

## **Colossians 4:2-18 – Continuing in Christ to the End**

*St Mark's Northbridge – 5/12/2021 AD*

Passage: Colossians 4:2-18

Title: Continuing in Christ to the End

Reflection Q's:

How can you make the most of every opportunity with outsiders?

Who are some co-workers in Christ who are a comfort and encouragement to you?

*BIG Idea: We complete Christ's ministry for us by prayerfully proclaiming and living the grace of Christ.*

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**Pray.**

### **Completing the Task**

Last week, you were all given some personal details about me when Simon read out my full name as part of an ordination notice. Well I thought why not make it two weeks in a row of disclosing personal details. So I'll let you in on something else personal: I have a bad habit of starting things, and not finishing them...or getting to them eventually.

On my bookshelf there are multiple books with bookmarks in them. On my phone there are podcasts that are half-listened to. On my computer I'll have a few word documents open and on the go, and in my web browser more than 20 tabs open (I can see the horror behind some of those facemasks!).

These are just a few tasks and projects of mine that are incomplete. So as I was reading today's passage, verse 17 stood out. The Apostle Paul says: *Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord."*

Now here's someone that I can resonate with, and perhaps it's a personal word from the Lord! A word about the importance of completing the task.

We don't know too much about Archippus and most of these people who Paul mentions by name in this passage. But from what we read, Archippus has been given some type of ministry in the Lord – most likely through Apostles like Paul as they enlisted him in their ministry of spreading the news of the resurrected Christ – calling on people to repentance and faith. And Archippus needs encouragement to complete this task of ministry amongst those who he is with in Colossae.

But I'm not highlighting verse 17 because of some personal connection that I may have with it.

You see, as Christians, we have all been given a ministry. Jesus has left us on earth to serve Him and bring glory to God. We have all been given a ministry of living faithfully and obediently for the Lord Jesus and making Him known while we are here on earth, however long or short that may be.

And so in this ministry that we have been given, we need encouragement to complete it. As Christians, if we are to continue in Christ to the end, then we need the encouragement to keep going and know how to keep going.

In this passage we have Paul's last words to the Colossians. And he wants them to keep going and finish strong. These are Paul's last words to the Colossians. And today these are my last words preaching to you here at St Mark's. So my prayer as we look at this last part of Colossians together is that we will be equipped with what we need to complete Christ's ministry that He has given us wherever we are.

### **Praying (v2-4)**

So how are we to complete this ministry we have in the Lord?

Well it all starts on our knees in humble dependence on God. And that's why Paul says in verse 2: *Devote yourselves to prayer.*

This theme of prayer is something that Paul has majored on from the start of this letter. Back in chapter 1 he said that he had not ceased praying for the Colossians. And now he is encouraging them to do the same - to be devoted to prayer, to persevere and persist in prayer. Paul is urging the Colossians to imitate his example, and more importantly to imitate Christ. As those clothed in Christ, Christians are to be like Him in humble dependence on our Heavenly Father. So we are to devote ourselves to prayer as we pray to our God the Father Almighty.

And we are to pray with a posture of watchfulness and thankfulness. Being watchful and alert to the time we are in and what God is doing in the world through his Son Jesus; and being thankful to our Heavenly Father for all that He gives us, especially in Christ – having gratitude in our hearts.

In my time here at St Mark's one of the many things that has stood out is that this is a church that is actually devoted to prayer. A church that prioritises and persists in prayer at all times and for all things. And as a congregation you are wonderfully led in this by the example of your pastors. So can I encourage you to keep being devoted to prayer, especially when you might not feel like it or feel that it's not doing anything.

So as we devote ourselves to prayer, what are we to pray for? Well among other things, we are to pray for the gospel message of Christ to be proclaimed clearly. That's what Paul says in verse 3.

And this is an astonishing prayer point that Paul gives the Colossians when you consider his situation. He says in verse 3 that he is "in chains for the gospel",

If I was in his situation, being locked up in prison for proclaiming Christ, my first prayer request would probably be that these chains come off and the prison door opens so I can walk free. That's what I would instinctively pray in Paul's situation.

But not Paul. His main prayer request is that he would speak the message of Christ clearly – that God would open a door for the message of Christ. Now here is a gospel-driven prayer. Looking beyond your own circumstances for the honour of Christ and the advancement of his kingdom. Paul's priority is for the gospel door to open, not the prison door.

And you can't help but hear echoes of Christ in Paul's prayer request: "Father, not my will but yours be done.", "Your kingdom come, your will be done."

Once again, this prayer or prayer request from Paul is a challenge for us to pray big prayers in line with God's will.

So as we seek to complete the ministry that God has given us, it will mean praying that God's message will be proclaimed. Praying for God to open opportunities for us to

proclaim the message of Christ. And praying for this, in the midst of personal circumstances which might be far from ideal – having God’s kingdom and the advancement of Jesus’ name as a priority no matter what our circumstances are.

We are to devote ourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

### **Proclaiming (v4-6)**

And as we pray for opportunities to proclaim the gospel, these prayers are quite often answered by our Heavenly Father. So we want to be ready to proclaim the message of Christ.

