



The Greatness of Christ:

A Study of Colossians

Week 6 - Chapter 4

Final Instructions 4:2-6

- Paul's closing instructions have a two-fold character, the first on conduct within the church, the second on conduct outside the church. The first is marked by prayer, the second by wisdom.
- Prayer – persevere in prayer
 - Paul focuses on the vital importance of prayer. A Christian life devoid of prayer is a contradiction. Paul does not focus on the 'how's of prayer, as in techniques of spirituality, which are all the rage these days, but rather focuses on the 'why'. A Christian prays because they are in Christ, because it is an expression of their union with their savior and with the lives of other redeemed people.
 - He exhorts the Colossians to persevere in prayer amongst themselves and individually (4:2), and he also request that they pray for Paul and his ministry.
 - In particular Paul's request deals with some sort of opportunity to proclaim the Gospel. Perhaps there was a barrier to sharing Christ with someone or a group and he is asking the Colossians pray for God to "open to us a door for the message"
 - Paul also instructs that prayer is the means by which we 1) stay alert and 2) express thanksgiving. The latter, while fairly self explanatory, is nevertheless an essential quality of the Christian life expressed through prayer. The former means is a bit more intriguing. What does it mean to pray regularly so that one might stay alert? To answer this we must ask, alert to what? Two things readily arise:
 - The first is to be alert to our spiritual surroundings – the deceptions and temptations of the devil, our own spiritual state, as well as a testing of the spirits, i.e. discerning the heart of the various messages about our faith and about Christ which we hear.
 - The second is the alertness which Jesus speaks in his various parables on being prepared for his return. When the master returns to his home, the servants should be ready for his arrival; "Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake [alert] when he comes" (Luke 12:37). Paul uses the same Greek word, *gregorountas*, for 'alert' or 'awake' as Luke uses for Jesus' parable. Some translations render the word, "watchful", but in either case the syntactic parallel is apparent and likely intentional.
 - In both cases, the function of prayer is to point us to God, to be aware and sensitive to his truth and his hand at work around us – and to recognize what is not of God and his handiwork. Again, this is a practical outworking of the inward reality of being in Christ, and seeking the things above where Christ is (3:1ff)
- Wisdom: Conduct yourselves wisely – 4:5-6
 - These next instructions move from the inner life of the church and believer to the outward interaction of the church (and its members) to the wider community.
 - The Church and its members are to be salt and light in a community. It should be a good thing for a non-believer to live next door to a Christian, in a very tangible and everyday sense of loving one's neighbor, but also in the sense of begin a good witness to Christ that all might believe.
 - Paul reinforces this concept in verse 5 by specifically stating that the Colossians be wise in their conduct with those outside the Church. Holy and upright living lays a good foundation for gracious witness. The challenge is to be holy in an unholy world, but without falling into the trap of being "holier-than-thou". Here we must take into account two worthy truths:

- On one hand the reputation of the gospel is held by the behavior of those who report to be saved by its power. People will judge the faith by its adherents, whether they ought to or not, and Christians should make every opportunity to put to rest any misperceptions or lies about their faith through their behavior. For we are to live as God intends us to live.
- But on the other hand, we are not the gospel. The Good News is a message about Christ and what he has done, to be received and trusted or heard and rejected. Christ is Lord and Savior regardless of whatever fools his followers may (sometimes) be. We do ourselves a veiled narcissism when we purport that we are the gospel, or at least confuse the grace of the Gospel message with the transformed lives (or lack thereof) of those who receive it.
- Paul places particular regard for the Christian's manner of speech (v6). He wants their manner of talking to be gracious and "full of salt". They are to contend for the faith, that is give a reasonable and truthful witness to Christ, without begin contentious, that is without being rude, obnoxious or belligerent about it.
 - We may also by implication point out that the Christian's language should be absent of profanity and blasphemy, and likewise should be restrained from angry outbursts and hurtful words, not as a cause of their righteousness ("holier-than-thou") but as the fruit of it (a tongue redeemed and not defiled!).
 - Compare with James when he wrote, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart his religion is worthless" (1:26) and "The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness...no human can tame the tongue, it is a restless evil full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God" (3:6,9).
- Ultimately what Paul has in view are Christians who not only behave well in public, but who can articulate and share the Gospel with wisdom, credibility, and fervor, "so that you may know how you ought to answer each person" (4:6b)

