

### **Colossians 4:7-18**

*Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here. My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.*

*16After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord." I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.*

Last week I spoke about the Perfect Storm which is building and how the church has to choose whether it will ride out and face the storm or stay in the harbor and die. St. Basil once compared the church, after the Council of Nicea, with a naval ship in a battle in the darkness of a storm. Clipper ships were once known as “*Gothic Cathedrals*” at sail. The most famous Clipper ship is the Cutty Sark. These next couple of weeks my plan is to build a fleet of ships with which the church can use to sail out into this Perfect Storm. I believe with these ships, we the church, can face any storm which arises, but only if we utilize the ships not just know about them. This week will build the “Fellow-ship.”

Let me reread the list of names of those individuals in our scripture passage, Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas, Nympha and Archippus. How many of those names do you recognize? Tychicus, never heard of him? Onesimus, I know a little about him, Justus, nope don't know him. We are familiar only with Luke and Mark in this list of characters. I'd like to pick up on three of the names in the list, and what Paul said about them, to define the shape of the Christian fellowship of the church.

The underlying principle is, that Christian Fellowship is lived by a group, or better yet, the church as a whole. The point I am making is Fellowship is not a solo effort. Fellowship is not carried out with just your favorite friends and family. Fellowship, more to the point, real Fellowship is lived by the group, the whole group, everyone.

Let's first look at Paul's reference to Tychicus, who was this man? "*Tychicus will tell you about all of my affairs; he is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord.*" It's interesting to me that Tychicus is the first person mentioned in this hall of honor, which Paul is providing. The Colossians evidently knew of him, he apparently came from the same area in Asia. Some scholars suggest that he was the one who brought the offering to the distressed Christians in the Jerusalem, referred to in Acts 20. Ephesians 6:21 tells us he carried the Ephesian letter to the churches. From the Colossian letter we learn a great deal about him. Paul uses three titles, he calls him: "*a dear brother,*" secondly "*a faithful minister,*" and lastly, "*a fellow servant of the Lord.*"

John Powell tells about having a head cold and going to the infirmary to get some medicine. While he was waiting in the corridor of the infirmary, he saw a fellow brother. I need to say that John Powell teaches at Loyola University, and is a part of the Jesuit order of priests. So he's talking from that context. He saw this brother saying goodnight to two priests in his care. As he tucked the blanket of the first man under his chin, the old priest snarled, "Get your face out of mine. What do you think this is?" Then the brother went into the next room and did the same thing for a second priest. The old man said, "Oh, brother, you are really good to us, and before I go to sleep tonight, I'm going to say a very special prayer of gratitude just for you." Suddenly, John said, "I thought someday I'm going to be one of those two priests. Which one will I be?"

It's a good question for us to consider. Which one will I be? We need each other; we need to accept each other with grace and humility. Fellowship is not just being in the same room as someone. Fellowship involves a relationship. Just as we need a true relationship with God we need true relationships with each other.

I believe this with all my heart, we can't get into heaven alone. We need each other in the good times, and the bad. There are those who claim to have a relationship with God but in reality all they have is head knowledge of Him.

Listen to this beautiful designation for another person, "*a dear brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord.*" As much as anything else, we need to learn this lesson from Paul, if we are going to be an active part of the church we need to be in a true and real relationship with each other. The key to an active relationship in the fellowship of the church is for each one of us to minister to one another as if ministering to Christ.

You have heard me talking a lot about serving this community, reaching out beyond the walls of the church, and that is a primary call of the Gospel, to reach out in service to the least and the lost. Friends, that's what defines our fellowship. That's what sets us apart as a unique community. No single person within the fellowship of the church should ever have a need without having persons around to seek to meet those needs. But in order to meet these needs we have to know each other. Do we know each other?

I know, right now, there are people on this side of the church who do not everyone on this side. There are people in this service who do not know people from the other service. There are people here this morning that have never said hi, or shaken the hand of someone on the other side of the church.

You can use the excuse I can't get over there during the passing of the peace, but what's holding you back from seeing them after the service? Instead of running out the side doors maybe you could walk over and introduce yourselves. Now we may not always be able to do so, but we can at least try. We can make the effort to reach out and touch someone. We can extend a hand or word of compassionate concern. We can offer that cup of cold water to a brother or a sister who is seeking to follow the same Lord that we claim to follow.

Let me plant a question in your mind that I hope will be your guide to relationships both within and outside the church. Will you continually ask yourself this question as you respond to other people, "If I were to relate to this person as I would to relate to Christ, what would I say and what would I do?"

That's the way it must have been with Paul towards Tychicus, and that's the reason Paul could call him a *beloved brother*, a *faithful minister*, and a *fellow servant in the Lord*.

Now let's look at another person, Onesimus. He is also referred to as a "*faithful and dear brother*." We have to know who Onesimus is to get the full impact of Paul's description of him. Onesimus is one of the two primary characters in the little book of Philemon. I hope that you have or will read this book. You may have difficulty finding it in your Bible, because it's only one chapter. Just go to the book of Titus and turn right towards Hebrews and it's in between.

This is a very beautiful piece of literature. Onesimus was a runaway slave belonging to Philemon, and Philemon is a member of the Colossian church. Paul doesn't refer to him as a slave; instead he refers to him as a "*faithful and dear brother*." Get the picture now. Onesimus had reached Rome in his attempt to escape from slavery, and had been accepted and loved in the inclusive fellowship of the church that perhaps met in Paul's house.

