Grace that Makes Us a People
Colossians 4:7-18

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October 25, 2026

Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here, and friends, it is good to be with you. If you are a guest or a visitor, we're especially glad that you would join us this morning, and we are finishing up this morning, actually, our series in the book of Colossians. So we're going to be wrapping up our series in Colossians, and next week we'll be turning to a minor prophet in the Old Testament for a few weeks before Advent, but this morning we're in Colossians 4, so if you have a Bible, you can turn to Colossians 4. If you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the chairs in front of you, and we also project the passage on the screen, and if you came here this morning and you don't have a Bible and you would like one, we would love for you to take that Bible in the chair with you today. That's our gift to you. We would love for you to have that.

But as we look at the end of Colossians 4, if you're familiar with the New Testament, particularly the letters of Paul or John or Peter, then the end of Colossians won't be very surprising to you, because at the end, we have a farewell. We have final remarks. Paul's going to name people that have been laboring alongside him, have been working with him for the advancement of the gospel. He's wrapping things up. But if you're not familiar with the New Testament and the various writings that we encounter in the New Testament, then it might be surprising that we have this list of names in the way that Paul concludes the letter, because for many people, we think of the Bible as simply a collection of theological treatises. And so when we come to passages like this, it might seem odd, because we're expecting sort of like a systematic theology textbook, and that's not what we're getting. Because that's actually not what the Bible is, right? In the New Testament particularly, much of the New Testament are letters, letters written by particular people like Peter and John and Paul. They're not simply theological abstractions that are cast out into the ether. No, they're letters addressing particular issues written to particular people by an actual person. And that's what these farewell remarks in these letters often remind me of, that we're reading someone else's mail, right? A personal letter that he wrote to people that he has connection to, relationship with, and he's dealing with actual issues.

And so these verses, they're not throw away. I imagine that for some of us, I won't ask for a show of hands, but I imagine for some of us as we go through our Bible reading plans, if you do that sort of thing, when you come to these portions, you kind of look at and go, okay, first Thessalonians, let's move on, right? We skip over the passages that have lots of names and names that are hard to understand and names that we don't know anything about. And I understand that. I resonate. I tend to move through these a little quicker than other passages. However, this is God's word. It's all God's word, even these portions. And so it's good for us to take a few minutes and to glean from this what Paul was saying about these people and what he was saying to them and what they were called to do and what he's saying to us, who we are and what we're called to do. So with that in mind, let's read Colossians 4, beginning in verse 7. Paul writes,

> “Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, 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.
> 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), 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. 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. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord." I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you."

This is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word and ask that you would help us. Father, we need your help. Apart from your Spirit's work, we would remain blind to your truth. We'd remain hardened to your grace. We would turn our attention away from your kindness. And so we pray, Father, that you would open our eyes, unplug our ears, and soften our hearts. We ask that you would be with me so that my words would be clear and full of truth, and that you would be with all of us so that we would be attentive to your grace. And we pray all this in Christ's name. Amen.

One of my favorite all-time television shows is the fictitious political drama, *The West Wing*. Kat and I have watched *The West Wing* through maybe five, six, I don't know how many times. It's a lot. It seems like we go through it every few years. And I love *The West Wing*. It's the story of President Bartlett and the people that are surrounding him in the West Wing, the different directors, the different vice presidents, all these sorts of people. And one of the characters in *The West Wing* is a man named Tobey Ziegler. Tobey Ziegler is the communications director for the president. And Tobey Ziegler is a very gruff man. He's not warm. He's not fuzzy. He's not loving. He's full of truth and firmness. And he's usually the smartest man in the room. And he wants everyone to know he's the smartest man in the room. And so he flies off the handle. He gets angry. He berates people who disagree with him. And in season 3 of *The West Wing*, there's a scene, an episode, where a leak has occurred. And it's going out to the press. And it's going to be very embarrassing. And the leak came from the communications team, the people under Tobey Ziegler. And so Tobey calls all his writing staff to him. And they're sitting in a room. And he's about to confront them. And the television camera pans to the young writers. And they're nervous. They're scared. They're ready to be berated by their director. And it turns to Tobey. And he looks up and very calmly says, "We're a group. We're a team. We win together. We lose together. We celebrate and mourn together. And defeats are softened and victories sweetened because we did them together. An item will appear in the paper tomorrow. And it'll be embarrassing to me and embarrassing to the president. I'm not going to have a witch hunt. I'm not going to huff and puff. I'm not going to take anyone's head off. I'm simply going to say this. You're my guys. And I'm yours. And there's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

I love this scene because this man who is oftentimes out on his own, oftentimes doing whatever he wants to do, oftentimes full of anger, sees people in front of him. And he says, “You are my people. We are together. Then no matter what you have done or what you will do, I am with you and you are with me. You're my people.” I love that. I love that. You're my people.

