

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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PROFILES IN PARTNERSHIP

Colossians 4:7-18

Do you remember back in the day, pre-COVID, when you could actually go to a theatre to watch a movie? Mary Sue and I didn't do it very often, but once in a while we liked to see a movie on the big screen. When the movie was over, most people (if there was anyone else there) would get up and leave. But Mary Sue and I like to stay to see the credits, in part because we want to know who was who in the movie (if we didn't know who played certain characters); in part to see the names of the behind-the-scenes crew without whom the movie would never have been made; and maybe to find out where the movie was filmed, if we didn't know.

Stars and, sometimes, directors get all of the attention and acclaim. But it takes the whole cast and crew members to make a movie that tells a story in a compelling way.

The same is true in ministry of the church. The same is true in the ministry of God's Word. The same is true in the ministry of the gospel, which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). We get a glimpse of this in the closing verses of Paul's letter to the Colossians, where he mentions no less than 10 individuals who were, in one way or another, partners with him in his ministry as an ambassador for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). What you see here is that Paul was not a loner. He was not a lone ranger for Jesus. He didn't try to hog the spotlight or diminish the contributions of others. Paul understood that ministry is best carried out by a team, by a band of brothers and sisters who are devoted to Christ first and foremost, devoted to one another, and devoted to fulfilling the mission God has given them.

Behind every great man or woman is another person, or a team of people, who help to make that individual great, people who help them to accomplish what they could not do without the support or encouragement or assistance of others.

Statues are being removed from public places all across the country. In some cases, it is a good thing. In others, not. One statue that is so far not in danger of being vandalized or removed, as far as I know, is the statue of General Ulysses S. Grant on his horse, that stands in front of the US Capitol Building, at the eastern end of the Reflecting Pool, facing toward the Lincoln Memorial. Grant, of course, was the commanding General of the US Army whose leadership was decisive in the victory of the Union in the Civil War. After the war, Grant served 2 terms as the 18th President of the United States, from 1869-1877.

There is another, much less conspicuous, statue in a park in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood that has a connection to Grant. It is the statue of a lesser-known Civil War figure, Major General John Rawlins. Rawlins, like Abraham Lincoln, had been a lawyer in Illinois. He organized and commanded the 45th Illinois Infantry for the Union in the Civil War and

became a close friend and confidant of General Grant, eventually serving as Grant's chief of staff. Rawlins knew Grant's character flaws, especially his weakness for alcohol. Rawlins extracted a pledge from Grant to abstain from alcohol, and when Grant was tempted to fall away from his promise, Rawlins would plead with him and walk with him until Grant could get back on track. General Rawlins does not receive the acclaim accorded to General (and President) Grant. But without Rawlins' steady support and unwavering loyalty, Grant would hardly have managed even to climb into the saddle. After the war, Rawlins served briefly as President Grant's Secretary of War, but died of tuberculosis just 5 months into Grant's first term in office. (Sources: Richard Phillips, *The Masculine Mandate*, 121-122; Wikipedia: Articles on "Ulysses S. Grant Memorial" and "statue of John Aaron Rawlins.")

Ulysses S. Grant would not and could not have succeeded without the aid and support of Rawlins and many others. Though Paul did not struggle with alcohol as Grant did, he still recognized and appreciated the contributions of his teammates and partners in the task of spreading the gospel and the establishing of the church throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

Let's look at the partners in ministry Paul names here in Colossians 4. The cast of characters he names ranges from the famous to those who are virtually unknown, except for Paul's mention of them here.

TYCHICUS

The first one Paul mentions is Tychicus (pronounced *TICK-i-kus*). Paul speaks of him in verse 7 as "a beloved (*agapetos*) brother, a faithful minister (*diakonos*), and a fellow servant in the Lord." That's high praise, don't you think? Wouldn't you want to be known as a beloved brother or sister, as faithful in your ministry, and a fellow servant of the Lord Jesus Christ? I would. That is how highly Paul thought of Tychicus, how greatly he valued him as a brother in Christ and partner in ministry.

According to Acts 20:4, Tychicus was a Christian from the province of Asia (Asia Minor) who accompanied Paul from Macedonia to Jerusalem with the offering Paul had collected for the church there. He was with Paul during the time of Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, and was tasked by Paul to carry his letter to the Colossians, as well as his letter to the Ephesians (see Ephesians 6:21-22) and possibly a letter to the church at Laodicea, which, as far as we know, has been lost. Paul mentions Tychicus again in Titus 3:12 and at the end of 2 Timothy 4 (verse 12), which is the last letter from Paul we have. Having earned the apostle's trust, Tychicus served God faithfully as a member of Paul's supporting cast.

ONESIMUS

Accompanying Tychicus was Onesimus, whom Paul calls "our faithful and beloved (*agapetos*) brother, who is one of you" (4:9). That is, he was a Colossian. He was from Colosse. He had been a slave in the household of Philemon, one of the leaders of the church in Colosse. As we know from Paul's letter to Philemon, Onesimus stole money from Philemon and then took off. He was a runaway slave who found his way to Rome where, in

the providence of God, he met Paul, heard the gospel, and became a follower of Jesus. Onesimus means *useful* or *profitable*. In writing to Philemon, Paul uses the name as a kind of play on words, telling Philemon that once Onesimus was *useless* to his master. He was an *unprofitable* servant. But now, Paul says, Onesimus has become *useful* not only to Philemon but to Paul as well, for he has become a brother in Christ and a partner in the ministry of the gospel. Paul is sending Onesimus back to Colosse with Tychicus, back to Philemon, hoping that Philemon will receive Onesimus back with forgiveness and grace as a fellow follower of the Lord Jesus.