Paul urges the Colossians in verse 5:

*<sup>5</sup> Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. <sup>6</sup> Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

The ministry that Jesus has given His church is to proclaim Him to a world that desperately needs reconciliation with God. And as we proclaim this message we do so with wisdom and grace.

We are to be wise in the way we relate to people, especially those outside the church – making the most of opportunities we are given to speak Christ into their lives.

And we speak with grace. As verse 6 says: we are to let our conversations be full of grace.

When we speak with grace, there are two parts to this: we are proclaiming a message of grace – God’s grace to us in the Lord Jesus, and we are full of grace in the way we act towards others. Both a message of grace, and a manner of grace.

We see this at the end of verse 6 when Paul says that our conversations are to *be full of grace. ....so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

How we answer people, especially outsiders, is not just about the content of what we say, but our manner as well. I think when we read that we should know how we are to answer people, we immediately jump to what we can say to answer people’s curly questions or provide a knockdown argument. But our manner also matters. The message of grace is important, we must be clear on that. We must be clear on what the message of Christ is and what it isn’t. But we must also have a manner that reflects the gospel of grace.<sup>1</sup>

So when our conversations are full of grace we are proclaiming the message of Christ and people should see that we are clothed in Christ as we speak.

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<sup>1</sup> This letter to the Colossians has shown these twin aspects of grace. Paul has laid out this message of grace in Christ – the only One who has reconciled us to God by making peace through his blood shed on the cross (Col. 1:22-23). He is the One whom we proclaim, teaching and admonishing everyone so that we may be mature in Christ. And in Colossians Paul has gone on to say that as those clothed in Christ our lives are to be marked by compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love. We have put on the new self as those united to Christ, and that is reflected in the way we relate to others.

A very prominent example of a Christian brother who is both wise and full of grace as he relates to outsiders is former Archbishop Peter Jensen. About 10 years ago he was a guest panellist on ABC's Q and A program. I still remember the way he interacted with fellow panellists and an audience of outsiders who were quite hostile to say the least. But as Peter was given this opportunity, he was wise as he spoke, and his message was one of grace – as he clearly proclaimed Christ, and in his manner. He is an example of wisdom and grace as he made the most of the opportunity on this platform in front of millions.

Whether we speak to a large audience or one person, this is something that all of us as Christians are called to do as we continue our ministry of proclaiming Jesus until he returns.

So what opportunities does the Lord give you? How has He answered those prayers for opportunities to speak the gospel?

And how can you make the most of these opportunities with outsiders? Is there a neighbour or colleague where your paths just keep crossing? Sounds like an opportunity.

What opportunities might you have over the coming weeks leading into Christmas?

Be wise in how you relate to outsiders, making the most of every opportunity.

**Encouraging (v7-9)**

But as we continue in the ministry that Christ has for us, we can easily be discouraged. So we need encouragement from one another.

And that's why Paul gives all these greetings here in this chapter: it's so that the Colossians may be encouraged as they hear about him. When we get to this part of New Testament letters, it can feel like we are listening to a personal conversation, and so we can quickly skip over it.

But these personal greetings and remarks give us an insight from brothers and sisters into how we are to continue in Christ.

And we see this from verse 7 as Paul is sending Tychicus to the Colossians. And he is sending him so that in verse 8, the Colossians:

*may know about (their) circumstances and that he may encourage (their) hearts.*

Paul wants the Colossians to be encouraged as they hear about him. And this is even more amazing when you remember that it appears Paul has never met the Colossians personally. Yet he can still be an encouragement to them.

This is a sign of the strength and power of Christ's fellowship – that we can be deeply encouraged when we hear from other believers – even those we have never met!

We experience this all the time when we receive news of brothers and sisters and how they are continuing in the Lord – friends who we used to go to church with, mission partners who we have sent out, and even news from fellow believers in other places.

Last week wasn't it so encouraging to hear from our brother Wayne about our brothers and sisters in Berkeley? That even in the darkness of people's lives, the light of the gospel is shining through. What an encouragement!

This is the same effect that Paul is wanting the Colossians to have. He wants them to be encouraged by him and his continuing faith in the Lord Jesus.

And we need this encouragement too. There are so many things in our lives and in the world around us that discourage us from continuing in Christ. But when we hear from fellow Christians in different places and the way God is at work in their lives, it lifts our eyes from our personal circumstances. We see that God is still at work. His mission in the world is continuing. He is still calling people to His Son and renewing them day by day in His image.

In God's goodness to us, we don't complete the ministry alone. God gives us one another and our fellowship in Christ so that we can encourage each another.

### **Comforting (v10-11)**

And the Lord also gives us each another so that we can be comforted. For the Apostle Paul, he had all manner of suffering and grief – being persecuted and locked up in prison for a start!

But in the midst of his hardship he was comforted by fellow co-workers in the gospel. That's what we see from verse 10 where we read of men like Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus, called Justus – fellow Jews like Paul. He calls these men, "co-workers for the

kingdom of God”. They were fellow workers and leaders alongside Paul in the apostolic mission of seeing the nations come under Christ.

