

Colossians 4:2-18 // Prayerfully Pursuing Christian Maturity

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[0 : 00] about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He's coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.

My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. You may have received instructions about him. If he comes to you, welcome him. Jesus, who is called Justice, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea and to Nympha and the church in her house. After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. Tell Archippus, see to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord. I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Well, thank you for reading Lamont, and a very good morning. As Robbie said, my name's Andrew. I'm one of the ministry trainees here at the church, and if, like me, your Bible has fallen shut, it will be a great help to us if we can keep that open at page 1184 this morning. We're finishing off today our series in Colossians, and as we look at our passage, you'll see that the NIV has imaginatively titled this Further Instructions and Final Greetings. Well, I hope that by the end of this morning we'll realize that there is something much more exciting, something much more important going on here than that, but let's pray together as we start. Heavenly Father, we praise you that in Jesus all things on earth and in heaven will come together, that as we look at him we see your will in action. So we pray that as we look at your life-giving, life-strengthening word together this morning, that you would help us to have big thoughts about what you have done, big thoughts about what you are doing, and big thoughts about what you will do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. I wonder if you think what the world would say makes somebody a really mature Christian, the kind of Christian that they want to have around. What would they say? Some might say, well, the kind of Christians we like are the ones who have realized that faith, a bit like politics, is just best kept to yourself. It's not really dinner table conversation. Others maybe would think of those people who say they're Christians, but really when it comes to the Bible, when it comes to Jesus, they say there's some helpful things in there, but actually look at all these other things that people have written, and why don't we put them all together? It's not the sole authority or the highest authority. I wonder if anyone in the world would say the mature Christians, the Christians we want, are people like Paul. We like people who follow in Paul's footsteps. I doubt it. It's long been the case that what the world really wants is Christians who just care a little bit less about Paul, Christians who care just a little bit less about Jesus. They don't want people like Paul. Even in Paul's own day, there were people who went around after him saying, you've just had Paul forget about Paul. You don't want Paul in your life. You don't want to be like him. But here at the end of Colossians, Paul finishes off his letter with his closing appeal that is just the opposite. What he says is, become mature Christians like me. That's what a mature Christian is. Throughout this letter that we've been looking at, Paul has been encouraging these Christians to keep on going, to put their roots down in Jesus, and to draw upon him despite much opposition from the world. Paul is, after all, in chains himself. He is in prison as he writes this letter. And as we've seen how Paul has painted the complete sufficiency of Christ,

and how that makes a new humanity, we've been urged to kill off the old, and to be the new us that we are in this new humanity through Christ. And now Paul gives us three ways that we can be mature Christians in Christ.

[5 : 10] He says, mature Christians prayerfully declare like Paul, develop like Paul, under Paul, and disciple like Paul. We'll take each of these in turn. They are in your handout. You should have gotten the way in on the back, if that's helpful to you to follow along. So firstly, mature Christians prayerfully declare like Paul, verses two to six. They declare their faith, their hope that they have in the Lord Jesus.

Verse two, we get our headline instruction for our passage. It says, devote yourself to prayer, being watchful and thankful. The Colossians need to be committed to prayer as they become mature Christians. It should be a regular part of their life. And in it, they should be watchful and thankful. Watchful that as they seek to grow, is they crave that growth that they've been wanting, and we've seen that. Watchful that they don't fall to the false teaching that says, well, you've got Jesus, and that's great at level one, but there's something more. Watchful that they don't succumb to that, but they stay rooted in Jesus. And thankful, thankful in the first place that they can be Christians, that they can have faith. That the work of Christ in bringing sinners to repentance, meaning they are accepted by faith alone, on the basis of grace alone, thankful for that. And these are things that Paul has done at the start of his letter already. Chapter one, verse three, we see that Paul says, we always thank God, the father of our Lord

Jesus Christ, when we pray for you. And verse nine, he says, for this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will. And that is a big call to action, isn't it? To be devoted to prayer. And I wonder if, as we read it, you noticed there were other ones as well in this passage. Big calls to actions.

Verse five says, make the most of every opportunity. Verse six, let your conversation always be full of grace. Again, in verse six, you may answer everyone. So what do we do with such commands? How do we respond to those? Well, it can be tempting to do a number of things, can't it?

Sometimes we say, well, this is just a Colossians thing, or this is just a Paul thing. We know that we're not Paul, so maybe that's just for him. It can be tempting as well to beat ourselves up and go, why am I such a pathetic Christian? If only I could make me be better, then maybe I could do that. Or we write it off as an exaggeration, completely undoable, and just move on and try to forget about it. But when we look at these calls to action in the context of the book, we see that Paul is not piling in on the Colossian Christians. He's not piling in saying, why aren't you better? Be better. No, he is saying, have you see what Christ has done for you? Do you see how you were accepted based on Christ alone? He has gone to great lengths to show that, how they don't need anything else. And this letter is an encouragement.

