

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 15, 2020**

PROFILES IN PARTNERSHIP (2)

Colossians 4:7-18

Before we were “interrupted” last Sunday by the still officially undecided Presidential election, we had begun to acquaint (or re-acquaint) ourselves with the sometimes-overlooked partners in ministry Paul mentions in the closing verses of his Letter to the Colossians. We now return to our “regularly scheduled” look at what Paul says there, in Colossians 4:7-18. You will find this passage printed in your bulletin or on your screen. May we give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

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First, a brief review:

Tychicus is described as “a beloved (*agapētos*) brother, a faithful minister (*diakonos*), and a fellow servant (*sundoulos*) in the Lord” (4:7). That is high praise, coming from Paul.

Onesimus: Paul describes him as “our faithful (*pistos*) and beloved (*agapētos*) brother,” who is “one of you” (4:9). That is, Onesimus was from Colosse. He was a Colossian. He had been a fugitive, a runaway slave who made it to Rome, where, in God’s providence, he met Paul and became a follower of the Lord Jesus. Onesimus was the main subject of Paul’s letter to Philemon, who was Onesimus’ master and one of the leaders of the church in Colosse. Onesimus is proof of the power of God to save, transform, and use sinners to serve the purposes of His kingdom in the world.

Aristarchus was Paul’s “fellow prisoner” (*sunaiχmalōtos*), one of the few Jewish Christians among Paul’s “fellow workers (*sunergoi*) for the kingdom of God” (4:10-11).

Barnabas was Paul’s former missionary partner, mentioned here because of his relationship to Mark, his cousin. Barnabas was not his real name. His real name was Joseph. Acts 4:36 says he was a (Jewish) Levite from the island of Cyprus. Barnabas was his nickname. It means “son of encouragement.” Barnabas had the spiritual gift of encouragement. He went around encouraging people, including both Paul and Mark.

Mark had gone with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:5), but left them and went back home to Jerusalem (13:13) before the mission was completed. When Barnabas wanted to give Mark another chance, it created such a rift between Paul and Barnabas that they parted ways, with Barnabas taking Mark and Paul taking Silas on their next missionary journeys. I don’t think God was pleased that Paul and Barnabas could not resolve their disagreement over Mark. And yet, God used it to double the number of missionary teams taking the gospel to places where the name of Jesus was not yet known. God works in mysterious ways.

While Paul refused to give Mark a second chance after what happened on the first missionary journey, Paul later came to value and appreciate him as one of his “fellow workers” (*sunergoi*) (4:11; Philemon 24). Though once they had been estranged, by God’s grace Paul and Mark were reconciled. Mark’s failure in that first missionary journey did not define him, any more than some failing or inadequacy in your life or mine defines us. You are not defined by your worst moments. You are defined by the love and grace of God for you. You are not defined by what you have done or failed to do. You are defined by what Jesus in His immeasurable love has done for you.

Despite his first failure as a missionary, Mark came to be a valued partner in ministry with Paul. God chose Mark to write one of the New Testament Gospels. Mark’s account of the life, teaching, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus was the first of the New Testament Gospels to be written. Quite an impact for a guy whose first ministry experience ended in failure!

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JESUS JUSTUS (JJ)

Now, we go on. Next on Paul’s list of partners in ministry is “Jesus, who is called Justus” (4:11). As I said two weeks ago, I’m just going to call him “JJ” (but not to be confused with any other JJ’s you may know, like JJ Watt or JJ Kerfoot or JJ Ong!) Everything we know about this JJ is right here in verse 11. There is no other mention of him anywhere in the Bible. True, there are two other references in the New Testament to individuals named Justus. Acts 1:23 speaks of a disciple of Jesus named Joseph, who went by both Barsabbas and Justus. Along with Matthias, this Justus was a candidate to take the place of Judas as one of the 12 apostles. Matthias was chosen (1:26), and Justus is not mentioned again. (Nor, for that matter, is Matthias. Though he was now one of the 12 apostles, his name does not occur again anywhere in the New Testament.) The other occurrence of the name Justus is in Acts 18:7, where Paul, in Corinth, connects with a Gentile named Titius Justus (“TJ”) and uses his house as a base for gospel ministry to the Gentiles.

Neither TJ in Acts 18:7 nor the Justus in Acts 1:23 is the same person as the JJ in Colossians 4:11. All we know about JJ is what Paul tells us here: He was with Paul in Rome. Like Aristarchus and Mark, he was a Jewish Christian. And, like the others, he had proved to be a comfort to Paul in his suffering for the gospel. That is all we know about him. Other than these bare facts, he is completely unknown to us.

