



Christ is Above All: Laboring for the Cause of Christ (Colossians 4:7-18)

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September 18, 2022

INTRODUCTION

Not a single word of Scripture is unnecessary or unimportant. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). Yes, passages like the one before us today describe people and events who lived thousands of years ago. Yes, there are significant cultural differences between the world they lived in and our own. Yes, Colossians was written by a real man named Paul who struggled with weaknesses and relational challenges like we do.

And yet, “No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pe 1:21). The Spirit superintended the words human authors wrote such that they were the very words of God, breathed out by God.

Here’s what that means. God speaks to us inerrantly, infallibly, and authoritatively through Col 4:7-18 even though it feels a bit like reading someone else’s mail. So don’t say, “I can’t pronounce half these names. Let’s move on.” Rather say, “Lord, open my eyes that I might see wonderful things in your law,” for they are the very words of life.

Paul has spent the entire letter equipping and urging the church in Colossae to hold fast to Christ, to not shift from the hope of gospel. He wants to guard them from thinking, “Enough already! I know Jesus lived, died, and rose from the grave to rescue us from sin and death and bring us home to God. Let’s move on to something more practical!” Friends, there is nothing more practical than the gospel! Nothing has the power to transform who you are and the way you live like the good news of Christ crucified.

When we grasp the reality that Christ really is above all, no area of life remains untouched. Who Jesus is and what he has done, is doing, and will do has serious implications for things like how we relate to other churches, how we pursue the work of Christian ministry, and how we care for you as pastors along the way. And Paul concludes his letter by showing us what the Lord wants from us in each of those areas. We’ll linger on the first two and briefly touch on the last one.

So remember, even though this section feels more personal, Paul hasn't stopped speaking for God and is no less inspired by the Spirit. In fact, he teaches us something critically important. In the character of church relationships, in the character of Christian ministry, in the character of pastoral ministry, **holding fast to Christ means laboring for Jesus' sake in a way that's consistent with the character of his work.** Let's begin with the implications of Jesus' work for our relationship with other churches.

1) THE CHARACTER OF CHURCH RELATIONSHIPS (vv. 7-9)

Tychicus spent a lot of time working with Paul. He helped Paul deliver a financial collection for the church in Jerusalem. He went at Paul's request to serve churches in Crete and Ephesus. Most likely, he also delivered the letter of the Colossians by hand. Notice what Paul tells them to expect from Tychicus in v. 7. "Tychicus will tell you about all my activities... (v. 8) I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts."

He wants the Colossians to know all the ways God has been on the move in Rome, all the ways the gospel has been advancing, not just despite Paul's imprisonment but through it! Phil 1:12-14, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear."

There is a joy in Jesus you will never experience if all you're aware of and all you care about is what God is doing in your personal life. We are self-centered by nature, not for the better. God made us derive joy, humility, and strength from reports of what he is doing in other churches, other cities, and other nations. Paul doesn't tell the man to give a report to the Colossian missions committee because, you know, that's their thing. No! He's reporting to the entire church because the entire church needs to hear!

We get to experience the same whenever we share a missions update on Sunday, watch a video testimony featuring another Sovereign Grace Church, attend a missionary feedback session after the service, or hear from a visiting pastor in our region before they preach. They're not optional activities. They're God's way of pouring spiritual encouragement into your soul and strengthening our relationships with the broader body of Christ.



Interdependent, relationally connected churches – not isolated congregations with little interest in denominational life – is the consistent pattern in the New Testament. We must not say, “As long as KingsWay’s fine, we’re good.” The Lord wants us to be deeply invested in the welfare of like minded congregations, to carry them on our heart, and regularly hear and rejoice in what Jesus is doing in their midst.

Tychicus isn’t some other guy from some other church to whom Paul wants the Colossians to politely listen. V. 7, “He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord.” It’s one of the many reasons I’m thankful we’re part of a denomination called Sovereign Grace Churches and that every church in our denomination is part of a region of churches, in our case, the mid-south. It’s not an affiliation. It’s not another group that wants our money. Mercy Hill in Fredericksburg, Sovereign Grace Church in Roanoke, Living Faith in Franklin, Grace City in Wilmington, Crossway in Charlotte, and Risen Hope in Charleston – that’s our spiritual family.

One of them planted our church. Two we planted. We just did a youth retreat together. The entire Fredericksburg church is joining us on Nov 20 for our annual Thanksgiving celebration. Pastors from all of them have preached Christ from this pulpit. And hardly a week goes by where I’m not in communication with other churches in our region about some sort of ministry need or opportunity. Let me give you a really exciting example!