So don't hear these things and think, these are the measures or the standards I must meet to be accepted. It's just not true. Christ, we have everything already in him.

[8 : 29] And verse 3 says, pray for us too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Paul asks that they would pray for his work, pray for him as he preaches that God would not just open doors, but pave the way through the opening of the doors, that people would come to faith as he proclaims the mystery of Christ. The mystery of Christ, not something as we understand it, but the mystery of Christ is that through Jesus, the promises of God are brought together and fulfilled. How his work alone enables both Jew and Gentile to come back to their creator in relationship with him. Not a mystery in something that we don't understand or we don't comprehend, but the wonder, the awe at how God has made for himself the true people of God, that involves not just Jews, but people from every nation in right relationship with him.

The ongoing work of Jesus is he ties everything together, as we have seen, is nothing short of astounding. And Paul asks them to pray that he would proclaim it, declare it as such. Verse 4 says, pray that I might proclaim it clearly as I should, not cryptically, not in parables, not mysteriously, just a clear declaration of the work of Christ that is happening in this world and a call to respond in faith. And we see from the word should that Paul clearly feels he has a duty to do this, a responsibility to clearly proclaim Christ. And this is what Paul's told us already that he has been doing. In chapter 1, verse 28, as he defends his ministry, he says, he, that is Jesus, is the one that we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. This is what Paul has already been doing. And now he says to the Colossians, he says,

you have heard this message, you have accepted it, albeit not from my words initially. So now join with me, come on board, share in this work that you have accepted. Pray for it. Mature Christians prayerfully pray for Paul's declaration then, others people's declaration today. They join in with prayer in that work. And verses 5 and 6, they join in declaring themselves, just like Paul. Verse 5 says, be wise in the way you act towards outsiders. Make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. Be deliberate, thoughtful, intentional about how we act towards outsiders, non-Christians. Going and seeking opportunities to declare Christ. Perhaps it's an edge that often we lack as a church in Scotland. I wonder if sometimes we create this artificial barrier and we say we've got lots of things that we do in life that we do because we enjoy them. Hobbies, things we do, and I do this because that's my life and that's their meaning and this is good. But then almost carved off separately is this idea that we do this thing to witness to people. We say, I'm going to join this group, I'm going to join and do this sport or whatever it might be. And these will be my friends I seek to make Christ known to. But all the while keeping these over here, and that is a good thing to do, I am not criticizing that.

But as we grow in maturity, we see there is no divide. We see that mature Christians let the gospel permeate their whole lives and declare it in all of our lives. And as we grow to maturity in Christ, we grow in making our replies full of grace. Ones that whet the spiritual appetite of people who hear us, who draw them in, who say, I want to hear more. I want to hear more about this Jesus.

And we seek to do so responding the whole time to what God has done for us. Actively seeking to make Christ known, prayerfully depending on God's wisdom and help. Having the privilege of sharing in Christ's work that is sufficient. He has done it all. We need not try to make it so. He has done it all.

[12:54] And we respond to that. Well, secondly, then mature Christians prayerfully develop under Paul, verses 7 to 14. Paul is clearly concerned that the Colossians are brought up to speed on what exactly is going on with him. Three times in verses 7 to 9, he tells us why Tychius and Onesimus are coming and what they are to do, to update them on what's going on with Paul.

And the end of verse 8 tells us it so that their hearts will be encouraged. Paul is inviting them to join in his ministry. So as they learn of all that is happening with Paul, they can be encouraged in all that God is doing through him. They can see that even if it doesn't always look like it, God's plan is happening as Christ's work and word go out in power. And three times in this passage, we're reminded that Paul is in prison, that he is in chains as a result of the gospel. And you can imagine what people might say to the Christians in Colossae. They say, you want to get on board with this guy, this guy who's sitting in a Roman prison, all doing nothing, facing death. This is the guy you want to follow. He's come and said, you can only do it this way. You really think this is the only way that God's will can go out. How is that a good idea to believe? They might say the world would much prefer it if you could just be a little bit less exclusive about Jesus, a little bit less exclusive about things like Paul is. Why not actually? Just have Jesus, great. But also, have you thought about these really cool festivals and the synagogues and other worldly forest days?

