

“Colossians”

Summer Series 1

Lesson 6

“Colossians 4:1-18”

Objective: To understand the message that Paul meant to convey to his audience and then to come to understand what that message means for us today as those living in the 21st century. We will seek to ascertain what this message means and to determine how we are intended to live our lives as those who are disciples of Christ in our modern context in light of the message it contains. We will place special emphasis on application.

Materials: I will begin by examining carefully the Greek text of Colossians, examine other early translations such as the Syriac Peshitta, and any other sources along with the historical setting of the first century Roman world that can help us to understand the original meaning. I will then examine early interpretations and understandings and examine commentaries and modern interpretations to enlighten our understanding for our contextual situation.

Procedures

- 1.** We will begin by translating the text from Greek into English. I do not here give you that full translation here, though there are excerpts.
- 2.** We will examine the contextual setting and seek to understand as much as we possibly can about the historical, cultural and social settings in order to understand the message Paul intended and that God still intends for us.
- 3.** From here, we will seek to find out how to best apply the calling that Paul has for the early disciples to our modern contextual framework in order to do our very best to live as disciples of Christ in our modern era.
- 4.** We will seek to understand the attitudes that we are called to have as disciples and to reflect not only the actions that are the calling of a disciple, but also to learn how to form our attitudes to reflect our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

Text

4:1 Masters, be just and fair to your slaves, knowing that you yourselves have a master in heaven. 4:2 Keep on praying and guard your prayers with thanksgiving. 3 At the same time, pray for us also. Pray that God would open a door for the word so we can preach the secret plan of Christ—which is why I’m in chains. 4 Pray that I might be able to make it as clear as I ought to when I preach. 5 Act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. 6 Your speech should always be gracious and sprinkled with insight so that you may know how to respond to every person. 4:7 Tychicus, our dearly loved brother, faithful minister, and fellow slave in the Lord, will inform you about everything that has happened to me. 8 This is why I sent him to you, so that you’ll know all about us and so he can encourage your hearts. 9 I sent him with Onesimus, our faithful and dearly loved brother, who is one of you. They will let you know about everything here. 4:10 Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, says hello to you. So does Mark, Barnabas’ cousin (you received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him). 11 Jesus, called Justus, also says hello. These are my only fellow workers for God’s kingdom who are Jewish converts. They have been an encouragement to me. 12 Epaphras, who is one of you, says hello. He’s a slave of Christ Jesus who always wrestles for you in prayers so that you will stand firm and be fully mature and complete in the entire will of

God. 13 I can vouch for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis. 14 Luke, the dearly loved physician, and Demas say hello. 4:15 Say hello to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, along with Nympha and the church that meets in her house. 16 After this letter has been read to you publicly, make sure that the church in Laodicea reads it and that you read the one from Laodicea. 17 And tell Archippus, “See to it that you complete the ministry that you received in the Lord.” 4:18 I, Paul, am writing this greeting personally. Remember that I’m in prison. Grace be with you. CEB.

Lesson

Chapter 4 actually ends the dialogue that Paul began in chapter 3. Here in verse 1 Paul deals with the common, in the ancient world, household issue, of slaves. Slavery was an especially important aspect of compulsory labor in the Roman Empire. About one-third of the Roman Empire's population were slaves. At one point in the history of Rome, most people became slaves through being captured in wars or through being kidnapped by pirates, but by the first century the vast majority of new slaves coming into the system were from those born to slave women. This prolific source of slaves was supplemented by those who sold themselves into slavery (often due to excessive debt), the sale of free-born children, the raising of foundlings and debt bondage. Slavery was practiced from ancient times by a whole variety of cultures, but the Greeks and Romans were two of only five societies in history that had a societal structure based upon a system of slavery.¹

Slavery was very much a part of households in Asia Minor. Depending upon whether the slaves were under Greek law, Roman

¹ S. Scott Bartchy, "Slavery (Greco-Roman), in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 65-73.

law, or Jewish law, their rights and status varied. Under Roman law slaves were primarily viewed as property, but at times they had some rights as human beings. Some people actually sold themselves into slavery. As was mentioned earlier, this was done at times because of debt but also at times in order to rise socially in the ranks. Generally, freed Roman slaves were granted citizenship in the empire, when their owner freed them. Sometimes people also sold themselves into slavery in order to obtain special jobs, and often to escape the pressures and strains of living as poor people. For instance someone who wanted to become City Treasurer would in many instances be required to sell himself into slavery to the city he chose to serve. Slaves were subject to corporal punishment at any time and in any place. Their bodies were considered the property of their masters and were generally regarded as sexually available without restriction.²

Paul will have been aware of all of the issues faced by slaves and he seeks to address them by making it clear that even the “masters” (κύριος - *kurios*) have a “master” (κύριος - *kurios*) in heaven. The implication being that slaves should be treated as they


² S. Scott Bartchy, “Slavery (Greco-Roman), in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 65-73.

would have their master, in heaven, treat them, with “justice”, with “mercy” and “fairly”.