We’ve been supporting a full time missionary couple in Windhoek, Namibia for a long time – Josh and Lieze Kruger. In recent years, the Lord has built a conviction in Josh Jr.’s heart that the local church is the centerpiece of God’s mission strategy and that healthy local churches are built on gospel-centered, expository preaching. Josh and Lieze have also had a growing sense the Lord is calling Josh to full time pastoral ministry, to see men and women in Namibia come to faith in Christ and be added to a local church body.

Right now, Josh and Lieze are part of a group of some 40-50 folks who look to Josh as their pastor. He’s preaching regularly on Sunday mornings and leading a Community Group in his home during the week. And when I visited Josh and Lieze in April, we talked for hours about their desire to plant a Sovereign Grace Church in Windhoek.

Since then, we’ve been discussing the possibility with our local missions committee, the other pastors in our region, and our global missions director at the denominational level. All of us believe this is something the Lord is doing. The relational favor God has given Josh and Lieze among different ethnic groups in their city is remarkable. So we’re



working on bringing their family to Midlothian in January for a 1-year church-planting residency designed to prepare Josh to return to Windhoek and plant a church in 2024.

Isn't that encouraging, my friends? It's the same thing the Colossians experienced by welcoming Tychicus and he didn't come alone. Look at v. 9. Paul sent Onesimus with him. Together, "They will tell you of everything that has taken place here." Onesimus was a runaway bondservant who had defrauded a member of the Colossian church named Philemon. Onesimus eventually wound up in Rome, met Paul, and became a Christian. If you want to learn more, read the book of Philemon, which Paul wrote to help Onesimus pursue reconciliation with his former master.

Suffice it to say, what Onesimus did to Philemon wasn't right. But notice Paul doesn't view or want the Colossians to view Onesimus for the sins or mistakes he's committed in the past. He wants them to welcome him for who he is in Christ (v. 9), "Our faithful and beloved brother," and gives him the dignity of reporting to the Colossians all the Lord is doing in Rome.

Relationships between churches will always come with challenges. They were difficult in the 1st century. They're still difficult today. When regional church relationships or denominational life is messy and we're tempted to duck out, we need to follow Paul's example. Respond with mercy and justice to whatever issues arise as Paul did in the letter to Philemon. And then we need to keep our eyes focused not on what people are doing or not doing, but on what the Lord is doing, even through broken vessels.

Holding fast to Christ means laboring for Jesus' sake in a way that's consistent with the character of his work. How is Jesus working? He's on the move in other churches no less than our own. And he's accomplishing his perfect work through weak vessels. May we rejoice and relate with other churches accordingly, especially in our region. Second, consider...

2) THE CHARACTER OF CHRISTIAN MINISTRY (vv. 10-14)

Vv. 10-14 contains a list of greetings from various members of the church in Rome to the church of Colossae. On one level, they further illustrate the deeply personal character of



church relationships I just discussed. On another level, the information Paul discloses here about each of them wonderfully illustrates the character of Christian ministry.

Eph 2:10 contains a precious promise for every believer in this room. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." In other words, Christianity means more than salvation on the final day. It means new life today, a life devoted to loving and serving the Lord who died to set you free from sin and death. It means using your time, your abilities, your resources, to make much of him all throughout the week.

It's easy to talk about the importance of living for Jesus, doing the good works the Spirit empowers us to do. But what does that actually look like? What does Christian ministry require and consist of, not just for pastors but all of us, from the newest believer to the oldest saint? Paul highlights several characteristics.

First, it's costly. There's some debate over whether the word he uses to describe Aristarchus as "my fellow prisoner" refers to the suffering of literal imprisonment with Paul in Rome or a symbolic captivity to God's priorities and purposes. Either way, the point remains, christian ministry is costly. For some, the cost will be physical. Aristarchus was attacked by a mob on account of his faith in Acts 19 and likely shipwrecked with Paul on the island of Malta.

For others, the cost will be relational. You may have to end a close friendship or stop hanging out with people who sabotage your love for Jesus or dull your sensitivity to the things of God. Or the cost may be financial. Nearly every one of us in this room is fantastically wealthy by global standards. If you're going to follow Jesus, we can expect the Lord to ask us to give much of it away.

Bottom line, if you like having a comfortable life where you're never too busy, never work too hard, or are forced to do anything outside your comfort zone, know this. The Lord will set good works before you that are perfectly designed to mortify the idol of ease.

You should be suspicious if whenever you have an opportunity to do something costly or painful for Jesus' sake, your default response is, "I don't think God is calling me to do that." To follow Jesus is to follow a suffering Savior, a sacrificial Lamb. The good works God has prepared for you will always be costly. Mk 8:34, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."



