

The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

Grateful to Labor Together

Colossians 4:7-15

Mark Vroegop

7 Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. 8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, 9 and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. 10 Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions— if he comes to you, welcome him), 11 and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. 12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. 13 For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. 14 Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. 15 Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house (Col 4:7-15).

Charles Shultz was the creator of the comic strip Peanuts, and a man who could provide insightful commentary on life through his characters. One particular comic strip includes a conversation with Charlie Brown and the ever-volatile Lucy. Charlie Brown is pleading with an apparently angry Lucy. He says, "Lucy, you must be more loving. The world needs love. Make the world a better place, Lucy, by loving someone else." The statement infuriates Lucy. "Look you blockhead," she screams, "I love mankind. Its people I can't stand."

I can imagine that a few times in your life you've found yourself agreeing with Lucy's view of life. People can really be challenging. And that doesn't change when you gather them together in a place called church. Ministry, by definition, is about people, and that makes it very interesting. I once heard Joe Stowell say that "ministry would be a cake-walk if it wasn't for people."

On the other hand ministry, in its finest moments, is about amazing people. Your life, like mine, is probably defined by the influence of certain people more than any other factor. Life on life is a powerful tool in God's hands. After all, God's intervention in our world was through the incarnation of Jesus. God became a human being (John 1:1-18). Further, when God gave gifts to the church he gave people – "he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers" (Eph 4:11). People are very useful to God.

Ministry involves people, and therefore there is great risk and great reward. As Paul begins to close the book of Colossians, he identifies some of the people who are with him. It is a

fascinating list – one that is filled with useful people, broken people, and disappointing people. I think that is beautiful.

Today I want to look at the unique categories of people in Paul's life, and ask ourselves what kind of people we really are – refreshing, recovering, or disappointing.

Resetting the Context

For months we have been deep into Paul's thinking and his teaching, and it is easy to forget what was going on behind the scenes when he was writing Colossians. A few key data points:

- He is writing from prison or house arrest in Rome (Acts 28)
- Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, and Philipians were likely written during this time
- He was addressing concerns that he had heard about the church in Colossae and several surrounding areas
- Paul is in the latter part of his ministry
- He will be released, writing 1 Timothy, Titus and rearrested, writing 2 Timothy

In verses 7-15 we find Paul wrapping up his thoughts and concluding with this personal section of meaningful people to himself and the church at Colossae. So this section is a personal window into the people who are important to Paul, and it is interesting to note the kinds of people who are with him.

Refreshing People

Paul had numerous companions in ministry throughout his lifetime. Probably the greatest among them was Timothy who he called "my true child in the faith" (1 Tim 1:2) and "my beloved child" (2 Tim 2:2). The list in Colossians includes the following notable people who appear very useful to Paul: Tychicus (v 7), Epaphras (v 12), Aristarchus (v 10), Justus (v 11), and Luke (14).

Here is what we see in the text and what know about them from other passages of the Bible:

Tychicus – He is the first person mentioned, and he is probably the most important because he was responsible to deliver the letter to the church at Colossae and the surrounding area. He was going to be the personal envoy of the apostle Paul to deliver the letter and inform them about Paul's status. Apparently he was also carrying the letter to the church at Ephesus because Ephesians 6:21-22 says this:

21 So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. 22 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts.

Tychicus was from the province of Asia, and he was apparently a man of spiritual influence in the churches of that region because he traveled as a delegate with Paul when he delivered the Jerusalem offering (see Acts 20:4 and 1 Cor 16:1-4). Paul refers to him as his messenger in 2 Tim 4:12 and Titus 3:12.

Verses 7-8 give us some critical information about him. Tychicus was 1) a beloved brother, 2) a faithful minister, and 3) a fellow servant. That's quite a list! "Brother" was a term indicating that they shared a common relationship with Jesus. He also calls him a minister (same word, diakonos, that we translate as deacon). Finally, he indicates that they are the co-slaves (sundoulos) of Christ. That is really a beautiful image: two brothers serving as co-slaves of Jesus. It doesn't get much better than that.

His role was to deliver the letter so that they could know how Paul was doing and to encourage their hearts. No doubt Paul knew that Tychicus' personal presence at Colossae would be helpful because he knew what Tychicus was like. Sending him was sending a gift of encouragement.

Certain people are like that, aren't they? Their mere presence in the room creates encouragement. It is not just that they are popular; it is that they, by their godliness, are refreshing to people.

