
Day 348 – December 14

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

Letter to the Colossians

Letter to Philemon

Readings: *Colossians 1:1-4:18; Philemon 1:1-25*

Reflections:

- The Prison Epistles: Most conservative scholars believe Paul wrote four letters while in this imprisonment in Rome. These are called the Prison Epistles. Philippians is generally accepted by scholars as authentic to Paul. The other three are strongly debated because of writing style. The three letters of Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians follow a very similar writing style. Once we accept that Paul used a secretary it would make sense that the writing style would vary. The content of the letters align with Paul's other teaching and most of the arguments against Pauline authorship are quite inconsistent with basic logic. (e.g. One liberal scholar will suggest that Ephesians is very similar to Colossians and therefore possibly Colossians is original but Ephesians is fake and an attempt to copy Colossians. Another scholar will say that because Ephesians and Colossians are so similar they are both counterfeits because they don't match the style of his earlier letters. Then another scholar will argue that only Philemon is original and both Ephesians and Colossians are constructed from that personal letter.) The reason to accept these as original with Paul is: 1) The early church accepted it as original; 2) The content matches Paul's other content; 3) Paul regularly used a secretary; 4) Paul signs Colossians with his own hand which would be a strong authenticating mark; 5) Philemon might have all been written by Paul as it is such a short and personal letter; 6) All of the names of his companions within the three letters align with Paul's team, circumstances and what we know of his circumstances. If you accept Paul's authorship, then most conservative scholars date these works around 61-63 CE.
- Letter to the Colossians: We have no record of Paul visiting Colosse but apparently Epaphras one of Paul's associates was active in proclaiming the message of Jesus in Colosse, Laodicia, and Hierapolis. Epaphras returned to Paul to report on the culture and issues within those cities and the impact these were having on the church. Paul again tackles head on the impact of religion and warns this particular community against being ensnared again in the bondage of religion. Like Romans and Ephesians, a key aspect to living a transformed life is being filled with the Spirit and having a renewed mind.

- Salutation: Paul's greeting is very simple and straightforward including the common elements we have come to expect as he greets both Jews and Gentiles with his opening, "Grace and peace".
- Thanks for their faith: Paul opens with gratitude for their faith in Christ and love for the saints that springs from their hope they possess for what is theirs in heaven. Paul apparently uses faith, hope and love as the most basic elements of what it means to be in relationship with God (1 Corinthians 13:13). Paul also affirms their response to the word of truth, the good news. This is the message that must be proclaimed locally and globally and even in Paul's day, just thirty years after Jesus died and rose again, Paul can say the message is being carried all over the world and is bearing fruit and growing. People's lives are being changed, the poor are being cared for and people are living in loving relationship with God and each other. Paul affirms Epaphras who was the leader they knew best and models for us the important role we have in building up other leaders rather than seeing them as competitors. Paul in this section also mentions their love in the Spirit. Again, as we look at Galatians 5:22,23 as well as Corinthians 12-14 we see that love is the key expression of being filled with the Spirit. Paul will again make this clear in his letter to the Ephesians.
- Prayer for the Colossians: Paul writes out his prayers to ensure his readers know exactly what he is praying. People need to not only know we are praying but they need to know what we are praying for them. Here are the basic elements of his prayer: 1) They would be filled with the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, 2) so that might live a life worthy of Christ, 3) pleasing to him, 4) bearing fruit in every good work, 5) growing knowledge of God, 6) being strengthened through his power to patiently endure, 7) joyfully give thanks to the one who has enabled (or qualified) you to enter his kingdom of light. We see in this prayer the careful attention to detail and the holistic nature of how Paul prays. Paul's prayer reminds us of the importance of intercession for those we love and lead as well as models for us an approach that completely covers people's complete spiritual needs. Paul now expands on his reference to the kingdom by reminding his readers that they have been transferred from a kingdom of darkness to kingdom of the Son God loves. It is in this new kingdom that we experience complete forgiveness and are rescued out from the self-destructive sin and system of this world. Paul makes this point to start to set up his main challenge to this church and their need to intentionally remain separate from the influence of the culture and religion around them.
- The Preeminence of Christ – The person of Christ: This next section some scholars believe is an early church song that they would sing, much like Philippians 2:5-11. If this is the case then we see here as in Philippians that the early church songs were carefully crafted, theologically dense and completely Christ centered. Everything was completely about Jesus. We also see by comparing the two songs that the early Christians were convinced that Jesus' story didn't start with his birth but with his pre-existent state as Word of God. These songs find strong parallel to John's opening chapter of his biography (John 1). The early Christian songs were a primary way for the churches to teach their people about the story of Jesus

including his divinity, suffering, death and resurrection. Paul chooses this particular song because it aligns so well with the content of his letter. It emphasizes Christ's authority over spiritual powers that work in and through religion. It also strongly affirms their identity in Christ as the church and the message of reconciliation they have been entrusted with. Anyone who wonders if the early Christ-followers thought that Jesus was "God with us" should simply read these two songs. There is absolutely no doubt after you review the content of how they praised Jesus as one with God.

