

“Completing The Picture”

Colossians 4:2-18

Series: Book of Colossians [#10]

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You are Complete in Christ! This is the central message of Colossians. Christ has provided the true faith—

- true and complete forgiveness of sin;
- true and complete righteousness;
- true and complete joy;
- true and complete peace;
- true and complete hope.

Christ is all we need to be fully accepted by God. He is all we need to grow in Christ-like character and living. We don't need the suffocating legalisms some would wrap around us, nor the dead-end searches for *special, extra* experiences, nor add-on truth from others. God has given us all the truth we need in the Bible, and the Holy Spirit to teach us, to enable us to understand and apply it.

We have a *New Perspective*. So, we should focus on the things above, the eternal things of heaven, as we live and serve engaging our world. Today, in our last look at Colossians, Paul “*Completes The Picture*.” He gives us four practical closing points.

You are complete in Christ, you have a new perspective, so first, be devoted to prayer. Prayer is not as familiar to everyone as it is to most us. A little boy went with his parents to visit his Dad's elderly uncle who they did not see very often. Now this boy and his parents were not Christians. In fact, they never went to church. When it was time to eat, the uncle bowed his head and prayed softly. Later, when the boy was alone with his Mom, he asked, “Why was he talking to his plate before we ate?”

Now, we know more about prayer than that little boy. Even so, there are a few important points here at the close of this letter. Paul opens this closing section, verse 2, chapter 4, by saying, “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving.”

“Devote yourselves to prayer.” This word *devote* has the idea of being engaged with, even busily engaged with something. After Jesus ascended back to heaven, Luke tells us the disciples “with one mind were continually *devoting themselves to prayer*” (Acts 1:14).

I realize that some people hearing this think, “I don't have time to pray for 2, 3, 4 or more hours a day!” The point is *not* how many hours or minutes we pray, *but* making prayer a regular, key feature of our life.

Others have the mistaken idea that if they are devoted to prayer, if they keep on praying and praying, they will eventually get what they want. This, in part, comes from a misunderstanding of two of Jesus' parables about prayer. One is about a widow who nagged an uncaring and unjust judge until he gave her the protection she deserved. The second is about a man who, at midnight, kept banging on the door of his neighbor and shouting to him to loan him some food to give to unexpected guests, until his neighbor got out of bed and gave him what he wanted.

Both parables teach that we are to be devoted to, persistent in prayer. *But, and note this*, the unjust judge and sleepy neighbor are not *comparisons* but *contrasts* to God. God does not have to be nagged. In fact, no amount of nagging will alter His will. The point is, since God is good and will provide for us, we ought to keep praying even when everything seems to be going wrong, even when nothing seems to be happening.

As well, prayer is a practical barometer of our relationship with God. We cannot have a close relationship with family members or friends if we seldom talk with them. In the same way, we cannot have a close relationship with God without regular, meaningful time with Him.

We are God's children. We have a new perspective which includes the things and the resources of heaven. Resources such as understanding, wisdom, peace, courage, strength. Resources which God gives us *through prayer*.

And, yes, it is prayer for others as well as ourselves. Go to verse 3,

“praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.”

Then we are to pray “... with an *attitude of thanksgiving*.” Thankfulness was one of Paul's basic themes. Turn back to chapter 1 to see just two examples in this letter.

- Verse 3, “We *give thanks* to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you.”
- Verse 12, “*giving thanks* to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.”

Being thankful for who God is, for what He has made us in Christ, for what He has done, is doing and will do for us. Thankfulness is important in prayer because God deserves our thanks. It also has the benefit of aligning the focus of our prayer.

Next, Paul tells us to be active, graceful in witness. Look at verse 5, “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.” Those who are “outside” are those outside of the faith, those who are not believers.

We are to conduct ourselves “with wisdom” toward them. Part of that, as I noted last week, includes not treating anyone as a *project*, but relating genuinely to each person with Christ’s love, concern and truth.