Epaphras – He is not mentioned next but I list him next because of the glowing comments from Paul to the church about this man. He is mentioned twice in Colossians:

7 just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf 8 and has made known to us your love in the Spirit (Col 1:7-8).

12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. 13 For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis (Col 4:12-13).

Epaphras was the person who started the work in Colossae while Paul was in Ephesus, and he clearly has a heart for the church. Paul calls him 1) our beloved fellow servant (1:7), 2) a faithful minister of Christ (1:7), 3) one of you (4:12), 4) a servant of Christ Jesus (4:12), 5) a fervent prayer warrior, and 6) a hard worker (4:13). That is quite a combination.

But what impresses me most about this list is Paul's comment about his prayer life for the church. Epaphras was no longer on the ground in Colossae, but he was fervent in his ministry of prayer. Paul even uses the word "agonizomai" (you can hear the word agony), which means intense laboring or striving, to describe his prayer life. The content of his prayers involved a deep desire to see the church grow to maturity and that they will become everything that God wants them to be.

Oh for more Epaphras-like people in our day, the kind of people where physical distance doesn't negate a passion for the growth of their people. Oh for more people who work hard on the ground and on their knees, people who see the spiritual progress of others as a significant enough burden for agonizing prayer.

Justus and Aristarchus – Both are described as “men of the circumcision” (v 11) which means that they were both Jewish Christians. We know little of Justus other than he was part of Paul's inner circle during this time, and that he was a Jewish convert.

We know a bit more about Aristarchus. He was a Macedonian from Thessalonica (Acts 27:2) who was at Paul's side during the riots at Ephesus (Acts 19:29), and the ill-fated voyage to Rome that ended in a shipwreck (Acts 27:2-44). He traveled with Paul to Rome and was imprisoned with him there (Col 4:10).

Luke – He is called the beloved physician (v 14). He is the author of both the gospel that bears his name and the book of Acts (meant to be a two-volume work), and he was likely from the city of Antioch. He was a frequent traveling companion of Paul (thus Acts often says “we”), and he probably cared for Paul's physical needs. You need to remember that Paul's life was hard: forty lashes on five different occasions, beaten with rods three times, stoned, shipwrecked, sleepless nights, and suffering hunger and thirst (see 2 Cor 11:24-27). The companionship and the expertise of this man in Paul's life was probably enormous. In fact he was the lone companion near the end of Paul's life – “only Luke is with me” (2 Tim 4:11).

Tychicus, Epaphras, Justus, Aristarchus, and Luke. These men were enormously important to Paul. And I think that their admission here reminds us that ministry partnerships or doing ministry together, when it works, is a sweet thing. The reality is – we need each other. And there is something glorious about laboring together with refreshing people.

As I look at this list of men and think about refreshing people in my life, there are a few common characteristics. These are the things that make them uniquely helpful. Let me give you six characteristics:

- **Personal involvement** - refreshing people understand the value of life on life ministry. They see the need to get involved, offer help, bear the pain, and just be there. Simply stated, they don't let you walk alone.
- **Investment of time** – refreshing people give of themselves. They are willing to adjust their schedules, be inconvenienced, and change their plans.
- **Sacrifice for others** – they see the needs of people as worthy of costly sacrifice. Refreshing people value people, and they hardly even feel like they are sacrificing.
- **Whole-hearted effort** – refreshing people are “all-in”. They are committed and persevere.
- **Common passion** – they know that there is something really important on the line.

- **Faithfulness** – refreshing people don't quit, especially when things get tough. Difficulties only serve to strengthen their resolve.

Does that list look like you? Can anyone count on you to be a refreshment to them? I want to call you to see the valuable role of refreshment to others.

Recovering People

The second group of people that we find here were also useful to Paul, but they weren't always that way. In fact, there are two names that have quite a story – a painful history of bad decisions. One of the men had ended his recovery; the other was just beginning. I want you to hear about them so that you can know that broken people are still useful to God.

Mark – He is called the cousin of Barnabas, and he the former companion of Paul. About fourteen years earlier (Acts 13:13) he had lost face with Paul when he refused to go with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch in Pisidia. And it was over Mark that Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement causing them to go separate ways (Acts 15:39). Apparently, over time Mark had proven himself again, probably because of Barnabas' influence (called son of encouragement), and now he was useful to Paul again (2 Tim 4:11).