Second, Christian ministry is restorative. I love how Paul relays greetings from “Mark the cousin of Barnabas.” Paul had a significant conflict with a fellow missionary named Barnabas in Acts 15 concerning Mark. During their first missionary journey, Mark bailed before they had finished. Paul didn’t want to bring him for round two. Barnabas did. A “sharp disagreement” broke out, and Paul and Barnabas ultimately parted company.

All of that happened some 12-14 years before Paul wrote Colossians. Clearly, at some intervening point, Paul and Mark were reconciled. In 2 Tim 4:11 Paul actually says to Timothy, “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me in ministry.” Exactly how Mark matured or how he was restored to ministry partnership with Paul, we don’t know. But don’t miss the key principle.

In the work of Christian ministry, we must never permanently dismiss someone or mentally sideline them from ever being used by God in the future on account of past unfaithfulness. We do it so quickly in the church. We size someone up, issue a functional verdict over their life, and conveniently leave them in the “useful” or “not so useful” discipleship box for the rest of their years. That should not be, brothers and sisters.

When a Christian stumbles, is discipline a loving necessity? Yes. When a leader falls, are public consequences appropriate? Absolutely. Yet how often we viciously eat our own. We adore our spiritual heroes until the moment they prove to be sinners like us and then we despise them. We serve a God who redeems, KingsWay. We serve a God who delights to restore.

In the kingdom of God, your future is not defined by your past. It’s defined, governed, and secured by the faithfulness of God! Through sharp disagreements, God keeps working. Through public scandal, God keeps working. Through painful departures, God keeps working. What a testimony of the redemptive power of God for Paul to say, “Mark greets you.”

Third, Christian ministry is communal. By that I mean it’s a team sport where success depends upon laboring in community. V. 11, “These [Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus] are the only men of the circumcision (the only Jews) among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.”

If Paul needed “fellow workers,” the support and comfort of working in community, how much more do we! The Lord doesn’t want us to go at it alone. Our roles and



responsibilities in his kingdom may be different, but we are able to strengthen one another in the Lord nonetheless. You don't have to be a pastor to comfort me. And I don't have to be an electrician to comfort you!

If you try to do whatever good work the Lord has prepared for you John Wayne style, you will fail. He created you for community, Christian. He saved you for community! The biblical mark of spiritual maturity is not an I-don't-like-people, feelings-be-damned, a hundred acres and a gun is all I need sort of attitude. Paul is humbly transparent about his need for encouragement and comfort from fellow believers and honors them accordingly.

I want to specifically speak to those of you who feel isolated in the work of ministry, not because you've run from the community, but because over the years, people keep moving, friends keep leaving, saints you can really lean on are difficult to find. What then? Are you doing something wrong? Is the whole coworker thing a utopian mirage? Allow the beginning of v. 11 to wisely shape your expectations. "These are the only men among the circumcision..."

Really, Paul? After all these years, countless sermons, untold miracles, with all your learning and ministry skill, are you really telling me only three Jews are doing ministry with you? "Yes. And they have been a comfort to me." Friends, serving Jesus has always meant following him outside the camp. You will experience loneliness. You will experience relational isolation. Don't be surprised or despair when the human faces are few in number.

And if they are, remember this. Abundant grace flows through the smallest channels in the kingdom of God. Do not underestimate the encouragement and comfort the Lord will bring through a single coworker in the faith. They don't have to be your type. They don't have to have your personality. They may strike you as terribly socially awkward. And our Gracious God delights to use them to strengthen you.

Finally, Christian ministry is marked by persistent prayer. We honor people who run a food pantry for thousands, take the gospel to Bangladesh, or leave a lucrative career for the challenges of full time pastoring. We would do well to honor the physically homebound widow who bows her head before the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ morning after morning, earnestly pleading for the spiritual protection and growth of our church.



If you don't know what I'm talking about, you need to meet our sister Marietha Hoffman. Or join Mike Hickman and Will Hagen to pray for our Sunday gathering in our pre-service prayer meetings. Or meet us tonight in the Seminar Room at 6:30 to intercede for men and women in our congregation.

Prayer is a holy act of spiritual war. It's how we contend against the spiritual forces of evil around us and within us. And it's a difficult struggle! Distractions abound. Plenty of other "good works" feel easier. Yet nothing rivals the power of calling upon the God who saves!

What does Paul tell us about Epaphras, a man from Colossae presently living in Rome? V. 12, he is "always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God." Paul commends him accordingly in v. 13. "I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis."