And in verse 11 Paul says that they “proved a comfort for him”. Here were fellow workers, brothers in Christ who were a source of comfort.

Paul doesn’t say how they comforted him, but I suspect the comfort came from knowing that he wasn’t alone in his ministry. That Paul had trusted brothers who were contending for Christ with him – even if distant. They were a source of comfort.

So as we continue the ministry we have as Christians, there will be times where we need to be comforted. And the Lord graciously provides us with one another for this. We have co-workers who we are walking alongside. Fellow ambassadors of Christ who are on the same mission. And it’s comforting to know that they are around – that you are around.

It’s the comfort that comes from knowing that there is another neighbour on your street who follows Jesus, or that there’s a fellow Christian in your workplace, or there’s another brother or sister in Christ in your year at school. It’s an enormous comfort when you know that there are co-workers around.

I would liken it to the effect of meeting a fellow Australian when you’re travelling overseas (if you remember back when we used to do that). You might be in the middle of Mongolia or somewhere far from home and you meet an Australian – instantly there is a connection and comfort around them.

As we complete the ministry we have as Christians, we don't do it alone. There are others contending for the Lord around us. They are a comfort to us and we will be a comfort to them.

### **Wrestling (v12-13)**

As we saw earlier, coming to God in prayer is vital for us as we continue in Christ. And from verse 12 we get an example of what this looks like in Epaphras. We were introduced to him back in chapter 1 as the man who first spoke the gospel to the Colossians and led them to Christ. But we see that he continues to pray for the Colossians. He is an example of someone being devoted to prayer – persevering and persisting in prayer for the Colossians.

And the picture we have in verse 12 is of Epaphras the wrestler. Not one of those WWE or sumo wrestlers but someone who wrestles in prayer.

In verse 12 we read that Epaphras is:

*... always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.*

Epaphras is struggling and striving in prayer for the Colossians. I don't know if you would describe your prayer life as a wrestle, but it's not an inaccurate description.

Praying is hard work that requires our full attention. There are many distractions that stop us from praying. And we know that our battle is not against flesh and blood but there are spiritual forces at work that want to stop us from praying to our Heavenly Father. It requires much discipline, alertness, and God's help.

So if you find prayer difficult, you're not strange or weird! The example of Epaphras shows us that as we continue in Christ, praying is hard work that we are to wrestle in.

And when we wrestle in prayer we are wrestling for the sake of others. We see in verse 12 that Epaphras working hard in praying that the Colossians:

*...may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.*

To complete the ministry that we have in Christ, we need God's help in standing firm. And we stand firm by growing and being fully assured of the certainty we have in Christ. God's Spirit works in us to grow and make us more like Christ.

And this is what we will want to pray for one another. Here in verse 12 we have another example of how we can pray for one another. And it's very simple:

"Heavenly Father, I pray that my brother or sister would stand firm in you and your Word, that they would grow to be more like Jesus, and that they would be fully assured of your love for them. Amen"

So we are to be devoted to prayer, wrestling and working hard in praying for others to stand firm in Christ.

### **Remembering (v18)**

And finally, as Paul finishes this letter, in the very last verse he asks for the Colossians to "remember his chains". He wants them to remember and not forget the circumstances in which he is writing to them.

But of all things, why would he want them to remember this? In another letter, Paul says, “Remember Jesus Christ...risen from the dead” (2 Tim. 2:8). Surely it would be more appropriate for the Colossians to remember Jesus, rather than Paul’s chains.

So why would he want them to remember his chains?

Well it’s a reminder for Christians of what it looks like to follow Jesus. If they are to continue in Christ and complete their ministry, it may result in chains. Taking up your cross and following Christ means following in his footsteps. And for Paul this meant that he was in chains. That’s what Paul said back in verse 3 – that he is in chains because he proclaimed Christ.

And this is a reality that Paul wants the Christians to remember. To count the cost of following Jesus. As we continue in Christ, we are to be under no illusions that it’s a hard road. We can see in our own context that the social and cultural landscape has changed. And in some parts of Australia it’s changing rapidly – as following Christ is less acceptable and more challenging than what it may have been before.

We follow a crucified Messiah. And we must remember this. Paul wants us to “remember his chains”.

But he doesn’t end his letter there. It’s not the last word. He doesn’t just want the Colossians to remember his chains. More importantly he wants them to remember God’s grace: “Grace be with you”.

Remember my chains, and remember God's grace. If you do end up in chains, remember God's grace. It is God's grace that will sustain you as you complete the ministry He has given you in Christ.

God's grace is with us. It is by God's grace that we are transferred from the dominion of darkness and into the kingdom of His Son. It is God's grace that unites to Christ so that we are raised with Him and that He is with us to the end of the age. It is God's grace that we have put on the new self and are clothed in Christ. God's grace is what characterises our households. God's grace is what enables us to proclaim Christ. God's grace is with us and will sustain us to the end.

Remember God's grace that is with you.

**Let's Pray.**