Verse 2 – Paul broadens his instructions beyond the household arena to an arena of global reach. This new life in Christ is not something to be simply enjoyed for enjoyment’s sake. With privileges come responsibilities. A devotion to prayer is one of these responsibilities. The Colossian Christians are also called upon to keep alert. It is likely the case that this refers to the same thing in Colossians as it does in Matthew 26:41, where it means to “stay awake”, or “keep alert”. Combining these two commands with “thanksgiving” may suggest here a watchfulness and then thanksgiving for prayers when the answers appear. The church is to keep alert and watch out for a sleeping world, which is the object of God’s love (John 3:16), and they are also to pray especially for those who are Christians.³

Verses 3-4 – The emphasis now moves beyond the Colossian church to believers outside the local community. He not only asks them to direct their prayers in a certain direction, as far as people are concerned, he specifically directs them to focus on prayer toward the

³ N. T. Wright, Colossians and Philemon, in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries series (Downers Grove IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p. 155.



continuing proclamation of the gospel.⁴ So often it is the case that this part of spreading the gospel is forgotten. Hours and hours, and thousands of dollars are spent devising new strategies for spreading the gospel message, but without God opening the door success will be truly limited in a variety of ways. God is the source of any true success in spreading the Gospel message and without his intervention, methodology, and even content, will ultimately fail to achieve the true goal of God. This is something that must be understood and practiced. Some procedures, programs or hot speakers may provide temporary success, but only when God, and His Spirit are active will that results be of lasting and eternal value.

The mystery of Christ can truly only be comprehended by those who have had their eyes opened by God. No amount of explaining, packaging or fanfare can reveal this mystery; this revelation only comes through God. Paul also introduces, in this letter, a very

⁴ David W. Pao, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2012), pp. 291-292.

concrete example of what it means to suffer (1:24-2:5⁵). Paul's imprisonment comes about as the direct result of his proclamation of the Gospel. It is also noteworthy, that he is imprisoned when he takes on the mission to proclaim the Gospel among the Gentiles. It is because of this aspect of Paul's ministry that his own people, the Jews, seek his life. This should provide additional impetus for the Gentiles to carry on the spreading of the Gospel message to outsiders.⁶ Paul has risked alienation from his own people to bring them the Gospel message.

There is an emphasis that begins in verse 4 which will ultimately be pointedly stated in verse 5 about using time and opportunities wisely. The emphasis is upon the focus that a person has as they live their life. Enjoyment for the sake of enjoyment is not the goal here; the proclamation of the Gospel message is the point of

⁵ Now I'm happy to be suffering for you. I'm completing what is missing from Christ's sufferings with my own body. I'm doing this for the sake of his body, which is the church. 25 I became a servant of the church by God's commission, which was given to me for you, in order to complete God's word. 26 I'm completing it with a secret plan that has been hidden for ages and generations but which has now been revealed to his holy people. 27 God wanted to make the glorious riches of this secret plan known among the Gentiles, which is Christ living in you, the hope of glory. 28 This is what we preach as we warn and teach every person with all wisdom so that we might present each one mature in Christ. 29 I work hard and struggle for this goal with his energy, which works in me powerfully. 2:1 I want you to know how much I struggle for you, for those in Laodicea, and for all who haven't known me personally. 2 My goal is that their hearts would be encouraged and united together in love so that they might have all the riches of assurance that come with understanding, so that they might have the knowledge of the secret plane of God, namely Christ. 3 All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in him. 4 I'm telling you this so that no one deceives you with convincing arguments, 5 because even though I am absent physically, I'm with you in spirit. I'm happy to see the discipline and stability of your faith in Christ. CEB.