- Relationship with Christ: Paul switches from Jesus' story to their story and our shared story. A key to growing with Christ is to discover his story and then learn how our story fits within his story. Life on this planet is not about the human race's story but about God's story and how we fit into his story. As we read this section we see how clearly Paul understood enemy love. God was the first person to practice enemy love by sending Jesus to rescue us and restore us to full relationship with him. This is the message of hope we carry to the world. This is the message that Paul became a servant of. This section also reminds us that there is a very clear order to how the kingdom is expanded: 1) Truth is proclaimed; 2) People's lives are transformed; 3) The weak, poor and vulnerable are cared for. Good works always flows from changed lives. Changed lives flows from hearing the truth and responding with repentance and faith. All three elements are vital to a growing healthy expansion of the kingdom.
- Proclaiming Christ: Here we have another summary from Paul of his sense of personal mission. It is clear that he sees his own suffering as a direct continuation of Jesus' suffering and ongoing redemptive work in the world. Paul uses a phrase that might cause a question: "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions..." This may ask us wonder if Paul is suggesting that somehow Jesus' death wasn't sufficient to save humanity. I think this is stretching the idea Paul is trying to communicate. Paul is simply building on the notion of the church being the body of Christ and the role that the body has in aligning with Jesus' mission and sharing in Christ-like suffering as a part of fulfilling his purposes in the world. There is more work to be done, more suffering to be endured, and therefore we as the body of Christ continue to fill up what is still yet to be completed. Paul describes his personal mission as communicating the word of God, the mystery that is now revealed. The word of God is a common phrase to capture the notion of God speaking his heart to us in the most complete and life-changing way. Paul adds to this an idea that would have been common to the Gentiles, this idea of a divine mystery that is revealed. Many of the Roman religions boasted that they revealed spiritual mysteries. Paul makes it clear that the only really true mystery that has been revealed is that surprise, counter-intuitive revelation of the message of Jesus and his power to change us from the inside out. Paul uses the phrase, "Christ (anointed one) in you, the hope of glory." Christ or anointed one makes a connection between Jesus dwelling in a person's life and the Spirit (the anointing power of God). It is God's presence dwelling in us that gives us a secure and sure home of being finally fully transformed and living forever with God. Paul's reason for teaching everyone with all wisdom is to ensure that everyone grows into the very best version of themselves, perfect in

Christ or maybe better translated, complete in Christ. Paul knows that his ability to do this comes from God's power or energy working through him, particularly through his weakness (see 2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

- Concern for their faith: Here we see Paul's deep ownership for those within the communities he oversees. We see his parental heart shining through. He is worried about their emotional encouragement, unified relationships, and grounding in knowledge. Like any other parent, Paul's concerns are holistic. Everything we need is found in Christ and so Paul continues to point them to the storehouse of all of the wealth and security – Jesus! Paul also warns them about people who are going to deceive them with half-truths. He also uses the phrase again about being with them in spirit (1 Corinthians 5:3-4). Paul is not talking about his ghost going over to visit them but rather that through the Spirit he is receiving an understanding of how they are doing as a community. The Spirit is connecting his spirit with their spirits.
- Warning against false teachers: Paul now warns them about being deceived by the essence of religion, a hollow philosophy rooted in a human tradition and the basic principles of the world. A deeply rooted relationship with Jesus is the true safeguard against the lure of religion. We should remember there are many forms of religion – 1) legalistic, 2) ritualistic, 3) intellectual/philosophical, 4) national/political, 5) mystical/magical, and 6) individualistic/monastic. All of these offer us a human constructed system of salvation that are rooted in half-truths that appeal to our hope for a better life but then enslave us to empty systems that ultimately over-promise and never deliver.
- Christ is all sufficient: Here is a very powerful statement on the power and lordship of Jesus. Jesus is fully God. Jesus gives us the fullness of God when we are in him. He changes us from the inside out (image of having our hearts circumcised – permanently changed to remove sin and set us apart for God; also image of being given the resurrection power of Jesus through our identification with him in baptism). Jesus has triumphed over sin, over religion and over all the power of Satan. These are the three great evils that Jesus has complete authority over through his death and resurrection. The church has historically focused on sin and Satan but has failed to understand the evil of religion and Jesus' complete triumph over religion.
- Carnality and spirituality – Christ should be focus: Paul now outlines the basic attitudes and approaches of someone who is bound by religion. They are obsessed with judging others by externals, they worship the wrong things, they have a false humility that is rooted in a super-spirituality that subtly or not so subtly inflates their sense of spiritual superiority.
- Doctrines miss Spirit: Paul continues. The religious attitude and approach also includes a legalistic approach to righteousness that obsesses about following a code of rules. This often emphasized an externalized approach to the harsh treatment of the body and forced worship that looks good on the outside but does nothing to curb the true self-centered

drives of the human heart. It is all about trying to change yourself from the outside in and putting on a good appearance in front of people.