Why don't you just have both? Why be so Paul about it? But we've seen through this whole letter that Paul says no. He says that being in Christ is everything. He is sufficient. He is enough. You do not need that stuff. That is not the will of God being carried out. Paul says, I am not worried about my chains. These guys I'm sending to you will tell you the good that is coming out of them. So let your heart be encouraged that while we often look around and other things look very impressive and much more powerful, be encouraged that we can have real confidence that the Lord is carrying out his work through Jesus and Paul-shaped ministry, no matter what the world might say. Verse 11, only Justice, Aristarchus, and Mark are on board from the Jewish circumcision group that have been causing so many problems in Colossae. Remember I mentioned there was a group that were going around after Paul saying, you've just heard from Paul, forget about him. That's the Jewish circumcision group. And there's these three guys who are on board from these false teachers. And for Paul, they are a comfort to him.

Elsewhere in the Bible, Paul laments the fact that so few Jewish people have come to faith, of people from his own heritage. But he takes heart in these three. So much of his ministry was him going from synagogue to synagogue to synagogue, clearly showing how Jesus fulfills all the Old Testament prophecies, all of God's promises, only for almost everybody there to reject him, often violently, and for him to be forced out of the synagogue to other people. And you can imagine that

at points he thought, how could this, that is Christ's ongoing work, be God's plan for the world, when so many of God's former people refused to accept it? Maybe it was those men, the faithful remnant who joined with him, that were of particular comfort to him at that time. And for us, don't we have times where we look and we wonder, is this really what God is doing in the world? Is this really the right thing to be so big on Jesus? I mean, there are so many other people out there doing so many other things that look so much better. Are we really right to be so big on Jesus is the only way? And it's in times like this where we need to pray the prayer of Epaphras in verse 12 for ourselves. Read from verse 12 with me. Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.

[17:17] I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Herapolis. Epaphras is always wrestling in prayer. He works hard for the Colossians. He is a bit of a legend, Epaphras. He works hard for people by praying for them. Isn't that a really interesting thought?

And we know that Epaphras is developing under Paul. He is like Paul in his prayerfulness, and he's joining in Paul's Christ-shaped ministry. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, Paul says, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. And do you see that that's everything that Paul has tried to accomplish through his letter to the Colossians? He wants them to stay rooted in Christ, built upon him. We've seen that God's will for the world is for everything to be reconciled under Christ through his work. That's what he's doing in the world.

And he's been at pains, Paul, to make sure the Colossians know that. For when you know God's will, isn't it so much easier to stand firm on it? You need clarity on what you're desperately holding on to, to be able to hold on to it as things seek to dislodge you amidst the storms of the world.

And so imagine that you're trying to avoid a tsunami that you know is coming. You're in a place you don't really know. It's pitch black, but you remember that you saw some trees a while back.

They looked like good trees. They looked quite climbable. And so as you desperately make your way there, you see some trees and you're there, but you don't really know how safe it is to go up.

[18:55] You don't really know what branches can bear your weight, what branches are true branches attached to the trunk. And what ones just look like it and will fall away when you boot any weight on them. Maybe they're just false branches. And the idea of what if I just go up a little further? What if I just edge out a little bit more? What if there's somewhere really safe for me to nestle in that isn't clinging to this massive tree trunk? Only if you go up or you go out and you boot a foot wrong, before you know it, that falls and it takes you with you. If only you had clarity on what you were trying to hold on to and where the safest place was to be. If only you prepared and were fully assured that what you were clinging on to is the right place to be. Now if I haven't utterly lost you, which by a lot of your faces looks very possible, what I'm trying to say is Paul and Epaphras are praying that the Colossians would ever know that tree better. That if the trunk is the will of God, they would know that and cling to it. They would have real clarity on what branches actually are attached to God's will. And what ones have either fallen away a long time ago and just look like they are. We're never attached in the first place. Real clarity on what God is and isn't doing in the world. So that as the wind and the waves come crashing and they seek to dislodge you from that tree, that you would know where to seek refuge. You would be fully assured that actually hugging this trunk is the best place. It's the only place to be. That it is where I am meant to be, because that is where God's will is being done in the world through Christ. And that is why I should stand firm upon. Real confidence in that. Deep, meaningful assurance that lets us stand firm.

No matter what, the wind and the waves of the culture crashing around seeking to dislodge us. My story looks to be true. We know that there is nothing worth moving away from Christ as God's will in the world. We are secure there. And it would be an awful thing to end up like Demas. We see in verse 14, we're told that Demas sends greetings like so many other heroes of the faith that we see in this letter.

And yet we know from 2 Timothy 4 verse 10, that the last we hear, Demas has wandered away from the faith. He has not stood firm. Paul writes to Timothy and 2 Timothy and says, Demas has deserted me because he loved the world. He's gone off. Perhaps he saw something that he thought was attached to the tree that maybe looked a bit safer, a bit more secure. Only to discover what looked to complement Jesus' work so well, what looked to be so firmly attached. Actually, when he put weight on it, it fell away and it took him with him. And so he went. It would be an awful thing to end up like Demas. But mature Christians who prayerfully develop under Paul, who pursue the

knowledge and the assurance of God's will, are equipped to stay faithful until the end. Faithful to the end no matter what false teachers say, no matter what things might look like. Standing firm, fully assured to reject the false teachers and stay in Christ. And then thirdly, mature Christians prayerfully disciple like Paul.