⁶ David W. Pao, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, p. 293.

emphasis, the point of life. There is also a call for them to pray that Paul will reveal this message clearly. Paul's goal is to be effective in what he does for the sake of the Kingdom of God and for the people he serves. "It is necessary" (*δεῖ - dei*) in other words he feels compelled, to to speak in a manner that is effective.⁷

Verse 5 – Though there is no formal connection between this verse and the verse that comes before it, there is a clear enough logical connection. Paul having asked that the Colossians be in prayer regarding his own evangelistic efforts he naturally now turns to focus on their efforts to outsiders. Some have thought that Paul was calling upon the Colossians to focus their efforts particularly on the false teachers here. This, however, is not likely correct here. The emphasis seems more widely focused on all those who could be classed as outsiders rather than upon a particular narrow group.⁸

⁷ cf. Jeremiah 20:8-13 - 8 Every time I open my mouth, I cry out and say, "Violence and destruction!" The LORD's word has brought me nothing but insult and injury, constantly. 9 I thought, I'll forget him; I'll no longer speak in his name. **But there's an intense fire in my heart, trapped in my bones. I'm drained trying to contain it; I'm unable to do it.** 10 I hear many whispering—"Panic Lurks Everywhere!—proclaim, yes, let's proclaim it ourselves!" All my friends are waiting for me to stumble: "Perhaps he can be enticed. Then we'll prevail against him and get our revenge on him!" 11 But the LORD is with me like a strong defender. Therefore, my oppressors will stumble and not prevail. They will be disgraced by their own failures. Their dishonor will never be forgotten. 12 The LORD of heavenly forces tests the righteous and discerns the heart and the mind. Let me see your retribution upon them, for I have committed my case to you. 13 Sing to the LORD, praise the LORD, for he has rescued the needy from the clutches of evildoers. CEB

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, in The Pillar New Testament Commentary series (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), pp. 326-327.

Though this verse is indeed a very short verse it is highly complex. It implies a great deal in its careful choice of words. The word translated as “conduct” is a word that can also mean to “live” or to “walk”. It is a word often associated with the entirety of the life lived before God as a “walk” before him. In this instance, Paul calls for this to be done with careful consideration using “wisdom”. The next clause uses a word that is only used four times in the New Testament and two of those four times it carries the meaning of to “buy out of”. This is the basic meaning of this compound word (*ἐξαγοράζομαι - exagoradzomai*). When combined with the word for time it means something like “to buy out the time” (*ἐξαγοράζομαι τὸν καιρὸν - exagoradzomai ton kairon*). At Galatians 3:13 it is translated “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law”. In Galatians 4:5 it once again means something similar to “redeem, or buy out from the law”.⁹

Some commentators think that the verb has a similar meaning not only here, but also in Ephesians 5:16. The idea in this verse is that Christ has bought humans out from their slavery to sin, so Christians perhaps need to “buy” time “out of” their captivity to sin and to Satan. The idea would then be that even time itself stands under the

⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 327-328.

domination of evil and needs to be redeemed, to be used for Kingdom purposes and with Kingdom goals in mind. Actually as sensible as this seems to us and maybe even this understanding appeals to us, there is actually no clear indication that this is the meaning here in Colossians. Indeed, it seems hard to conceive of something as inanimate as “time” being redeemed. The likely meaning is that Paul is encouraging the Colossians to “buy up” all the time available to us or to make the most of every opportunity, not to buy it back from Satan as the one who holds time in his custody. Time is short, and it should not be squandered on trivia, or on things that are not of kingdom value. The idea of wise living then is to use the time we have to the best effect for the kingdom of God.¹⁰

Verse 6 – This final exhortation explicitly envisages a church that is in communication with the world around them, not one that is cut off from communication with the world; one that is sequestered behind walls that are real or imagined. These Christians are not in a “holy huddle” speaking only church language to church people, about church things. They are engaged in conversation with those that are around them in such a way as to create and take advantage of opportunities to bear witness to the power of Christ in the lives of the

¹⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 327-329.

members of the church and those that one day may be members of the Church of Jesus Christ. “Let your word always be spoken with grace”.¹¹ What a challenge to us all. How easy it is for us to let our tongue slip and cause so much harm to those who are around us. Paul is concerned here with how this will affect the growth of the church. This is the primary motivation for holding a tight rein on the tongue.

Words “seasoned with salt”. Salt that makes things more interesting and not simply bland and tasteless (Job 6:6¹²; Mark 9:50¹³; Luke 14:34¹⁴). Timon (third century B.C.) calls the speech of the Academics “unsalted, insipid”, while Plutarch speaks of wit as the “tastiest condiment of all,” being called by some “graciousness”.¹⁵ The idea is the Christian is to be able to maintain interesting conversation with others, and not to be bland, uninteresting, or boring. Such conversations in the community would regularly present opportunities to present the Gospel message in a natural positive

¹¹ James D. G. Dunn, The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon, in The New International Greek Commentary series (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), pp. 266-267.

¹² **Is tasteless food eaten without salt, or does egg white have taste?** CEB.

¹³ **Salt is good; but if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? Maintain salt among yourselves and keep peace with each other.** CEB.