- To be spiritually minded: The answer to a religious approach to life change is simply taking a relational approach to Jesus. Just focus all of your attention, thoughts and needs on Jesus. Make Jesus the center of your life and allow his truth and what he says to you to become the entire focus of your thought life. This will help you renew your mind (develop new mental habits) as you live in intimate communion with him through the Spirit. This living in the Spirit and developing the mind of Christ is at the very heart of being changed from the inside out. As you do this, you can have complete confidence that when Jesus appears you will be so deeply rooted in and anchored in Christ it will be the natural next step for you to be completely enfolded in the complete glory of his transforming power.
- Lives to be transformed: Paul now moves on to the next step. As we focus on Christ, we then must partner with him to put an end to the sinful junk that messes up our lives and embrace his new approach to relationships and life. This means dealing with self-indulgence and its various expressions. It also means dealing with anger and its various manifestations. These are two of the most common malformed patterns of the self-centered human heart. It is critical we speak the truth (in love) as we actively put off our old habits and actively build new habits with Christ's help. There is another key to our inner transformation that we often forget. We must embrace unified community and allow the diversity within the body of Christ to help us experience the full measure of Christ.
- Putting on Christ: So what do we fill our lives with? First, love! This is a patient, forgiving, humble, gentle, compassionate, and unified love. Our experience of being forgiven by Jesus fuels our ability to forgive others, even our enemies. Second, peace. This is a peace that enables us to live in harmony with all people. Lastly, gratitude or thankfulness. This is a joyful, singing our praises, giving Jesus all the credit kind of thankfulness. We should not simply make our entire focus "not sinning!" Rather we need to push the junk out of our lives by filling ourselves up with the great stuff God has for us. Empty the container of your heart but fill it up with something better.
- Christ-likeness in relationships – in the family: Basically Paul says that every relationship in the family must find its inspiration and example in Jesus. Everyone serves everyone as they seek to emulate Jesus.
- Among slaves and masters – This is of particular importance as we will see in the accompanying letter of Philemon. Again for both masters who are in power and the slaves who are vulnerable, Jesus is to be our model. Jesus is both master and the one who became a slave to serve us. We must take all our cues from him on how to truly love and serve those over us and under us.
- Concluding thoughts – call for prayer: After all of his reminders and teaching around a changed life, he calls his readers to make prayer and communicating/communing with God central to everything they do. Prayer helps us stay thankful as well as spiritually attentive

(watchful) because we are reconnecting with God and just that process of turning our hearts to him to interact and listen gets us focused on the right things again. When we fail to pray and get too busy, it is easy to get frustrated and careless in how we treat others or how we remain focused on the life God has called us to. Prayer is also a key part of spiritually supporting others, particularly those in leadership. It is a mystery how God works through prayer but we do also see the way Paul felt deeply connected with people through prayer as he would talk about being with them in spirit. I think as we pray for people, the Spirit connects us with them and there is a kind of strength in unity that is accomplished through Spirit-led prayer.

- Words of caution: Paul also gives some great reminders about how to relate to spiritual seekers in our lives. Wisdom, maximizing each interaction, conversation that is gracious and brings out the best points (seasoned with salt), and humble answers to their questions – these all show how loving and other-centered we are to be as we see to be servants of Jesus. If Christ-followers treat others around them this way, we make the message of Jesus attractive to others. This goes directly against the pattern of preaching to seekers that is angry, judgmental, focuses on sin, and warns of impending hell fire. Paul teaches the exact opposite!
- Report to be given: Paul simply affirms here the role of Tychicus and Onesimus. We will learn more about Onesimus in the personal letter that accompanied Colossians. We also see modeled here the importance of relationship and spiritual leaders investing into spiritual community.
- Greetings among brethren: Aritarchus as we have mentioned was a well-known leader. Here we find out that Mark (or John Mark) was a cousin of Barnabas. It makes sense that Barnabas would stick with John Mark after his failure and continue to develop him as a leader. Paul's team consists of both Jews and Gentiles and Paul highlights this. Epaphras was well-known to the Colossians church and we see by Paul's report the kind of spiritual ownership Epaphras has for this church family. As Paul has modeled, Spirit led prayer by leaders is a key for a community to grow to maturity and complete the will of God. No doubt the prayer releases a greater work of the Spirit but I also believe it better aligns the heart of the leader who is praying so that he/she does a better job at leading under God's direction. Paul also mentions a female leader, Nympha, who apparently led a house church. The letter to Laodicea is most likely the letter to the Ephesians. Ephesians was a circular letter for that region and Laodicea was very close to Colosse. So Paul is simply encouraging them to share this letter with the other church and to read the other circular letter he was writing. If you read Colossians and Ephesians together you can see the obvious complimentary nature of the letters. Paul gives one final personal encouragement to Archippus. It is a reminder that when Jesus calls you to do something, he expects you to do it. His grace will be sufficient.
- Benediction: Paul now signs the letter in his own handwriting so that they know it is authentic from him, even though he had used a secretary. In his final words he communicates volumes. "Remember my chains. Grace be with you."