His People

That is basically what Paul has been saying throughout Colossians, right? We've heard it time and again, right? He talked early on about how we are united to Jesus, that his death and resurrection have been applied to us. So what is true of him is true of us. But then he went on and said, because we're united to Christ, we're united to one another. We're united together. He has been saying to the Colossians, you are my people. And he's saying it one more time in this passage. He's saying it one more time. These are his people, not just the Colossians, but those who are laboring with him, who are working hard for the advancement of the gospel. There's a lot going on at the end of this letter that we don't know anything about. There are names that are unfamiliar, backgrounds that are lost to us. But what is clear when we read these few verses is that when Paul talks about the Colossians and he talks about the people that are with him, he has deep affection for them. Deep affection because they're his people.

Did you see the language Paul used? Three times he uses the word beloved. Tychicus and Onesimus, they're beloved brothers. Luke is the beloved physician. They're beloved by Paul. He has deep affection for them. And he has affection for them, but not just this warm affirmation, but he also commends them for their labors, for their work. Did you see what he said? Tychicus is a faithful minister. Epaphras is struggling in prayer for the Colossian church. Nympha, she has opened her home for the church to meet there. She is practicing hospitality. You see, Paul looks at them and he sees the blessing that they are, not just to him, but to the church broadly. He sees the blessing. He affirms who they are, how they labor and give of themselves. They are his people.

But really, this affection that Paul has for them, this appreciation, this affirmation, it's not because they simply have affinity for one another. It's not simply because they're laboring in the same place or for the same mission or for the same purpose. No. Ultimately, Paul has this affection for them because they're not just his people, but more importantly, they're God's people. Paul's appreciation for them is birthed out of the fact that they are part of the family of God. We know that because he calls them brother. He's calling them sisters, right? There is a bond that is deeper than affinity, that is greater than appreciation. You see, Paul is telling us that the church is the spiritual family of God. Now, that's no something that's new to many of us. We've heard that before.

Unexpected People

But what's remarkable to me when I look at this passage is to consider who these people are, that who the people that are part of this spiritual family are is they're the unexpected people. They're unexpected. We can't go through every name and, you know, talk about great detail about them because the truth is we don't know much about them. In fact, we know almost nothing about some of them. And that's what actually makes them so unexpected, that they're unknown. They're unknown. And I kind of love this. I love that the Bible is filled with names of people that the Lord knows that we don't. That they're unknown to us, right? They're real people, right? Like Nympha. All we know about Nympha was she opened her home and that's where the church met. The house church is at her house. Or Jesus, who's called Justice. This

is the only time we hear about him. And all we know is his name was Jesus. And so not to confuse him with the Lord, they gave him a nickname. And that's it. We don't know what he did. We don't know what he looked like. But his name was Jesus called Justice. And I love this because they didn't do anything. They didn't say anything that is remembered throughout history and yet they're remembered here.

Now listen, I know that when we read the Bible we come across people like Paul and Peter and John or Old Testament heroes like David and Moses and Abraham and we think of their accomplishments and we read their sermons and we look at their lives and we hear of their faith and the hope that they had. And we think maybe our lives should be as remarkable as theirs. And yet, for the vast majority of the church and for the vast majority of church history, the church is filled with people like Nympha and Jesus called Justice. And people like you and me. People that people won't remember. And that's okay. They were people who lived simple, faithful, very normal, and very ordinary Christian lives. And there's beauty in that. The pastor Kent Hughes, he said there is greatness in the smallest things done for Christ. The smallest things that maybe no one else sees. And that's encouraging to me because that's us. Most of us.

Probably all of us will be forgotten within a couple generations. But who we are and our value and our worth and our personhood, those things aren't determined by whether we're remembered or not by people who come after us. No, what determines our worth and our value, our personhood, is that we're remembered by the Lord. That we are brought into his family. We hear names like Nympha and Archippus, but there are others that we've never heard of, right? Like the church of the Laodiceans. Paul says, go talk to them, send them the letter, make sure to read it. Who were they? I don't know. I don't know who they were. Like, who was their pastor? Who was the woman opening her home for them to meet? Who were the people advancing the gospel in that place? We don't know. And that's beautiful. Unknown people, like you and like me, but known by the Lord.

Now, that's the first thing that makes these people unexpected, that they're unknown. But it's not just that they're unknown that makes them unexpected, it's also what we do know about them that makes them an unexpected people. Because they're actually very different kinds of people. See, the church is made up of people that we, that the world that we would maybe never expect would be together. Do you see it as Paul names them? He says of Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus called Justice in verse 11. He says, “these are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God.” Now, when he says the men of the circumcision, he's simply referencing, he's meaning that they're ethnically Jewish. And so, if these are the only ones who are ethnically Jewish, the implication is that all the other people he talks about, like Epaphras, Luke, and the others, weren't. And yet, here they are laboring side by side. Jews and Gentiles, right? I mean, for us, like, we've heard that, right? We put those two words together so easily in our day. Jews and Gentiles, living together, working together, laboring together. But that was remarkable. These were people who despised one another, who didn't talk to one another, who had different religious traditions, who hated one another. And yet, here they are, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, people of different ethnicities and different backgrounds and religious traditions together. Living in the same community, working alongside one another, calling each other brother and sister, sharing the same spiritual family name.

