

West Van Baptist, February 8
Jesus Brings Us Together
Colossians 4:7-18

I. People and puzzle pieces

Today we're considering the final verses in the book of Colossians. You probably haven't heard a lot of sermons on this section. Unlike earlier parts of the letter, it doesn't contain any profound teaching, and there's no practical instruction that speaks directly to us. It's full of names and greetings, so pastors tend to skip it.

On the other hand, New Testament scholars love these verses! They sit up straight, pull on their thick glasses, and dig in. For them, these are like pieces in a puzzle.

If you read a commentary on Colossians or other Bible books, you'll find that they usually start with comments on the background to the letter. When was it written? Where from? To whom? What was the situation? How does this fit the early church timeline? This information helps us understand what we're reading. Sometimes it's easy to spot, but sometimes not so much, and people wonder: where do commentary writers get this stuff?

One important source are the little historical references in NT books, like the ones we've just read. They really are like little puzzle pieces that we try to connect into a larger historical picture.

Now, I like puzzles. My daughter and I are working on one right now. But I know not everyone in our family enjoys them. I suspect that if we took a vote here this morning, some of you would say you love puzzles, some of you hate them, and many are somewhere in between. So ... you'll be happy to know that I'm not going to piece together a New Testament timeline from the verses we've read this morning. We'll leave that for a puzzle-lover's Bible study!

However, I'm not going to skip this passage, either. It's part of God's Word to us. It makes up 1/8th of Colossians! When we say we believe the Bible is God's inspired, living, powerful, transforming Word, that includes these ordinary-looking verses. So we need to give them a little attention. With that in mind, I'm going to walk through the passage, pointing out some things that I hope you'll find interesting. Then we'll consider a couple practical applications from these verses. In the process, I trust that the Spirit of God will speak to us, as He loves to do through His Word.

II. Some bits and pieces of news

I almost titled this sermon "Ten People, Three Cities, Two Letters, and One Farewell." I decided that was too long, but it does describe what we find in these verses.

- Paul names 10 people. A number are quite important, and 8 of them are mentioned in other parts of the New Testament.
- He references 3 cities: Colossae obviously, as well as Laodicea and Hierapolis. These were sister cities, located in a triangle in the Lycus valley in today's Turkey. They were 10-25 km apart, meaning they all fit in an area about the size of Vancouver, the North Shore, Burnaby, and Coquitlam.

- Paul tells us he's sent another letter to Laodicea, and he suggests that the two churches should share their letters with each other.
- Finally, Paul signs the bottom of the scroll and says farewell.

(1) Tychicus and Onesimus

The first 2 people Paul mentions are **Tychicus and Onesimus**. These men are with Paul at the moment (most people think in Rome, though that's not certain). They are about to make a trip to Colossae, so they will be the couriers who carry Paul's letter.

What I find interesting about Tychicus and Onesimus is how different they are. Tychicus is a mature believer and trusted minister who has worked alongside Paul. He was part of a team entrusted to deliver a large gift of money from the Greek churches to the church in Jerusalem (see Acts 20). Now he ministers alongside the Apostle and travels as his representative. He seems to be a fairly well-off, well-educated, recognized leader.

Onesimus is a runaway slave. Now, he's probably not a ditch-digger. Most likely, he managed some of the household business—otherwise, he couldn't have run away so far. But he has no social status, and he's broken the law. Somewhere along the way, he met Paul and came to faith in Jesus. He's still a relatively new Christian. Now he is returning to his master in Colossae. (That's Philemon. We'll learn more about him in the upcoming weeks.)

Paul calls both of these men "faithful," and "dear brothers." He treats them as equals! This would be scandalous in Greek and Roman society. But in the church, it is a powerful reminder that Jesus brings us together—that in Christ, it doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor, slave or free, an established Christian or a new believer. We're all loved by God, all members of His family, all gifted by His Spirit, indwelt by Jesus, able to serve, and valuable.

(2) Greetings from 6 others

Next, Paul sends greetings from 6 more brothers in Christ. Of these, 3 are Jewish and 3 are Gentiles. This is also a reminder that Jesus brings us together—that in Him the old barriers which divide people are broken down so we can love and serve each other in one body.

Several of these men play an important role in the New Testament, and/or in the early church.

We read about **Mark**, the cousin of Barnabus, in Acts 12, 13, and 15, and also in Philemon, 2 Timothy, and 1 Peter. Mark's family were among the earliest believers. He was part of Paul's first missionary journey—though he left the team early, upsetting Paul and creating some division. Later, he and Paul became friends and coworkers again, and he served alongside Peter. This is the Mark who wrote the Gospel of Mark. He's a great reminder that God uses people in spite of their past failures.

Luke, of course, is the author of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. In terms of sheer word-count, Luke wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else. Yet his name is only mentioned 3 times. I think Luke is a great example of a humble person who served God well, not feeling the need to receive a lot of public praise.