It also includes, Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 4, excelling in love for each other, living a quiet (as opposed to unruly) life, and tending to our own business and work, which he describes as part of behaving “properly toward *outsiders*” (9-12). And in 1 Timothy 3:7 he tells us that a “good reputation with those *outside* the church” is one of the qualifications of an elder.

As well, this wisdom includes seeing people outside of Christ as they really are spiritually, as God sees them.

- People whom God loves, for whom Christ died.
- People who are separated from God by sin and headed for everlasting separation and punishment.
- People who have a set of beliefs, priorities, questions, hurts and doubts to which we need to carefully and seriously give our attention.
- People who are hardened against God, or indifferent to Him or, in some cases, very open to Him.

We are to make the most of every opportunity we have. To make the most of opportunities that surprise us, as well as those for which we have prayed and planned. To make the most of opportunities that are difficult and unpleasant, and those which are easy and pleasant. I like the brief prayer of Mychal Judge, a Roman Catholic Priest and Chaplain for the New York City Fire Department, who died in the 9-11 terrorist attacks.

“Lord take me where you want me to go;
Let me meet who you want me to meet;
Tell me what you want me to say;
and keep me out of your way.”

God in His grace sometimes gives us second chances, as He did with Jonah and John Mark. But there is no guarantee that God will give us a second time to serve Him in an opportunity we take a pass on, we refuse today. Then, we know some opportunities by nature are one time invitations to serve God as His witness. So, we must make “the most of every opportunity.”

To do this we rely on what God tells us through James,

“But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” (1:5-8)

There’s more here. Go to verse 6.

“Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.”

Question: How do people come to faith in Christ? We can answer this question from several perspectives. Let’s review one description of the human side of the process in Romans 10,

“‘WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.’ How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher [e.g., an *announcer*]? How will they preach [e.g., *announce, tell*] unless they are sent? Just as it is written, ‘HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!’”

(13-15)

God uses believers to get the good news of Christ to people who do not know Him. He calls, commissions, and commands each of us to speak the “glad tidings of the gospel.”

Our speech is always to be “*with grace*.” Graceful speech... at all times, in all circumstances. Remember Jesus’ beautiful example. Luke 4 tells us, “all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the *gracious words* which were falling from His lips” (22). In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians believers we read,

“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give *grace* to those who hear.” (4:29)

Graceful speech is “as though *seasoned with salt*.” Salt was used in the ancient world to purify, preserve and, of course, give flavor. It is this last sense that is in view, flowing from the idea of beauty in this word *grace*. Beautiful speech. Speech that has pleasant flavor, rather than being bland or bitter. We are complete in Christ, we have a new perspective, so we should be active, graceful in our witness.

Moving on, Paul instructs us to encourage each other. All of us need encouragement. There are no exceptions. One lady tells of the morning she opened the door to get the newspaper and was surprised to see a strange little dog sitting on the porch with her paper in his mouth. Delighted with this unexpected “delivery service,” she gave the little dog some treats.

The next morning she was horrified to see the same dog again sitting in front of her door, wagging his tail, paper in mouth *and* surrounded by *eight* other newspapers on her porch! She had *encouraged* that dog, and he responded! As a result, or consequence, she then spent the rest of that morning returning the papers to their owners.

Encouragement. Encouragement begins with having a true, deep concern for others. Paul's coworker Epaphras is a good example. Go to verse 12.

“Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave 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.”

Epaphras was one of their own who was helping Paul in Rome. Back in the first chapter, verse 7, Paul referred to him as “our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf.”

Here in chapter 4 Paul says Epaphras “labored earnestly” for his fellow believers. He “labored earnestly.” Jesus used this word in Luke 13:24, “*Strive* to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” *Strive* is not quite graphic enough for the meaning. It has been rendered, “strain every nerve to enter.”

Paul used the word earlier in Colossians to describe his own intense efforts to proclaim Christ (1:29). Our English word *agonize* comes from this term. Epaphras cared deeply for his brothers and sisters in Christ back home in Colossae. His deep concern was evident as he *agonized* for them in prayer.