Onesimus is proof (one of millions of proofs) of the power – the dramatic power – of the gospel to redeem runaway sinners, to transform sinners into fully-devoted followers of Christ. Not only is Onesimus proof of God’s power to save sinners, he is proof of God’s ability and desire to use people like Onesimus – and you and me – as “fellow workers for the kingdom of God” (4:11). We don’t know for sure, but some biblical scholars believe this former runaway slave later became the bishop (*episkopos*) of the church in Ephesus.

If God can take a runaway slave and make him useful in His service and a leader in His church, He can certainly use people like us. Like you and me. Do not ever think otherwise. Do not ever doubt that God can use you. Or that God is using you, whether you see the fruit of your witness and your labors in Christ right now or not. Ask God to show you how He is using you. Or how He wants to use you. And then follow where He leads.

ARISTARCHUS

After Onesimus comes Aristarchus, who, though he has a Greek name, was a Jewish Christian. We know this because of what Paul says in reference to Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus (whom I prefer to call JJ) in verse 11: “these,” says Paul, “are the only Jews (literally, ‘the only ones of the circumcision’) among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God.” Aristarchus was a native of Thessalonica. He was with Paul during the riot at Ephesus (Acts 19:29). Along with Tychicus and several others, he accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the offering for the church (Acts 20:4). He was also with Paul when he sailed from Caesarea to Italy (Acts 27:2) after appealing his case to Caesar. Paul speaks of him in verse 11 as “my fellow prisoner.” Aristarchus was a faithful friend and partner in ministry who, like Paul, suffered for his allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ.

MARK

Next comes Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. Barnabas was Paul’s advocate after Paul’s dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. When the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem were suspicious of Paul and hesitant to believe his testimony of coming to faith in Christ, Barnabas urged them to accept Paul as a true brother in Christ (Acts 9:26-27). Barnabas was also Paul’s missionary partner in the first missionary journey, when they were set apart by the Holy Spirit and commissioned as missionaries by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3).

So, Paul and Barnabas had a history together. And Mark was intertwined in their history. Mark went with Paul and Barnabas on that first missionary journey (Acts 13:5, where he is

called John, which is short for John Mark), but at one point, when they arrived in the town of Perga on the Mediterranean coast, Mark “left them and returned to Jerusalem” (Acts 13:13). We aren’t told why Mark left and went back home, but we know it upset Paul deeply, so much that when Barnabas wanted to give Mark a second chance, Paul strongly opposed it. Their disagreement was so strong that Barnabas and Paul parted ways. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, while Paul took Silas and went back through Syria and Cilicia for the start of his 2nd missionary journey. The cause of the rift between Paul and Barnabas was Mark – the same Mark whom Paul mentions in Colossians 4:10 and Philemon 24; the same Mark of whom Paul says in 2 Timothy 4:11: “(H)e is helpful to me in my ministry;” the same Mark whom Peter calls “my (spiritual) son” in 1 Peter 5:13.

We don’t know the details of the changes that took place in Mark’s life and in his relationship with Paul after Mark’s failure on that first missionary journey. Maybe one day in heaven we will know. What we do know is that God did an amazing work in the life of Mark. What we know is that the same Mark who left the mission field without completing the mission eventually became a valuable and valued member of Paul’s ministry team. God brought them back together and healed the rift between them. In addition, Mark wrote the earliest of the four Gospels that are included in the New Testament. Mark’s primary source for much of the information in his Gospel account is none other than Peter.

Paul didn’t want to give Mark a second chance. He didn’t think Mark deserved a second chance. Maybe he *didn’t* deserve a second chance. Maybe *no one* deserves a second chance. Eventually, though, Paul gave Mark another chance.

God is not nearly so reluctant to give us a second chance as Paul was. He is “the God of the second chance,” and the third and the fourth and on and on. God is in the business of giving second chances to people who have messed up in some way, but who want to start fresh and new with Him.

The beginning of Mark’s ministry “career” was inauspicious. Or even ignominious. Paul, it would seem, didn’t think Mark had a future in Christian ministry. But look how it turned out. Look how Mark turned out. Look what God did with his life.

The point of this is not how great Mark was. The point is not how great Barnabas or Paul or Aristarchus or Onesimus or Tychicus were. The point is not how great this Christian leader or that Christian leader is. The point is how great, how gracious, how mighty and magnificent, how loving and merciful, how powerful and purposeful God is, and what He can do with you. With me. With us. When we are sold out to Him and fully devoted to serving Him.

We’ll continue with these profiles in partnership next week.

Remember this: There is a place in the work of God’s kingdom for you. There is a place for the most ordinary of the ordinary, and for the most extraordinary or the extraordinary. Like Paul, we are not lone rangers in God’s service. We are not meant to be lone rangers. We are meant to work together, to serve together, to live and love and laugh and cry and pray together as beloved brothers and sisters and fellow workers for the gospel.

Will you, like Tychicus and Onesimus, like Aristarchus and Mark, like Paul and Barnabas, give yourself fully to the Lord, to let Him have His way in your life? Remember, He can do more with it than you can.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.