¹⁴ **“Salt is good. But if salt loses its flavor, how will it become salty again? ³⁵ It has no value, neither for the soil nor for the manure pile. People throw it away. Whoever has ears to hear should pay attention.”** CEB.

¹⁵ Moralia 514E-F, 685 A.

setting. Christians should be ready when these opportunities arise to give a good account of themselves and thus engender a positive attitude and a positive reception to the message of Christ.¹⁶

Verse 7 – As Paul begins his conclusion he indicates that Tychicus will deliver to them the news about him and his circumstances. The opportunity is taken to commend and build up this “beloved brother” and “faithful minister”. The word translated as minister here is the Greek word *διάκονος - diakonos*, which is where we get our English word “deacon”, it can also mean “minister”. We get a glimpse into the role of Tychicus as he is sent to Colossae as an emissary of Paul to deliver this letter. He is also charged with speaking of personal and Christian matters. Often the sender of the letter brought critical information to the receiver of a letter allowing them to better comprehend the message of the author. None of these titles by which Tychicus is designated indicate anything that is specific or that was only relevant to the Christian church as an official title to some kind of office. Tychicus is Paul’s minister, a role that is reflected in the qualification of Epaphras, which is substantially different from the role reflected by the phrase “in the Lord” attached to his title earlier in this letter. The word here has no ecclesiological

¹⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 266-267.

overtone, it merely reflects the task that Tychicus is performing for Paul.¹⁷ This word was not a church word of some great ecclesiastical significance. Paul's focus is upon the acts or actions of Tychicus.

Verse 8 – Paul sent Tychicus for the purpose of providing encouragement beyond what could be put in the letter and to inform them of how they are doing in their time of captivity. He is in effect, a living letter, that can convey more than can be put to pen and paper.

Verse 9 – He is coming to them traveling with Onesimus who was the runaway slave to whom the letter to Philemon was written. It is likely that Philemon was written about the same time as Colossians. Onesimus was already one of them, one of the Colossians, in the sense that he was a native of Colossae and is now more deeply one of them as a fellow Christian.¹⁸

Verse 10 – In this new subsection, Paul now provides greetings from those who are his co-workers in the Lord. Three types of greetings can be found among Hellenistic Papyri (Greek style Letters that were written upon papyri). Only the first type, which is relatively rare in papyri letters, is missing in this closing section. Paul uses the conventions and styles common to his time and culture. One of these

¹⁷ John J. Collins, *Diakonia Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 222-223, 226.

¹⁸ David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 311-312.

stylistic features is the direct greeting from the author to his audience. In Acts, Aristarchus is referred to as a Macedonian from Thessalonica (Acts 27:2). He is listed as the traveling companion of Paul on his third missionary journey. Aristarchus was with Paul during the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:12-41). The implication is that he is also imprisoned with Paul at this time, but this could be simply a metaphorical usage rather than a physical reality.¹⁹

Mark is listed with the sequence of the greeting being given with a reminder of instructions they have previously been given concerning Mark; they are to welcome him. It is not clear when these previous instructions were given. This note may hint at the fact that there are still lingering matters that yet need to be resolved in this community. The idea would then be that Mark will be coming to settle these unfinished matters.²⁰

Verse 11 – Next comes Jesus who is also called Justus, who is identified along with those previously mentioned as being the only ones from circumcision who are among the fellow workers of Paul. He indicates that these companions have been a comfort to him.

¹⁹ David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 312.

²⁰ David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 313.

Verse 12 – In this verse, Paul moves to Epaphras who is a Colossian and a “slave” (*δοῦλος - doulos*) of Christ Jesus. Paul indicates that he is always “wrestling” in prayer on their behalf. He indicates the nature of these prayers, which are for their maturity and for the assurance of God’s will being conducted in their lives. Paul speaks of Epaphras, “wrestling” in prayer for the Colossians. The word used here is where we get our English word “agony” (*ἀγωνιζόμενος - agonizomenos*). It has the meaning of “to strive”, “to fight,” or “to struggle”. This is not something that is passive, disinterested, or in any way easy and comfortable.

Verse 13 – Paul continues his testimony on behalf of Epaphras here indicating that he has worked hard, not only for the people of Colossae, but also on behalf of those of the other two cities in this area, Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Verse 14 – He now turns to greetings being sent on behalf of Luke and Demas. These two also appear to have been, still are with Paul.

Verse 15 – There is now a shift as Paul turns to personal greetings that he asks to be given to the church in Laodicea, and to a house church that meets in the house of Nympha.

Verse 16 – This letter is to be used as a circular in some way and to be read also in the church of the Laodiceans. There is also the indication of another letter from Laodicea, which is now lost to us.