In fact, notice the passing comment in 4:10 – “concerning whom you have received instructions, if he comes to you – welcome him.” It may be that Paul's instructions were about the usefulness of this man. Even though he made what was likely a mistake in the past, God still used him.

Onesimus – We do not have sufficient time to tell the whole story about this man. He is the chief character behind the writing of the book of Philemon. Who was he? Well, he was a run-away slave who was probably guilty of stealing something from his master.

Philemon was Onesimus' master and part of the church at Colossae. Somehow Paul had met Onesimus, and the run-away slave was converted (see Philemon 8-15). Apparently Onesimus was a great help to Paul, but he needed to be sent back to Philemon to make things right.

So it is interesting in verse nine Paul says, “Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.” Onesimus was going to travel with Tychicus to Colossae, deliver the letter, and make things right with his owner.

I find it very promising to know that some of the people close to Paul had some baggage in their past. Mark made an immature decision, but he received a second chance. Onesimus had a pretty big skeleton in his closet from his past. And yet both men were a part of Paul's inner circle.

Everyone has a past. Every one of us have made decisions that we wish we could call a “do-over.” Some probably even have some really unfortunate things in their past. Everyone does. The beauty of the gospel is the fact that Jesus cancels the past and fills our future with hope. Here’s how Paul said it:

9 For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain (1 Cor 15:9-10).

So let me speak directly to those of you who feel like you in “recovery mode.” There are three things on my heart for you:

1. **Preach the gospel to your heart.** We all have pasts; we’ve all made mistakes. The hope of our lives is not perfection. It is the cross.
2. **Learn from the past and grow .** Don’t let the past bind you. Humbly, slowly, but definitely grow into maturity.
3. **Pray for eventual usefulness.** God may very well give you an opportunity to use the mistakes of the past. Pray that it will come, but be patient for his timing.

God uses broken, recovering people for his glory. So embrace the humility that imperfection brings and pray that God, in His time, will bring beauty from ashes (Isaiah 61:3).

Disappointing People

The final category includes one name – Demas. In Colossians we find him in 4:14 where Paul says, “Luke, the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.” Now that verse only tells us that Demas was with Paul. By itself there really is no significance to it.

But at the end of Paul’s life he writes 2 Timothy, a passionate and reflective letter as he thinks about the end of his life. And at the end of the letter he says this: “9 Do your best to come to me soon. 10 For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica” (2 Tim 4:9-10).

The verse is rather direct, isn’t it? Paul says two things about Demas: 1) he has deserted me, and 2) he is in love with this present world. You can almost hear the pain of the apostle Paul come through. Demas must have been a close companion, but he had forsaken Paul. We don’t know what happened but it appears that the trial just became too great. It looks as though Demas didn’t think suffering with Paul was worth it. In other words, he loved something more.

I find two things here:

1. **A Warning.** We all have potential to become like Demas. The fact that he's listed as a disciple in one book and a deserter in another should be a sober reminder of what can happen to any of us.
2. **An Encouragement.** Some of you have been betrayed, abandoned, and deserted. You are in great company. The Apostle Paul knew what it was like to face betrayal, and even our Lord knew it too.

To be betrayed or abandoned is one of the most painful things to experience. Therefore, we need to pray that we're never the cause and realize that even the greatest of saints (even God himself) experienced rejection.

Ministry is about people. Sometimes they are disappointing. Sometimes they are in recovering. And sometimes they are refreshing. Don't ever underestimate the power of being a refreshing person. Yes, people can be risky. But they can also be gloriously helpful – like an oasis in the desert of despair.

In 2004 when we discovered that our daughter had died in the womb, the doctor sent us to the hospital to induce delivery. Walking into the OB unit knowing that you are going to deliver a dead baby is traumatic beyond belief. The nurses ushered us to a specific room that was more private, and at the same time two of our pastors came out of the waiting room. They beat us to the hospital and held us outside the room as we wept together.

As I started to walk in the room, I noticed a particular card on the door. I knew the card from my chaplaincy training; it was a symbol to the staff that a still-birth was taking place. The sight of the card literally caused my knees to buckle. And the two other pastors literally caught me and lovingly carried me over the thresh-hold into the delivery room. Years of friendship, love, and ministry together expressed itself in a real and tangible way; they helped me step into the darkest room of my life.

That is what ministry is all about: doing life and ministry together.

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