- Letter to Philemon: Philemon is an interesting letter within the New Testament library. It is a personal letter from Paul to a man named Philemon who apparently had a slave that stole some property, ran away and ended up meeting Paul in Rome. Paul led him to faith in Christ and sent this slave, Onesimus back to Philemon to reconcile their relationship. Onesimus's name means "useful" and Paul uses that as a mental hook in the letter. This is an interesting letter to study the ethics on personal relationships. It is interesting that Paul doesn't argue against slavery but argues for loving relationships within unjust societal structures. Paul taught openly that in Christ there is no slave or free social casts but also taught that people shouldn't live as rebels to society but look to live the new love ethic of Jesus within the society with a long term view of changing those unjust structures. The letter also reminds us of the sovereignty of God to work even through very broken situations to reach people who are running from him. Who would have guessed that the best thing for Philemon would be for his slave to run away to Rome so that he could run into Paul and be converted to faith in Christ?
- Salutation: We see here the familiar leaders all mentioned in this letter suggesting that this is a letter that is written not just to a person but actually to their home church. Paul is appealing directly to Philemon but indirectly to the Home Church to support this process of restoration and reconciliation. Healing relationships is usually best accomplished within community. People with broken relationships need support and that is a primary purpose of home church communities.
- Paul's love for Philemon: Paul begins by affirming him before his own group and affirming the value of sharing our faith with unbelievers. He is subtly laying the foundation to point out that God has actually used Paul to lead Onesimus to faith in Christ. Sharing our faith with others should be a top priority for all of us. Paul reminds his listeners that as we share our faith, our own faith becomes more well rounded as we tangibly experience the impact of Christ working through us and the power of his truth and love to transform a life.
- Appeal on behalf of Onesimus: Paul pulls out every possible reason why Philemon should listen to his request. Paul is not ordering him but appealing based on love. Paul is an old man now and Philemon should honor him for his age. Paul is in prison and so he deserves some honor for the cost he is paying for Christ. You can see Paul laying it on heavy and thick. He then points out that Onesimus (name means "useful") was useless to Philemon most likely because of his bad attitude. Now that he is a Christ-follower, he has become truly "useful". Paul continues to lay it on as he reminds Philemon of the sacrifice Paul is making by sending Onesimus back to him rather than keeping him to help out while Paul remains in chains. Paul again doesn't want to force the issue but wants Philemon to respond freely. Now although Paul is laying it on heavy for Philemon to receive Onesimus back, he is making sure that he is not trying to control Philemon. For true restoration to occur there must be freedom for the person who has been offended to decline the repentance. In Paul's own way he is modeling for us the love ethic of Jesus and servant leadership.

- Onesimus returning as a brother: Paul encourages Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ, as he would welcome Paul himself. We see that Paul again is encouraging us to transcend oppressive societal structures with the true loving relationships of the family of God.
- Offer to repay any loss: Paul keeps laying it on. He asks Philemon to charge any loss to his account rather than to Onesimus. Paul writes this in his own hand to ensure that Philemon knows that he will pay him back. Now Paul knows that Philemon won't demand Paul to pay him back because Paul actually led Philemon to faith in Christ it would appear. Fascinating how God used Paul to see this relationship fully restored.
- Paul's hope to see Philemon: Paul writes in faith that Philemon will do even more than he asks and that God will set him free soon so he can come stay with Philemon and catch up with him. One of the key aspects of leadership is to continue to call people to live lives of confident trust in God even as you trust that God will work through them in ways that go beyond what you might expect.
- Greetings and benediction: Paul and his team sign off and encourages Philemon and his home church to continue in the grace of Jesus that is key to reconciliation.