When was the last time you specifically, earnestly, and persistently prayed for our church, my friends? I don't say that to guilt you into anything. I say that because I've noticed how easy it is to spend more time physically doing things for the church or mentally evaluating the church than it is to diligently pray for the church. The chief work of Christian ministry is the work of prayer. It's why we pray for other churches no less than our own on Sunday morning!

Prayer reminds us that our hope for the success of Christian ministry resides in the Lord who always keeps his promises, not in people who may prove unfaithful tomorrow. In v. 14, Paul relays greetings from Demas. A few years later in 2 Tim 4:10 he grieves the way Demas deserted him, having fallen "in love with this present world." Human hopes may fail us. God will not. Holding fast to Christ means laboring for Jesus' sake in a way that's consistent with the character of his work. He's a faithful God. So we pray, asking him to do what he has promised to do.

3) THE CHARACTER OF PASTORAL MINISTRY (vv. 15-18)

Paul illustrates the character of Christian ministry in general in vv. 10-14. He reveals the character of pastoral ministry in particular in vv. 10-15. I linger here as we close both to exhort our present and future elders, as well as to instruct us in what we should expect from our under-shepherds.



First, pastoral ministry is relational. That doesn't mean every pastor will be your best friend or every pastor will spend equal time with every member. It does mean cold professionalism has no place in the church. Genuine pastoral ministry always proceeds from a heart of affectionate responsibility for the flock of God.

Notice in v. 15 how Paul does more than relay other people's greetings. He communicates on his own. "Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house." Both men and women are the recipients of his pastoral care and concern.

Second, pastoral ministry is Word Centered. Though Paul could claim a unique authority as an apostolic eyewitness of the risen Christ, he doesn't build the Colossians into his personal brand or apostolic authority. He builds them into the Scriptures. He roots and grounds them in the Word of God, urging them to submit to the Lord.

V. 16, "And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans..." That's what faithful pastors do. They use their authority to build the church into the living and abiding Word of God, both in public and private.

Not everything Paul said or wrote was inspired and became part of the canon of Scripture. We may wish for a copy of his letter to Laodicea, but we need not fear we are missing part of God's Word or that 100 years from now an archeological discovery will expand God's Word. Why not? Because of the faithfulness of God. The assurance that we are not missing something he intended to communicate to us ultimately rests on his character, not ours.

Remember Jer 1:12, "I am watching over my word to perform it," says the Lord, preservation, transmission, and canonization included. Or 2 Pe 1:3, "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness," the "precious and very great promises" of the Scriptures we hold in our hands included!

Third, pastoral ministry majors on equipping people. V. 17, "Say to Archippus, 'See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received from the Lord.'" To put it bluntly, our job as elders is not to curate and run a bunch of ministry programs for Christians to consume. Our holy responsibility is to equip and strengthen you for the Eph 2:10 works of ministry God has called you to do. It's your job to do the work of ministry. It's our job to equip you.

A faithful pastor does not run around providing tacit endorsements of various members' personal ministries by making them churchwide things. Rather, through our teaching, our intercession, our example, and our personal encouragement, we urge you toward faithfulness in what God has called you to do.

When we evaluate elders present and future, these are the questions you need to ask. Is he a man who deeply cares for God's people? Is he a man you can trust to explain and apply God's Word? And is he a man who joyfully and skillfully equips others for the work of ministry? For pastors, holding fast to Christ means laboring for Jesus' sake in a way that's consistent with the character of his work. That's the kind of man Paul was.

CONCLUSION

Friends, when it comes to the way we relate to other churches, the way we do Christian ministry, or what we expect and require from our pastors, the character of God's work must inform the way we pursue our own. Simply having connections with other congregations is not enough. Being busy in all sorts of Christian volunteer activities is not enough. Putting in a ton of hours as a pastor is not enough.

We must allow what Scripture models and teaches in places like Col 4 about God's priorities and purposes in all those areas to govern our actions and expectations. And if that feels like a tall order, fear not. Paul knew the same grace, the same unmerited, divine favor that broke into his life would sustain the Colossians in holding fast to Christ. "Grace be with you," he concludes in v. 18.

That's our hope, brothers and sisters. If we are going to hold fast to Christ, it will be a work of grace. If we labor for his sake in a way that's consistent with the character of his work, it will be because the Lord gave more grace. By grace, we refuse to go at it alone. We pursue fellowship with other churches. By grace, we do the work of Christian ministry, paying the cost, pursuing restoration, laboring as a team, and persevering in prayer. By grace, pastors serve from the heart, build with God's Word, and equip the saints for ministry.

We need grace. And Jesus delights to give us more grace. He's our provider. He's our hope. May we earnestly labor for his sake in response to his glorious grace. The Savior who reigns above all is worth it. Let's pray and ask for his help.