



The Reverend Dr. David V. Silvernail, Jr.
Colossians 4:7-18

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English Standard Version

"A Supreme Fellowship"

The 14th & last Sermon in a series on the Book of Colossians entitled
"The Supremacy of Christ"

Colossians 4:7-18

"Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. 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, ⁹ and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

¹⁰ Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions— if he comes to you, welcome him), ¹¹ and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. ¹² Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. ¹³ For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. ¹⁴ Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. ¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. ¹⁶ And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. ¹⁷ And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord." ¹⁸ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you."

Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us the Scriptures and making us Your people. You

have brought us for one last time to this wonderful book that speaks of the supremacy of Christ. We're often too busy, too preoccupied, too distracted to see Jesus. So this morning we ask that you would re-focus our hearts and minds to look at Jesus and the difference He makes for our lives. To do that we need Your Word to be living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, and so by the power of Your Spirit, use this Scripture to bring about needed change in each one of us this day, and, as always, for this we need Your grace. Give us the desire to learn from You this morning, in the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: *The Fellowship of the King*

If you ever walk into the church office, you'll notice on the wall is a collage of photographs. And they're pictures of you. Random pictures, which we rotate with the seasons, of people in the church. And seeing it is a great reminder for the pastors — that we're here to serve you. We're here to preach, to teach, to lead, to counsel, to encourage, to pray for, and sometimes simply to be there — for you.

At the moment, my favorite picture in the collage is one taken from an Officer's Retreat a few years ago. It's a motley crew of thirteen ... and in the picture we're smiling and laughing ... probably at something just said that was horribly inappropriate. [Did I just say that out loud?]

Anyway, it's a great picture of a great moment of great fellowship and I'm reminded of how close this group can be. Of course we have a Session meeting this week and afterwards I'll probably be frustrated enough to take the picture off the wall and shred it. But, for now, it's a nice memory.

As the Apostle Paul closes Colossians, he encloses with his letter **a verbal group photograph**. He includes in it a number of those who helped him in his ministry while he was imprisoned at Rome. He gives recognition to some of the unsung heroes of the New Testament, and by so doing uses them as means of encouragement to those who read this letter. This section adds a warm, personal touch to what has been largely a doctrinal letter. That many of those mentioned had stuck with Paul for years indicates the tremendous loyalty he inspired.

Back at the beginning of September, when we started this study of Colossians, I told you that "Paul's heartfelt commendation [for this church] rose from **the miracle** which had taken place in Colossae: a poor, pagan people without God and without hope in this world had found Christ. Their lives had been **changed**, and some remarkable things had happened."

And so for Paul, these people had become indispensable assets to his ministry. He was well aware that when it came to ministry, he couldn't do it alone; no one can. God's leaders have always depended on others to support them in their work. And the Apostle Paul never ministered alone. He shared his first leadership opportunity in the church at Antioch with four other men, and throughout the years of his missionary travels, he always had companions. The only time we find him alone is in Acts 17 for a brief period in Athens. Although he's a prisoner as he writes this letter to the Colossians, he's still not alone. The men he names are not well-known figures. Each was, however, a special person to Paul. And each was willing to pay the price of associating with a prisoner.

So we may not have quite the mixed group of The Fellowship of the Ring; we do have a unique group that you might call **The Fellowship of the King**. So turn with me to Colossians 4, starting with verse 7, and let's see what makes this fellowship unique. I'm not going to go verse-by-verse as I normally do, but this morning we're going to look at this fellowship by what describes them ... and this first thing that describes them is seeing that this ...

FELLOWSHIP OVERCOMES BARRIERS¹

In this passage six individuals sent greetings (through Paul) from Rome to the Colossian church. Three were Jews and three were Gentiles. The three Jews are Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus called Justus. Paul said of them, verse 10, “**Aristarchus my fellow prisoner** greets you, and **Mark the cousin of Barnabas** (concerning whom you have received instructions— if he comes to you, welcome him),¹¹ and **Jesus who is called Justus**. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.”