But it's not just different ethnicities that are brought together, but people are reunited after difficult pasts. Did you see it in verse 10? Paul says, “Mark, the cousin of Barnabas

concerning whom you have received instructions, if he comes to you, welcome him." Now, Mark and Barnabas, those are two people that we know something about. Because in the book of Acts, they show up. So, Mark and Barnabas, they were two of the men who were going with Paul on his missionary journeys that are depicted in Acts, right? So, Jesus, he ascends into heaven, he sends the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the church starts to spread, and it takes off, and Paul is taking the gospel to all these places. And Barnabas and Mark were with him, until they weren't. Because you remember, Mark went home. We don't know why he went home. Maybe his wife was sick. Maybe he had to, like, you know, a child was acting up. We don't know what was going on, but he went home. He departed. But then he wanted to come back. And so, Barnabas is ready to receive him. Let's keep going. Let's be, you know, let's go out onto the and Paul was adamantly opposed to it.

And so, Acts tells us, but now, Paul says, "when Mark comes to you, he doesn't say shun him." He doesn't say, that guy who departed from me, keep him out. He says, welcome him. Now, we don't know what happened. We don't know the details. We don't know the conversation. But clearly, whatever disagreement they had, it has been resolved. That there's been repentance, probably on Mark's part, probably on Paul's part, probably Barnabas, right? There's been repentance, and there's been forgiveness, and there's been restoration, so that where there was once grievance, there is now welcome. In fact, Paul goes on, and he says that they have become a comfort to me. Someone that he was angry with, someone that he fled from, right now is a comfort to him. That's beautiful. I mean, do you see what's happening? The ethnicity, and history, and language, and tradition, and relational hardship, those things that would normally divide, those things that would keep people apart, yet here there is fellowship, and community, and belonging, because God's grace transcends those things that would divide.

We read about this throughout the New Testament, but all we have to do is look around, and we can see this. We can see it right here, this morning, as we have people of different ethnicities, and races, people who are black, and white, Asian, and Hispanic, people from different parts of the world, from Europe, and the Middle East, and strange, and exotic places like Canada. We have different political persuasions, and different paths. We have some people who have been part of the church all their lives. They can't remember not being in church, and we have others who just came to faith in the last few months. We have people whose histories are marked by morality, and goodness, and others whose histories are filled with hedonism. Different educations, different economic standing, different social backgrounds, all these things that would normally divide us, that would normally keep us apart, that would normally separate us, and yet here we are, worshiping people, brothers and sisters, members of the household of faith formed by the grace of God. The grace of God in Jesus, that's what transcends differences and unites us around the Lord. And what's amazing about this is that when this unexpected group of people are united together, it not only is evidence of God's grace now, but it is a foretaste, it is a picture, it is a sample of God's grace in the future, of what will be.

One theologian said that "the vocation of the church is the call to live as the small working model of the new creation." The new creation that's ushered in by Jesus, that is consummated when he returns. This new creation, we know what it will be marked by, no more tears, no more disease, no more death, no more division, no more anger, but we also know what else it will be marked by, that every tribe, and tongue, and people, and every person who has been transformed by the grace of God will stand together in praise of Jesus as his people, united together by God's grace. Friends, that only happens by God's grace. It is only his grace that we are made into this new people. Paul ends his letter, "grace be with you."

Grace. We've heard about grace throughout this letter, right? Grace that transforms sinners into saints. Grace that takes people who despise one another and makes us brothers and sisters. Grace that heals past pain and does away with deep-seated grudges. Grace that takes unexpected, unknown, forgotten people, people who differ and make us God's people. Toby told his staffers, you're my people, but they were united around a president, around politics, around a career or job. But y'all, that kind of union is weak. It will fracture and it will fade. But the people of God, those united together because of Christ, my friends, you're my people, and I'm yours because we are God's people. The grace of God be with you. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you. Thank you for your Word. Thank you for your truth that unites us in grace because of our Lord Jesus. And so I pray, Father, that that is what we would look to. That we would look beyond difference. We would look beyond those things that would separate. And instead, we would cling to Christ, the one we have been united to. And we would hold fast to one another because you have united us together. You have done this in grace. And so help your church be a model before the world of what this looks like. Help us be a foretaste of that future day when every tribe and tongue and nation will stand before you and declare that you are our God and we are your people. And we pray all this in Christ's name. And God's people said together, Amen.