But his legacy still lives on, doesn’t it? What we can learn from JJ is that you don’t have to be famous in order to have an impact. His friendship and support made a difference to Paul. You don’t need to be in the spotlight to have an impact as a follower of Jesus. Your labors in the Lord may be hidden from public view, but that doesn’t mean they are not valuable. It doesn’t mean they are not effective. It doesn’t mean they are not appreciated. God sees. God knows. God smiles when you find your place in the work of His kingdom. God smiles when you come alongside others and offer love and comfort and support in the name of Jesus. Like JJ.

EPAPHRAS

Next, in verse 12, we have Epaphras who, like Onesimus, was from Colosse. The Colossians had a special place in Epaphras' heart because he was one of them. In addition, Paul speaks of Epaphras as a "slave (*doulos*) [or 'servant'] of Christ Jesus." In the Letter to Philemon, Paul speaks of Epaphras as "my fellow prisoner (*sunaimalotos*) in Christ Jesus" (Philemon 23), indicating that, like Aristarchus (4:10), Epaphras was being held with Paul in prison in Rome.

Colossians 1:7 tells us that Epaphras, not Paul, had actually planted the church in Colosse. Paul says: "You (Colossians) heard it (the gospel) from Epaphras, our beloved (*agapetos*) fellow servant (*sundoulos*), who is a faithful (*pistos*) minister (*diakonos*) of Christ on our behalf." Epaphras was a man whose heart and life were so changed by the gospel that he wanted everyone in his hometown of Colosse to know the saving power of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Not only did Epaphras have a heart for the gospel. He was also a man of prayer. A prayer warrior. In 4:12, Paul says of him: "He is always wrestling in prayer for you" (NIV), "always struggling on your behalf in his prayers" (ESV). *The Message* says: "He's been tireless in his prayers for you, praying that you'll stand firm, mature and confident in everything God wants you to do." Isn't this a good way for us to pray for each other? And for all of God's people?

Wrestling. Struggling. Tireless. The word Paul uses to describe the heart of Epaphras is *agonizomai*. Sounds familiar, right? It is where the words "agony" and "agonize" come from. Epaphras took the ministry of prayer seriously. He *agonized* in prayer for the believers and yet-to-become believers in Colosse. He understood that prayer is a form of spiritual warfare against Satan, the archenemy of our souls.

Wouldn't you love to know that someone like Epaphras is praying for you, agonizing in prayer for you? Perhaps God wants you to be an Epaphras in the life of someone(s) you know. Perhaps the Lord wants us all to be Epaphrases for one another. Are you willing to be an Epaphras for your brothers and sisters here at Faith? And beyond?

LUKE

After Epaphras comes Luke (4:14). Paul calls him the "beloved doctor" (*ho iatros ho agapetos*). Like many of Paul's friends and partners in ministry, Luke was a Gentile (non-Jewish) believer in Christ. He was with Paul on some of his missionary travels. He was not only a physician but an historian as well. He wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. (The usual title for the Book of Acts is 'the Acts of the Apostles,' but it has often been said that a better title for it would "the Acts of the Holy Spirit.") Here is a little trivia about Luke that you may not know: He is the only *known* author in the New Testament who was a Gentile. We do not know for sure who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews, since the writer is not identified anywhere. But of all the rest of the writers in the New Testament, Luke is the only one who was not Jewish.

The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are the enduring legacy of Luke. But the importance of his friendship with Paul, and his willingness to suffer along with Paul for the sake of the gospel, should not be underestimated in the plan of God for the spread of the gospel.

DEMÁS

Demas comes next. We know very little about him. What we do know is not so good. Demas is mentioned three times in the New Testament: Here is Colossians 4:14; in Philemon 24, in a list of Paul's fellow workers (*sunergoi*); and in 2 Timothy 4:10. This last verse is the troubling one. Paul says that "Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica." For whatever reason, Demas seems to have decided that it was not worth it to follow Jesus. He fell in love with this world and its enticements. He started out well. But he did not persevere in the faith. He stuck with Jesus for a while, but then walked away.

Let the legacy of Demas be a warning to you. Be careful that you are not tempted to walk away from the faith. Be careful that you are not enticed to turn away from following Jesus in order to pursue pleasure or another worldly desire, or for any other reason.