Then he went on to name the Gentiles: Epaphras, Luke, and Demas. Starting at verse 12, “**Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.**¹³ For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.¹⁴ **Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.**”

Language, nationality, and differences in religion and culture had divided the world of that day into hostile camps which could only be held together by the sword. Now, as part of the church, both camps were meeting together not only willingly, but having great fellowship with one another!

From the very beginning Jesus had demonstrated that this was the intent of the gospel. When He crossed forbidden barriers in reaching out to the Samaritan woman, as recorded in John 4, the woman was amazed, and the Jews who heard of it even more so. Hatred between Judea and Samaria had lasted over 400 years. While the Jews had kept their racial purity during the Babylonian captivity, the Samaritans had lost theirs by intermarrying with the Assyrian invaders. To Jewish eyes this was unforgivable. Also, the Samaritans had built a rival temple — only to have it destroyed by the Jews. In Christ's time hatred **reigned** between these two groups.

Added to this was the fact that the Samaritan was a woman. But Jesus not only spoke to the woman, He used the woman's drinking utensil, thereby becoming ceremonially defiled — a scandalous act. Jesus leapt far beyond the conventional barriers of his day! And in doing so, He modeled one of the supreme glories of the Church. Jesus not only reaches people like me, He doesn't **just** reach people like you, he doesn't reach just rich people, He doesn't only reach poor people, but all of us, and He brings us together.

This is what had happened in Rome (and elsewhere), but it had not been easy. The Gentiles in Rome were ready to mix, but it was not so with the Jewish believers who legalistically demanded that the Gentiles follow Jewish ceremonial law. When Paul came to Rome, these legalistic-minded Jewish believers gave him a cool reception, even rejecting the authenticity of his missionary charge. Only the three Jews named here helped him. They were receptive and loving; they understood grace; and so here they sent their greetings to the Colossian church.

It is impossible to hold prejudices in the heart and be Spirit-filled; that goes against

1 The Introduction, Exposition, and Conclusion of the text has adapted material from the Books, Preaching the Word – Colossians: The Supremacy of Christ by Dr. R. Kent Hughes, pages 141-159; *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Colossians & Philemon* by Dr. John MacArthur, pages 189-199; and *The Hope of Glory* by Dr. Sam Storms, pages 333-357. **And the Sermons, “The Incomparable Christ – Part 17”** by Dr. J. Ligon Duncan, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, nd, www.fpcjackson.org; and “Sanctification: New Relationships” by Dr. Phil Newton, South Woods Baptist Church, Memphis, TN, 2/6/00, www.southwoodsbc.org.

everything Christ taught and teaches. When a Christian refuses fellowship with other healthy, Spirit-filled believers, there can only be one conclusion: something is wrong in his or her relationship to God. When we're having fellowship with Christ, we have fellowship with one another regardless of background. Three Jewish believers in Rome were experiencing this type of fellowship, and it was overflowing to the Colossians.

There was no way that those men, who loved God and were walking in fellowship with Him, even though they were Jew and Gentile, would not have fellowship with one another. This is what true fellowship brings! If two believers cannot be reconciled, then either both or one is not in fellowship with God. Is there someone that you won't forgive — that you have **no desire** to forgive — even though this person may have humbly sought your forgiveness? If so, you need to be filled with the fullness of Christ. If you are full of Him, you'll be like Him — forgiving — and able to reconcile and restore your relationship.

An inability to forgive reveals a heart that's not fully focused on Christ. And in order to regain that ability to restore relationships here, you first have to focus on restoring your relationship with Christ. And then your fellowship with Him will result in fellowship with others, because true fellowship overcomes all sorts of barriers. But that's not the only thing fellowship does, because just as increased spiritual maturity produces greater fellowship, so we see that ...

