calls him "my fellow-prisoner." According to tradition he was martyred during the persecution of Nero.

Mark: He is the son of Mary of Jerusalem and is most probably Mark the Evangelist, the writer of the Gospel of Mark. We have met Mark before in our study of the Acts of the Apostles. In St. Paul and St. Barnabas' first missionary trip, Mark set off with them only to return home early, later creating a riff between Paul and Barnabas about including Mark in further missionary trips.

Barnabas: a prominent early church leader fondly nicknamed, Son of Encouragement (Acts 4:36) in that he sought out those in need and did all he could to assist them. Barnabas was a Levite originally from the island of Cyprus. Barnabas courageously vouched for St. Paul when the Church in Jerusalem was suspicious of Paul's conversion (Acts 9:20:31). After helping to establish the Christian community in Jerusalem, St. Barnabas and St. Paul were sent off on a missionary trip (Acts 13:1-3).

4:11: Jesus, who is called Justus: We know nothing beyond what we learned from this verse. That "Jesus" is the Greek form of the common Jewish name Joshua and "Justus" is a Latinized version. Justus means "righteous". We know that these three: Aristarchus, Mark and Jesus/Justus are all Jewish Christians since they *are of the circumcision*.

4:12 Epaphras: a colleague of St. Paul mentioned twice in the New Testament, in the Letter to Philemon (1:23) and twice in Colossians (1:7 & 4:12). He is a fellow servant in ministry with St. Paul, *a slave for Christ*. Otherwise little is known about him, though we can infer that he was a native of Colossae and perhaps converted by St. Paul during the apostle's ministry in Ephesus.

Luke: Yes, this is St. Luke who wrote the Gospel of Luke as well as the Acts of the Apostles. It is from such texts as these that we learn that St. Luke was a *physician*.

Demas: The only information that we have on Demas is here and in 2 Timothy (4:10): *Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica.*

Final Comments 4:15-18

4:15 Give greetings: Finally, as we bring this letter to a close, St. Paul extends greetings to the Christians in the Church in Laodicea and it is most likely that the leader of the Church there was named Nympha, of whom we know nothing else. Scholars differ in their opinion as to the gender of Nympha. As it is written Nympha was a woman's name of the period. Some scholars say that in the form used here it could also be a derivative of Nymphas which would make the leader male. While it might seem like these scholars are stretching, having a woman as the leader of a mixed community of men and women would be highly unlikely for that period in history. This has caused some translations to identify the Church house as *his* rather than *her house*.

4:16 When this letter is read before you: this verse acts as a reminder that this letter, like most documents of the ancient world, was a script intended not for silent private reading, but for oral presentation before the community gathered for the Sabbath or for the occasion.

4:18 in my own hand: As we have talked about before, in writing this short statement, St. Paul is not simply stating the obvious: "Here I am, Paul, signing my own letter." Most scholars agree that he

is following the convention of authorizing a document that another person has penned (perhaps, Timothy). St. Paul goes on to say **remember my chains** not as a way of gaining their sympathy but as a request for support and prayer. It is in statements such as this that scholars mark Colossians as one of St. Paul's prison letters. St. Paul brings this letter to an end with a final statement of God's grace.

As we bring this study to a close I would like to go back to a part of our conversation of the first day by looking at two things: First, the four general themes of the letter as a way of an overview of our study and the relevance of this document for Christians today.

Theological Themes we will encounter

In many ways the letter to the Colossian, while bearing several similarities to St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, (common themes and expressions and some identical teachings), is unique among his other letters. There is a specific problem that St. Paul must deal with and he is almost aggressive in doing so. The major theme of this document is to deal with what has become known in some biblical circles as the Colossians heresy. This heresy was the merging involving four elements of both pagan and Jewish origin into Christian belief and practice. Those four elements are:

1. denying the all sufficiency and pre-eminence of Christ (Colossians 2:8).
2. Judaist ceremonialism - which attached special significance to the rite of circumcision, food regulations, and observance of special days (Colossians 2:11,16-17)
3. Angel worship ((Colossians 2:18)
4. Asceticism, the practice of self-denial and self-discipline simply for the sake of doing so, which called for harsh treatment of the body (Colossians 2:20-23)

St. Paul attacks each of these issues by reminding the community at Colossae that Jesus Christ is the fullness of God and our belief in Him, our dedication to Him, our living our lives following Him is all that is required in faith.

Pertinence for Today

In our world today, we are bombarded with messages telling us a "better" way to live. From the commercials everywhere proclaiming that if we wear these shoes, or eat this product or drink this beer we will be happy, healthy and the life of the party; to the various "religious" messages (astrology, scientology, the occult...) seeking to show us the way. It is tempting, at times, to want to put our trust in these tangible philosophies and ideologies that require less of us. But in the end, in walking down their paths we find ourselves in spiritual or even physical (alcohol, drugs) bondage. In the face of these daily dangers St. Paul powerfully calls us to recognize that Christ is all we need. Why look elsewhere when Jesus is the fullness of wisdom and our fulfillment and true life come from entering ever more deeply into *the riches of the glory of this mystery* which is *Christ in you, the hope for glory* (Colossians 1:27). We study this letter because we must be constantly reminded that NOTHING is to displace the importance of our direct relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

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Reflection Questions:

1. There are many who are in church leadership, here in the parish, in the diocese and around the world. What are your thoughts of the importance of including them in your prayers? What are some ways to support and encourage them?
2. What is one “take-away” from this study of the Letter to the Colossians?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Prayers of Petition: 2629-2633

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