Let's look at a few other glimpses of encouraging others in these verse. Go back up to 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.” Paul wanted to *encourage* the Colossian church with the news of God's work. 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”
(7-8)

Now drop down to 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).”

Here Paul is saying, “*We are encouraging you, and you encourage Mark* if he is able to see you.”

Then, go to verse 11 to see an example of others encouraging Paul.

“... 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.”

Encouragement is spurred on and completed by remembering. Look at the last verse, verse 18. “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. *Remember my imprisonment.* Grace be with you.”

You are complete in Christ, you have a new perspective, so encourage others. Are you, are we true encouragers? Who have we encouraged this last week? This is part of the new, heavenly perspective. It does *not* depend on your personality or gifts. Each of us are to be encouragers.

The fourth, and final direction in light of being in Christ and having a new perspective: Be Faithful In Ministry. Be faithful in the ministry, the service you have received. We meet a man named Archippus in verse 17. “Say to Archippus, ‘Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord ...’” In Philemon 2 Paul described him as “our fellow soldier.” He had taken up the ministry God gave him.

All of us have work to do for God. Every one of us is a *minister*, a servant of and for God. Jesus’s command to be His witnesses is for each of us. 1 Corinthians 12 tells us that each of us is given spiritual abilities from God to help the work of the church, God’s work. He distributes the abilities as He chooses, and gives us opportunities and responsibilities to serve Him.

The requirement God places on us as His servants is *to be faithful* in the work He gives us to do. He is the One who gives us the ability, work, wisdom and strength. He is the One who actually accomplishes the work through us.

We are to take up the work in faith and be faithful to,

- keep engaged in it,
- to keep on, as Paul told Archippus. “taking heed,” or “taking care,” or “always paying attention and being careful;”
- to keep on relying on Him;
- to keep on doing it His way;
- to keep on being faithful.

The purpose, we see at the end of verse 17, is “that you may fulfill it.” Paul, in his last New Testament letter, close to the end of his life, told Timothy, “... fulfill your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:15). This is an important, great, beyond-us-on-our-own responsibility. But we are not on our own. It is not all up to us.

Remember, God recreated us in Christ for this purpose. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 1, “we are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” And, as we have already seen today, God gives us spiritual abilities for His service. The Holy Spirit within us energizes us. It is His power in us that accomplishes His work. And God goes ahead of us, preparing the way.

You are complete in Christ, you have a new perspective so...

- be devoted to prayer,
- be active, graceful in witness,
- be encouraging to other believers,
- be faithful in your ministry.

We have spent ten weeks looking into these great truths. Question: “What difference has looking made...*for you?*” Remember the challenge and then the contrasts of warning and blessing James gives us in the first chapter of his letter. First, beginning at verse 22,

“But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.”

Then the contrast, verse 25,

“But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.”

Joe Stowell tells a story about The Shepherd’s Home in Michigan which cares for mentally limited and impaired children. In that caring place many children have come to know Jesus as Savior, and then learn about Him and what it means to be His children. One truth that became important to some of them is that Jesus Christ is coming again. Each day, in addition to their other activities, some of them rush to the windows to see if *this* is the day that Jesus is coming. Now, there is a slight problem here—it’s hard to keep the windows clean! But the important thing, the lesson they teach all of us, is that what they have learned and believe determines how they live each day.

In the next few moments that you spend with God, thank Him that Christ has given you all that you need for heaven; that He has given you, in Christ, in His presence within you, in the Bible, and the ministry of other believers, all that you need to live a life pleasing to Him here and now.

Then ask yourself, “What difference has looking at God’s truth in Colossians made for me? What difference will it make in the days ahead?”

As you briefly survey your life up to this point, ask yourself, “When it’s all said and done, what really is important?” “What really counts, what will stand with me when I am in heaven with Christ and He evaluates all I have done?”

Consider this, and make or reaffirm the decision to live as one who *is* complete in Christ, who *is* directed by the things above in heaven, not the things on earth.

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