Verse 17 – An admonition is added for Archippus to encourage him to complete the task that he has received in the Lord. We have no real idea of what this refers to here.

Verse 18 – As the bulk of this letter likely was written by a secretary Paul now writes this part in his own hand. He once again reminds them to remember his chains and leaves them with the blessing asking for grace to be with them.


As the letter began with so much that was of such a deep theological nature Paul has now concluded in such a way as to challenge the theology of the Christian life not to be something contained in the head, or simply to be studied in some cerebral fashion, but instructions and a way of life that are to be lived out in the real world among real people and demonstrating to the world the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God into the old and broken world. Paul seeks to give them some idea of what this new order will look like as people live out this new life while still being surrounded by so many of the trappings of the old, the decaying realm, that is being prepared for destruction and renewal.



Synopsis

This chapter begins with a continuation of instructions for how households should now conduct themselves and here the reference is to the treatment of slaves by their masters. Paul challenges masters to recognize that they too have a master to whom they will be called to give an account. He then moves onto describing what should be the things Christians devote themselves to, such as prayer, and specifically prayer for the door to be opened for Paul to be able to declare the word of God effectively and clearly. There is a call for wise conduct, particularly with outsiders and for efforts to use time and opportunities effectively for the progression of the Kingdom. There is also a call for them not to be boring and lacking in grace calling upon them to have a readiness to be able to give an answer to outsiders regarding their faith.

Paul then goes into a greeting and benediction that commends a number of people to them and continues a theme of encouragement. He specifically commends those who have labored in prayer on behalf of those at Colossae. He reminds some



of things they need to do for the Lord while asking for this letter to be read in Laodicea and for them to read the one sent to them.

In this letter as a whole Paul challenges his audience to have a different world-view; one that allows them to see the hand of God moving and transforming that world. Paul calls upon his readers to live in the context of that world, to make decisions that are based upon this understanding and this perception. They are to love their lives as devoted followers of Jesus and as agents of God's continuing actions that are transforming the old, broken world into the new world of God's Kingdom.

Main Points

- A command for masters to treat their slaves fairly.
 - A command to devote themselves to prayer.
 - A command to conduct themselves wisely among outsiders.
 - A command to be wise in their use of time.
 - A command to speak graciously and with an interesting flair, and not to be boring and uninteresting.
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Questions

1. Why do you think God does not seek to abolish slavery in the New Testament?
2. What do you think it would be like if you had been born a slave?
3. What does it mean for us to recognize that we have a master in heaven?
4. What does it mean to be devoted to prayer? What are some ways that you seek to live this out in your life?
5. What are some ways that you give thanksgiving to God?
6. How do you think “thanksgiving” guards your prayers?
7. What do you think wise conduct before outsiders actually looks like?
8. What does unwise conduct before outsiders look like?
9. What is gracious speech?
10. How can you season your speech with salt? Does it mean using “salty” language?
11. Why are you a follower of Christ?
12. What are some instances or who are some people that you have “wrestled” in prayer for?
13. Who has been the most influential person in your walk with Christ? Why do you think this is true?
14. What are some risks that you have taken for the cause of Christ?

15. Why do you think Paul asks the Colossians to remember his chains?

16. What do you most remember about our study of Colossians?

17. How would you summarize the message of Colossians in one sentence?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that we will be called to give an account for the things we say, the things we do, and even the things we think. Sometimes people live without being cognizant of this reality. It is interesting that many people do not want to be recorded on camera, and yet, in the Bible the indications are that we are going to be held responsible for all of our life choices. What are some ways that being cognizant of this might change your actions, your thoughts, and how you treat others?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words of Paul seeking relationship and fellowship with His children. Paul seeks to promote behaviors and attitudes that will help improve relationships within the church and challenge people to be continually seeking to promote the cause of the Kingdom. He seeks to be encouraging while at the same time challenging his audience with the reality of the rule and reign of Christ. What are some ways that the rule and reign of Christ forms your thoughts about life choices?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

A huge part of what Paul hopes to accomplish with his words to the people addressed by his letter is that they will make better, more kingdom-informed, choices in their daily life. He also challenges them to be a thankful people that are devoted to prayer. He seeks to cement their relationships with one another, but even more their relationship with God. What are some ways that you strive to have a better relationship with God in your life?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

God is calling His followers to be Kingdom people. That is, people that live in the reality of God's in-breaking power which is actively transforming our present reality day by day, inch by inch, and moment by moment. Paul seeks to open the eyes of his audience to enable them to live as God has called them to live and to live in relationship with their God and with one another. What are some ways that you feel God calling you to live your life today?