FELLOWSHIP PRODUCES MATURITY

The maturity of Christian fellowship is seen in the desire of these six men to send greetings to those in Colossae. Most of the six had never been to Colossae, but they loved the believers there anyway. They understood that they were all part of the team. What Paul said about Epaphras suggests something of what they were like, verse 12, "*Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.*"¹³ *For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.*"

Epaphras was the one who came from the Colossian church. He had come all the way to Rome because he was concerned about the heresy of "**Christ Plus Religion**" which threatened to rob the Colossians of their faithfulness to Jesus. Epaphras had a profound concern for his fellow-believers. Paul represented him as "*always struggling on your behalf in his prayers,*" some versions translate that as "*wrestling in prayer.*" From the Greek word used here we get our English word **agonize**. Paul had watched Epaphras pray for **his church**, and specifically for the people in **his church**, and this was the one word which **best described his prayer** — **struggling**. The same root word was used to describe Jesus' fervent prayer in Gethsemane, in Luke 22, when He sweat drops of blood.

Epaphras cared! He prayed that "*you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.*" His prayer was specifically directed against the false teachers who offered perfection and fullness through their system of "**Christ Plus Religion.**" The Colossians already had everything they needed in Christ. "**God, help them to stay there!**" prayed Epaphras. This was selfless, giving, large-hearted prayer for the people **that he knew**, and people **that he loved**, and people, on whose behalf, he had traveled from Asia Minor to Rome to let the Apostle know exactly what was going on.

Paul concluded his brief portrait of Epaphras by saying, verse 13, "*For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.*" That phrase, "**worked hard for you**" implies deep concern, and great effort causing personal pain and distress.

That's the way it was with Epaphras and his coworkers. His love for the saints made him vulnerable to their burdens.

And that's because we have something wonderful to offer to each other, **1 John 1:3**, “... *that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.*” A primary motivation behind John's proclaiming of the gospel was that his hearers be brought into fellowship with the Father and Son, **and thus into fellowship with John and the Church!** Fellowship with the Christ brings fellowship with other believers.

The key to the quality of our earthly fellowship is the quality of our fellowship with God. Those with the richest fellowship with God have the richest fellowship with each other. They share the same view of **reality** as they regard the world around them. They share the same view of **self**, and understand the reality of sin as it affects the human personality. They share the same **values and ethical standards**. They share the same **love for Christ** and **love for His Church**.

But let's not pretend that there weren't any problems here. Every church has problems. Every church has people who don't get along. Every church has those who are mature ... and those who aren't. And most of the problems that churches face aren't lack of programs, or poor theology ... like every other arena of life, most of the problems within churches are driven by personality conflicts. And the Colossian church was no different. But here, Paul teaches us something of great importance, and that's because he wants us to know that ...

FELLOWSHIP TRANSCENDS GRIEVANCES ²

Now fellowship encompasses what we might call “**marginal**” people. What do I mean? Paul includes in his greetings, verse 14, “*Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.*” Luke was the only Gentile writer of any book in the New Testament. He was a much-loved Christian, physician, devoted friend, careful historian — all in one! **But Demas is another story.**

What happened to Demas? We don't know. All we know is that some of the last words the Apostle Paul wrote before his Roman execution expressed heartbreak, **2 Timothy 4:10**, “*For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.*” Maybe Demas feared being executed with Paul and fled to safety. Or maybe he succumbed to immorality. Or maybe he simply caved in to the relentless temptation of a more comfortable, prosperous life in the large, cosmopolitan, pluralistic, wealthy, culturally interesting city of Thessalonica. Whatever it was, Paul saw it as embracing the world. And perhaps Paul was already aware of Demas' spiritual slide because he was the only one of the six about whom there's no comment in the greeting.

Christian fellowship isn't meant to be perfect. It must always be stretching. Sometimes you have to fellowship with people who come to church, who hang around on the fringes of the fellowship, but never really commit, and who disappear when they find something they think looks better. And they'll tell you that they're just leaving the church, when in reality, they're walking away from Christ. They've been seduced by “**Christ Plus Religion.**” Our Lord even takes in those who disappoint Him ... and who hurt Him. And so our fellowship in Christ makes us people who have a greater capacity for joy— and for sorrow. Believers at their worst are capable of holding on to grievances. Believers can be stubborn, unchanging and unforgiving. But just a little bit later in this letter to Timothy, Paul says something very hope-giving, **2**