Today, most people aren't as familiar with **Aristarchus**. But if we lived back in Paul's day, many people would recognize his name. Aristarchus traveled with Paul on his longest missionary journey, and accompanied the Apostle on the trip to Rome that we read about in Acts 27. When the people of Ephesus rioted against the church and they couldn't find Paul to arrest him, they arrested Aristarchus instead (Acts 19). So people saw him as an important Christian leader, though we don't know much about him today.

Epaphras wasn't a missionary or an internationally famous Christian. He was probably a businessman who traveled back and forth between Colossae and Ephesus, who became a Christian during Paul's ministry in that coastal city. But Epaphras mattered to the church in Colossae, and probably also in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Paul tells us he is the one who first shared the news about Jesus and planted the church in Colossae (1:7), and he continues to pray faithfully for that church even though right now he is far away.

Epaphras and Aristarchus remind me that most of the really important ministry of the church—in the first century and today—has always been done by people who aren't famous. Paul started a handful of churches in strategic centers. But the gospel spread all across the Roman empire because hundreds and hundreds of faithful brothers and sisters carried the work forward wherever the Lord led them.

(3) Greetings to others

Paul doesn't know everyone in the Colossian church, but he knows several people and some of their history. So, he adds a few more greetings of his own.

He remembers that there is a growing church in nearby **Laodicea**, and asks the Colossians to pass along a warm "Hello." He has a friend named **Nympha** who hosts a church in her home, and extends a greeting to her and those who worship with her. Paul also names **Archippus**, a member of Philemon's family (see Philem 2) who plays a leadership role in one or more of the churches in the area. He urges this young servant of God to fulfill the ministry the Lord has given him—much as he will send letters of encouragement to Timothy and Titus.

Paul's greetings are a reminder that the church of Jesus has always met in local gatherings: "local churches." Spiritually, all Christians are one body of Christ, linked to each other by the Holy Spirit. But, except during the first few months in Jerusalem, the church has never been able to gather all together under one roof. This isn't a problem—it's actually a very good thing! God created the church to be a community where we love each other and build one another up. We can only do this when we know each other personally, and when we're all able to be involved in the life of the community. So, the church has always gathered in smaller groups: in homes, synagogues, theaters, and other modest-sided buildings—like this one. A few churches do meet as larger groups in bigger venues; but they need to work very hard to stay healthy, which always involves meeting in smaller groups as well as in the big auditorium.

We sometimes speak with sadness about divisions in the church. So, we should. Jesus calls us to unity; the body of Christ should be one in mind and heart and spirit. But please remember: unity has never meant that all Christians meet together in one giant stadium. The fact that there are many local churches, preaching Jesus and serving Him separately, is not a bad thing. It is exactly how God intended the church to function. He calls us to be an effective local church, and to maintain healthy

relationships with other gospel-preaching local churches around us. Paul models this beautifully in his letter to the Colossians (and the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis).

(4) Two letters (and more)

I've mentioned two letters: one to the **Colossians** and another sent to the church in **Laodicea**. When we put the New Testament "puzzle pieces" all together, we find that Paul actually sent at least 3 letters in the hands of Tychicus and Onesimus. Colossians is one. Another went to Onesimus' owner, **Philemon**. (See Philem 10, 23-24.) A third was the letter we call "**Ephesians**," also carried by Tychicus (Eph 6:21) and similar to Colossians at a number of points.

New Testament scholars call Ephesians a "circular letter." This doesn't mean it was written on a circular piece of cloth. It means the letter was designed to be *circulated*—shared with a number of churches. It's quite possible that the letter we call "Ephesians" is the same epistle that went to the church at Laodicea, meaning people have been reading Colossians and Ephesians together since the very beginning.

We don't know this for sure. Maybe there was a 4th letter to Laodicea that's lost now. We don't have everything Paul ever wrote. We trust that the apostolic letters which were kept and copied and passed to us are the ones God wanted to be in our New Testament. But Paul's instructions here are a reminder that the books of the Bible were always designed to be read *in context*. From the very beginning, it was important for the church to read *all* of God's Word, to study every letter, anchoring our teaching to the whole Bible and not just one isolated part. I didn't make up the idea of reading in context. Paul shows us that it was always the right thing to do.

(5) Farewell

Colossians ends very simply. Paul says: *Here is my greeting in my own handwriting.... Remember my chains. May God's grace be with you.*

It's a typical ending to an extraordinary letter. It reminds us that Colossians, like most New Testament epistles, was written in partnership (this time with Timothy—see Col 1:1). It reminds us again that Paul values the church's prayers. And of course, it's a reminder that we live in the grace of God.

III. A few lessons for us

These final verses in Colossians don't teach us new theological truths or give a lot of specific instructions for Christian living. All the same, they have a few practical lessons for us. Let me highlight four.

(1) The Bible is God's Word—*given in history*

We believe God has spoken to us in Scripture, in His Word. This is incredibly important. Precisely because it's so important, sometimes Christians treat the Bible as if it were completely disconnected from history—as if it fell from heaven one day on a golden parachute, as a kind of supernatural encyclopedia of all truth and right behavior. The intention behind this is good. We want to honor

God's authority in His Word. But when the Bible is viewed this way, often people forget to read it in context, and that can lead to some very problematic interpretations.