What a picture of the power, of true Christian fellowship, of real openness, of pure love, and of a non-judgmental attitude. At her best, that's what the church should be, a place of reconciling fellowship.

Did you know there is a difference between justifying and reconciling? Justifying and reconciling have similar but different meanings. Justified has a courtroom ring to it. To be justified is to be declared innocent, to be cleared of all charges. Reconciled has to do with relationships, suggesting a bringing together of those who have been separated for whatever reason. True Christian Fellowship does just that it reconciles everyone, but only when it's true fellowship, not coming together with selfish wants and desires.

So, obviously, Onesimus had accepted Christ as Savior and had joined the Lord's people. When you read this New Testament letter to Philemon, you will understand Paul's desire to have Onesimus forgiven, and received not as a slave, but as an equal brother in Christ. Paul knew that neither Onesimus nor Philemon could grow in Christ without reconciliation.

Of course, Onesimus would have to make restitution, but above all, Philemon would have to express the Lord's forgiveness. The main point here is the Church should be a place of reconciling fellowship, not condemnation.

Some years ago there was a man named Lance Rentzel, who was a member of the Dallas Cowboys football team, and while a member of that team he was arrested. "In his autobiography he tells of the terrible trauma of his battle with emotional difficulty, a weakness he had to face and deal with. After the incident and his arrest, Rentzel was concerned about embarrassing his team and shattering their morale. The papers had made a big deal of the whole affair.

One evening as the team met for a strategy session Rentzel stood up. He tried to explain his problems, his embarrassment, and how he feared he would smear the good name of his team and destroy their spirit. He stood before the entire team, apologized, and then began to cry. No one in the room spoke. Finally the lights were dimmed as the team began to study the movies of the previous week's game, but while the lights were out, an incredible thing happened. Rentzel tells about it in his own words.

“A hand grabbed my shoulder, a huge hand, and it held on, firmly, supportively, and then, from the other side, a tap on the arm, then again. The room was dark and the coach was talking, but there was a shuffling and a sound of scraping chairs as one after another these men moved to make contact with me. They wanted to convey the unspoken message: ‘We're with you.’ I wondered how I could have doubted them. I knew one thing. I’d never forget that moment.”

Rentzel’s strength was found in the frank expression of his weakness, and in that courageous moment he felt the strong support of his team, or may I say his “church?” For they did indeed respond to him as should a church, reaching out to support a broken member to bring him back into their circle.”<sup>i</sup>

Have you ever felt that hand on your shoulder? That tap on your arm? Have you ever experienced that supportive touch to let you know that in spite of your weaknesses, that in spite of what you have done, you are loved? I have, and I’ve experience it most of all within the church. Perhaps a more important question you need to ask yourself, “is that the style of my life, to reach out and put my hand on the shoulder of that one who needs a symbol of strength, to provide that

supportive touch, letting another person know that they are accepted in the fellowship without judgment but with welcome, or do I make it about me and condemn the person?"

Is your life a life of hospitality that welcomes those, welcomes everyone who may have missed the mark, or do you tear down and condemn everyone and anything not to your liking? Do you welcome with open arms those whose style and way of living may not be like yours, or do you condemn them for what they do and avoid them altogether? Do you offer, to those in need, what they so desperately need, or do you reach out, only to have a ulterior motive for what you do?

Do people feel welcomed and accepted around you, or are you constantly negative and degrading and condescending towards others? Do people outside these walls know that this is a place where they will be loved and accepted, as Christ would love and accept? Or is this place known for judgmental condescension? Onesimus reminds us that the church must be a place of true fellowship, a place of reconciliation.

The last person I want us to look at is Justus. I think this verse is the only time his name appears in the New Testament, but there he is along with the famous Luke and Mark. Let's call him the unknown disciple. We know absolutely nothing about him. The amazing thing is that he is mentioned at all. Maybe he had been of some special help to Paul. Maybe his faithfulness to Christ, in spite of the rejection of the hostile Jews in Rome, inspired Paul. He was certainly taking a risk, because if the Jews learned that he was involved with this Roman prisoner, they certainly could have arrested him for that kind of behavior. Maybe it was his courage and his devotion that earned him a place in Paul's heart, and having his name engraved in scripture.

The point is this; we never know what our obedience to Christ might mean to others, to the Church, or to ourselves. The truth is, the church is made up of many unknown disciples. For every Mark and Luke within the church, there are 10,000 Justus's. Justus reminds us that the heroes of the faith, mostly unsung and unknown, are to be celebrated.

Remember this, on the ship called the church, there are no passengers: everyone is a member of the crew. The church is not just a trumpet section, it's an entire orchestra; each member a different instrument, playing a unique sound.

I know how much church people like to dedicate everything to someone, so if anything is ever dedicated I pray it can be dedicated to the unknown workers in the church. The truth of the matter is that two of the four persons we have talked about today would be among them. And even the third, Onesimus, is known only by those who are serious students of the Bible or Christian history.

That means that all of us can take heart. It doesn't matter that our names are not written down in history books, what matters is that our name is written in the Book of Life, on the heart of Christ and that would be evident in our attitudes, our words, and our lives towards others. Let's all board the Fellowship as crew members to do the work, and not as passengers who just go along for the ride.

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<sup>i</sup> Randy Wright, "Jesus Loves Me", Pulpit Digest, July/August 1979, p. 32