Demas' rejection of the way of Jesus for the way of the world is the last thing we hear of him in the Bible. But we don't know how his life ultimately turned out. Did he walk away from his faith forever? Was his faith in Jesus never really real? Or did Demas, like the prodigal son, eventually come to his senses and come back to Jesus? Remember the rich young man who came to Jesus so enthusiastically but then went away sad, because he was in love with his wealth? We don't know if he ever had a change of heart and mind. We don't know if he ever came back to Jesus. We don't know. Maybe he did. I hope he did. I hope Demas did, too. I hope he eventually came to his senses. I hope he repented of his rejection of the gospel. I know it is possible. Just as I know it is possible that people we know, people *you* know – maybe even members of your family – who have walked away from Jesus, who are not living the way God wants them (us) to live, may still come back to the Christian faith in which they were nurtured and taught. Until Jesus returns, or until the appointed day of their death comes, there is still time. The last chapter of their story has not yet been written. Until that day comes, don't give up hope for them. And be like Epaphras. Don't stop praying for them.

NYMPHA

Two more names appear in these final verses of Colossians. The first is Nympha. Nympha, as far as we know, was a Christian woman in Colosse, who hosted a house church in her home. In those days, they didn't have church buildings like we have. As the gospel spread, followers of Jesus met together in homes, where "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the [life together of] fellowship (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Nympha graciously opened her home for the church to meet there. The growth of the church was aided and impacted by ministry of hospitality, as believers opened their hearts and homes to both believers and seeking unbelievers.

It may not be practical in the age of COVID, but when we have gotten through this difficult season, we can learn from Nympha about the value of opening our homes to one another and to unbelieving friends, neighbors, family members, classmates, teammates, co-workers, and anyone else God puts in our path.

ARCHIPPUS

Last (but not least) we come to Archippus, for whom Paul has a specific message: “see to it that you fulfill the ministry (*diakonia*) you have received in the Lord” (4:17). Archippus is mentioned in the opening of the letter to Philemon, which is addressed by Paul “To Philemon our beloved friend (*agapetos*) and fellow worker (*sunergoi*), to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier (*sustratiotes*), and to the church that meets in your home” (Philemon 2). [The word “your” (*sou*) is singular, suggesting that Philemon, Apphia (possibly Philemon’s wife), and Archippus (possibly their son) all lived in the same house where, like the home of Nympha, a house church met.]

We don’t know exactly what Paul is referring to in his message to Archippus. But presumably, Archippus would “get” the message. Archippus may have had a pastoral role in the church in Colosse. Whatever it is, Paul urges Archippus to make sure he doesn’t neglect it. His ministry (*diakonia*) is from the Lord. So Archippus had better make sure he doesn’t let it slide.

Has the Lord given you a ministry to fulfill? Has the Lord given you a task to carry out in His name? The answer is: Yes, He has. If you have taken on a specific ministry responsibility in the church, in your neighborhood, or in the larger world, be sure you do it. Not in your own strength, but with the help and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Do you know what God has called you to do? If the answer is yes, do it. If your answer is no, then ask God to show you what He wants you to do – even now, in the age of COVID. Can you encourage someone who is lonely? Can you help a neighbor with groceries or in some other practical way? Can you pray? Can you show an interest in your neighbors? Can you teach a class? Can you invest some time and love in the children and youth of our church? Can you volunteer in a community ministry? See to it that you fulfill the ministry you have received in the Lord.

Paul didn’t let his chains stop him from the ministry the Lord had given him. He was in prison, yes. He was chained to a prison guard. But, as he would write in 2 Timothy 2:9, “God’s Word is not chained.” Nothing – and nobody – can stop God’s Word from doing what God in His sovereign grace and power intends for it to do.

So Paul never gave up. Not when he was in jail. Not ever. And neither must we. Neither must we. Not now. Not ever.

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GRACE BE WITH YOU

Paul's final words to the Colossians are: *Hē charis meth' humōn*. "(The) grace [be] with you." He begins and ends with grace. In his opening greeting to the Colossians in 1:2, he says: "Grace and peace to you from God our Father." (Some manuscripts add: "and the Lord Jesus Christ.")

The grace of God is the foundation of our salvation. It is our experience of His saving grace in the person and work of Jesus Christ that links us together and makes us partners in ministry, just as Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Barnabas, Mark, JJ, Epaphras, Luke, Demas (for a season), Nympha, and Archippus were partners with Paul in faith and ministry.

May the same grace Paul pronounced as a benediction be with you. With us all. As recipients of His great grace, may we be instruments of that grace day by day, in the age of COVID and beyond, for as long as we live. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.