Final Greetings 4:7-18

- These are the sections of Paul's letters that often get overlooked and are rarely read in church. This is unfortunate because, while they may not contain specific doctrine or practical advice, they bring an anchoring to these great letters.
 - These are real letters written by a real Paul to real people in a real city. The people named and addressed in these sections remind us of the historical setting of our Christian faith. Ours is a religion not of timeless moral principles, but of historical events and people, the most central being Christ himself.
 - It is interesting to note that Paul's most personally direct instructions and greetings to specifically named people occur in the two letters written to the two church's that, at least by the time of writing, had never been in person. Those two letters being Colossians and Romans. Paul, presumably, did eventually end up in Rome, but when he wrote his letter to the Church their he had yet to visit them in person.
- There are nine people specifically referred to (excluding the reference to Barnabus, who is given as a relative of Mark's for identification of the latter). Some of those named are associates of Paul's in his ministry, some are those of the Church in Colossae and also in Laodicea.
- Tychicus (4:7) is Paul's associate who is actually delivering the letter, and who is accompanied by Onesimus.
 - Paul indicates that Onesimus is "one of you", that is from Colossae, and who is a faithful and beloved brother. It is more than likely that this is the same Onesimus referred to in Paul's letter to Philemon. Philemon was a member of the Colossian church, and Onesimus was a former slave of his who had run away, joined Paul's ministry, and now was being returned to him, not Paul hopes, as a slave, but now as a "beloved brother". Note Paul uses the same term in both letters to describe Onesimus.
 - We know from the letters of Ignatius that at the close of the first century the Bishop of Ephesus was a man named Onesimus. It is possible, although impossible to confirm,

- that this may have been the same man. If Ephesus is the location of Paul's writing and imprisonment, likely given the proximity to Colossae, Onesimus could have met Paul in Ephesus and joined his ministry there, and would have been known to the Christian community in and around Ephesus.
- Tychicus is also likely the bearer of Paul's letter to the Laodiceans (see below; v16)
 - Paul next passes on greetings from his associates who remain with him, namely Aristarchus, Mark (the cousin of Barnabas, whose other name was John, cf. Acts 12:12), Jesus, who is called Justus, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas.
 - Mark is a previous associate of Paul's, well recognized in the Jerusalem church but they had a falling out (Acts 15:36-41). If this is the same Mark, it would seem his relationship with Paul and his work as a missionary is being restored, especially given that Paul adds the comment that should Mark visit them, they have been instructed to receive him. We can not determine if this is the Mark who wrote the Gospel that bears his name. The NT does not provide any direct evidence of this, but early Church tradition and the writings of many of the Fathers indicates such.
 - Epaphras is the man who started the Colossian church, or at least is the one who brought Paul word that there was a church there and the challenges they faced which occasioned the writing of this epistle. As a corollary to Paul's instructions in 4:2-3 he describes how much Epaphras prays for them, that they may grow and mature in Christ, which is, as we have mentioned, a core theme to the whole letter.
 - Luke, who is likely the Luke mentioned in Acts as Paul's missionary associate, is here identified as a physician – the only place in the NT where he is described as such. It is likely that this is the same Luke to whom authorship of the Gospel and Acts are ascribed. We note that Luke is also mentioned in the closing greetings in Philemon.
 - It is significant to note from this list that two of Paul's associates named, Mark and Luke, are attributed by early Church tradition and a reasonable cross section of scholarship to have authored two of our canonical Gospels (Wright, 159)
 - Laodicea
 - In the greetings that Paul passes on from Epaphras, he makes mention of the two other major cities in the Lycus Valley near Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea.
 - In 4:16 Paul makes a significant, but brief, mention of a letter to Laodicea, a reference that is most assuredly regarding another letter that he wrote and likely delivered by Tychicus. In all likelihood a traveler would arrive in Laodicea first and then journey on to Colossae, given the road through the valley. Paul instructs that the Colossians are to read the Laodiceans letter, and likewise pass on their own letter (Colossians) to them.
 - Paul's comment sheds interesting light on the development of the NT canon. Clearly his letters, by his own intent and instruction, were to be read in the churches they were sent to but also copied and shared with nearby churches. We know that by the early part of the second century most of Paul's letters, excepting the Pastoral Epistles, were collected into a corpus of ten letters. What likely happened was that as one church received a letter, it was read, copied, and passed on. We know that Galatians was not addressed to any one church, but actually the 'cluster' of churches in Galatia (which is a region, not a city). Revelation, which includes letters to the seven churches around and including Ephesus, was to be copied and sent to them all. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is actually not specifically address only to the church in Ephesus, but likely the surrounding churches (possibly even the same seven addressed in Revelation). Thus from an early stage Paul's letters were collected and preserved, and later to be considered part of the canon of scripture.
 - Paul's letter to Laodicea has not survived, although there has been preserved a Letter to Laodicea written in the second or early third century which was know even then to be an obvious forgery and denounced by the Church.
 - As was often his practice, Paul used a secretary, or *amanuensis*, to draft his letters while he dictated, but he would sign the letter in his own hand, so that its recipients would know of its authenticity and proper apostolic origin.