2 Part of this section is adapted from the article “Demas and Mark” by Jon Bloom, 9/3/09, www.desiringGod.org

Timothy 4:11, *“Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.”*

Remember Mark? He had been the first to desert the team. Back in the early days, Mark had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on Paul's first great missionary journey when they set out from Antioch. After ministering in Cypress, John Mark abandoned Paul when they reached the shores of Pamphylia, returning to Jerusalem. We don't know why. We can guess from Paul's writings that the hardships were incredible, with stress very much like that experienced by combat soldiers. Later, after the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, when Paul was planning another journey, Barnabas wanted to bring Mark back on the team, and Paul refused. The result was the famous separation as Barnabas took John Mark with him and Paul recruited Silas. Paul was not running "Holy Land Tours," and he didn't want anyone who had been fainthearted on his team.

But now, twelve years later, John Mark was in Rome, ministering to Paul in prison. As Paul sent Mark's greeting to the Colossians, he even commended him saying, verse 10, *“Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions— if he comes to you, welcome him).”* In the accompanying letter to Philemon he called him his *“fellow worker.”* And so we once again, here we find Mark, at the end of Paul's life, fully reconciled to and fully trusted by Paul and very useful in the gospel ministry.

Demas and Mark serve as contrasts. One provides a word of warning, the other a word of hope. And as people who stumble in many ways, we need both. **Demas began well.** But he doesn't appear to end well. Having once fought alongside of Paul in kingdom battles, he seems to have sided with the enemy.

So the warning is this, **1 Peter 5:8-9**, *“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”*⁹ *Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”* Our enemy is very real and very crafty. He threatens and seduces. And even those who start strong and become leaders, like Demas, are susceptible to his deception.

Mark, on the other hand, gives us hope. He had a weak start. He didn't appear to have the right stuff. He disappointed his leaders and friends by leaving them to bear the heat of battle while he went home. **But Mark ended well.** At some point he rejoined the battle and proved a faithful, trusted, useful warrior. Mark would later go on to serve the Apostle Peter, who, in his own letters, refers to Mark as *“his son.”* **And it is this Mark** who would later write the Gospel, based on what he was taught by Peter.

Let us then be on our guard. We live with indwelling sin that is **inclined** toward **insanity**, because it is inclined to believe lies that lead to our destruction. When we're feeling the powerful pull of worldly temptation we need to take Paul's exhortation very seriously, **1 Timothy 6:11-12**, *“But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.”*¹² *Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”*

Paul knew what he was talking about. He watched those who had labored with him in the Gospel ... fall. But also let us remember that God is in the business of forgiving sins, reconciling stumbling sinners to Himself, and restoring them to useful service. Paul knew this too. It was part of his story as well, **1 Timothy 1:12-14**, *“I thank Him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because He judged me faithful, appointing me to His service,”*¹³ *though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy*

because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

We don't know the last word on Demas. I hope that he repented in the end. But because of Mark, we know that failure doesn't have to be the last word for us. Rather, may our last word be, **“But I received mercy.”** And whatever may have happened in the past, let us resolve to pursue Jesus as our treasure and seek to live lives of useful service for Him from this day forth.

Think about what you really deserve from God ... and then think about what you get. And then come to the Lord's Table because **you get mercy.**

You need to pray. Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

O Lord, we are people who love fellowship, as long as it's not inconvenient, as long as it's not forcing us to deal with difficult people, as long as it's fun and it involves food, then we're fine. But when fellowship demands commitment and forgiveness and maturity, then we struggle.

Lord, You know we want to be a place of grace, where people's faith is so evident, despite the pressures of the world. We want to be a church where our love for each other is constantly refreshing. And we want to be a people who's hope in Christ, laid up for us in heaven, is a driving motivation to live in such a way that people take notice. Lord, this morning we give You thanks and praise that when we were still far off the word of truth, the gospel, came into our hearts and changed our lives. Thank You that Jesus is a friend of sinners like us. Thank You that Jesus makes dead people live. Thank You that You love us far more than we will ever deserve. For we pray, in the Name of Your Son, Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

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1 Corinthians 15:58

“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”