They develop under Paul. They are prayerfully declaring like Paul and they disciple like him. We've seen that Paul has invited them to join in with his ministry in witnessing to others. And now he invites them to join in in helping others grow. As part of the new humanity that we've seen, we see that Paul is set out in chapter three there to help each other come to full maturity, fully assured in God's will. In verse 15, Paul tells them to give his greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea and to Nympha and the church in her house.

[22 : 56] If greetings were simply, oh, say hi to them when you see them, it would be rather weird for Paul to put this in. Because the next verse tells us that he's written a letter to Laodicea too. I'm pretty sure he will have said hi to them in that letter. Instead, I think it's best to view this as the part of the wider push going on of join in my ministry. Paul says, as I have greeted you, greet the people in Laodicea, greet Nympha and the church in her house. Join with me. Paul tells them to make sure that the Laodicean church have the letter sent to the Colossians read to them too.

And this helps us see that while there are many specific Colossae issues in this letter, this letter was always meant to be read by Christians elsewhere. It's true that sometimes we have to work a bit harder to figure out exactly what's going on and how that comes to us.

But the brothers and sisters in Laodicea weren't in the exact same situation as the Colossians. But yet Paul is so determined that they make sure that it is read to them. And Paul's invite to the Colossians then is an invite to us to get involved in his ministry.

And just before Paul signs off, verse 17, he says, tell Archippus, see to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord. Now it's hard to know the exact tone of this message. It could be a pointed warning, a public thing to say, step back, Archippus. I know you're on the edge of going for that false teaching. Don't do it. Stay in Christ. Don't succumb to that. But equally, it could be one of encouragement. It could be, Archippus, I know you are beleaguered and weary by being smashed about by the wind and waves of this world. But my brother, it's not worth giving up. Keep on going. Keep on going. But I think either way, no matter what it is, if you're sitting in the Colossian church and you hear this letter, isn't what you think, Archippus seems to be in a bit of trouble.

I should really go and encourage him. I should get alongside him, help him to stand firm. Either way, that's what you're thinking. And that looks different for different people in the church in Colossae. For some who know him well, they go and they have deep and meaningful conversations with him. They try to get alongside him and speak the word and truth to him. For others, they might try to encourage him by deed. They bake a casserole and give it to him. I don't know, other things like that. But for many, the most appropriate thing to do is to help him by praying for him. To help him by praying for him is something that we can be quite slow to think really counts as real help.

[25 : 35] But for the church in Colossae, that is what they are to do. So going back to Epaphras in verse 12, going back to his prayer, what if we committed to praying that for each other?

What if we committed to pray big prayers for the long term, for those who we know, for each other in the church family? What if alongside our weekly prayer requests in our small groups or wherever else, we said, I'm going to work hard at praying big prayers for you.

We're going to work hard at praying that you will grow to maturity in Christ, that you will stand firm, that you will be fully assured in the will of God. What might happen in our church if we worked really hard at that?

What joyful fruit we might have in the new creation? So we see so many walking in. What if we joined with Paul in Epaphras in continually praying that each of us would take the message of Colossians to heart?

That as we move on to other sermon series, that we would not forget what we have learned through this book. To know that we need to keep on booting our roots down in Christ, growing in him, for he is all that we need.

[26 : 46] Or as I remember being taught growing up when we looked at Colossians, this really simple thing that Colossians says, Christ plus anything just equals nothing whatsoever. But Christ plus nothing equals absolutely everything.

It's a really simple way to remember that Christ is what we need. And do you see how this letter is bookended with grace? Verse 18, Paul signs off with, Grace be with you. And chapter 1, verse 2 started with, Grace and peace to you. All that Paul has called his readers to do is based on the foundation of grace. Grace and peace to you. The idea that God has given us everything that we need in Christ, not because we're good people, but out of his love and out of his kindness for us. And so we respond in accepting his invite to join in his kingdom work. Not because we need to, not because that is what gets us accepted, but out of a joyful, heartfelt response to all that he has done. Our time is gone. [27 : 51] Friends, Christ plus anything equals nothing. But Christ plus nothing equals absolutely everything. So keep putting your roots down in him. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we praise you that in Christ, we already have all that we need or could ever have. Help us to respond to your immeasurable grace shown to us by declaring, developing, and discipling together. Help us all to grow to be mature, prayerful Christians who are fully assured that your will is being done in the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.