Passages like the one we've read this morning remind us that the Spirit of God spoke through Paul (and Timothy) to a particular group of people, at a particular place and time in history. The truths this letter teaches are God's truths, and they are fully applicable to us today. But we need to study those words *in context*, because that is how God chose to speak to us.

I know I talk a lot about context, and it can start to sound like nagging. But it's essential if we want to live under the authority of Scripture. And we learn it from passages like Colossians 4.

(2) The "body of Christ" *isn't just a theory*

You don't have to read far in Paul's letters to hear him talk about the church as the "body of Christ." This means Jesus lives in us by the Holy Spirit. It means we serve as Jesus' hands and feet and voice—as His representatives in a needy world. And it means the church is designed to be a diverse group of people, with different gifts and personalities and backgrounds, unified by the Spirit, living and serving in harmony and love. We find this in Colossians and Ephesians, in 1 Corinthians and Romans and all over the place in the New Testament.

This "body of Christ" image has practical implications. It means we need each other. It means the health and ministry of the church depends on *every member*, all serving with the gifts God has given us. It means everyone matters. It means our relationships are important—relationships not only between us and God and us, but between each of us as members. It means there should be diversity and also unity in the local church, and between local churches.

In this morning's passage, we see that Paul doesn't just teach this as a theory. He models it in his ministry: caring about relationships, promoting gift-based service, working with teams of diverse coworkers, calling local churches to help each other. The "body of Christ" is a living reality for Paul and the churches he serves. It needs to be a living reality for us, too.

(3) Effective ministry happens *in teams*

Too often, people read the book of Acts and other stories about gifted ministry leaders, and they get the idea that the church is built on the work of superstars: Paul, Peter, Billy Graham ... name your favorite.

This has never been true—not in the first century, and not now. Yes, God blesses His church with some very gifted people who make a real impact. That's good! We should celebrate it and pray for more leaders like Paul. But the New Testament church grew because of Paul ... and Barnabas, and Mark, and Luke, and Aristarchus, and Tychicus, and Epaphras, and Nympha, and Archippus, and a slave named Onesimus, and some guy named Jesus Justus about whom we know nothing at all. And a whole lot of others besides.

The Spirit of God is present and working in every member of the body of Christ. That's how the church has always worked. It's how West Vancouver Baptist Church needs to work. It's my privilege to serve you as pastor. I'm thrilled to have Neil and Aldo on our pastoral staff, to have other wonderful staff members and ministry leaders among us. We all want to do our best to serve well.

But we—the pastors and leaders—aren't the church. We—all of us—are the body of Christ. And the work of Christ only gets done as we all find our places to serve. Effective ministry happens in teams, and ultimately in the whole body. May we never forget this crucial truth!

(4) **Jesus brings us together**

Finally, a reminder: Jesus brings us together. He brings together slaves and masters, Jews and Gentiles, brothers and sisters from many nations and backgrounds and languages. He does this because He is the Lord of all nations, and it glorifies Him when the church is diverse and united.

We experience a little of that here at West Van Baptist, as we seek to be one church uniting groups from different backgrounds: Persian, Chinese, European, and more. Our church isn't intentionally multicultural because we are Canadian—though it fits our context well. We seek to demonstrate unity-in-diversity because that is what the body of Christ is supposed to be like. It's what we will experience in heaven. When it happens here, it brings praise to our Lord.

I'm glad West Van Baptist has made it part of our mission to be a diverse-but-unified, multicultural church. I pray we will continue to grow in unity together.

Studying the Bible well, in context. Living as the body of Christ. Serving in teams. Diverse, but unified in Jesus. We're called to be all these things, all the time!

This morning we get to express them in some special ways. When Jesus launched the church, He instructed us to perform several regular symbolic acts that teach us and help us to remember who we are as His body.

We've done one of those already. We've had some **baptisms**. Baptism reminds us that Jesus came, was baptized, taught, healed, died, and rose again—in history. As His followers we declare: "Yes, my faith is rooted in a real, historical Jesus, and I want to live out that faith in my own life, in my history." Baptism also indicates the desire to be part of the community of Jesus, to be an active member in the church, the body of Christ. It is a sign of "joining the team"—of willingness to be part of what the church is doing. And baptism is offered to everyone who loves Jesus—to men and women, old and young, rich and poor, new Canadians and lifelong Canadians, English speakers and Chinese speakers and Farsi speakers. In the water of baptism we're all equals, and we're united to each other through the Lord who died and rose for us.

Now we're about to celebrate **the Lord's Supper**. Here too, we're reminded of things we've studied this morning. As we eat, we remember that Jesus died and rose for us *in history*. His body, given for us, was as real as the bread we are about to hold. We all take part, united in a "communion" supper that connects us with Jesus and also with the church, the body of Christ. We will serve one another, as a visible reminder that we minister in teams. And everyone who loves our Lord is welcome, no matter what language they speak or what background they bring.

Jesus brings us together—and that's very good news! May we sense it as we partake of the Lord's Supper this morning. May it be visible in this church and in our lives, all the time. And may it always be a source of joy and praise.