

We are now nearing the end of this letter to the Colossian church. Having contradicted the false teaching that we something more than the imputed righteousness of Jesus, that we must add things to him, such as our own achievements or lawful living, or that it is up to us to release the power of God through some incantation or ritual or religious practice, the apostle displayed the absolute supremacy of Christ Jesus above all things, so powerful, being fully God and fully man, that He alone bridges the relational gap between the holy God and sinful men. It is in Christ, and Him only, and Him alone, by which we are brought out of a relationship of animosity with God and into a friendship with God. By being united to Christ Jesus, being wed to Him, bound to Him, included “in Him”, we gain the identity of those belonging to God, and receive a place of belonging within His own household, not merely as friends, but as sons and daughters.

This is the good news. This is the sufficiency and supremacy of Jesus Christ. Nothing else will suffice. Nothing else can be added to make Him better, or more powerful, or more complete, or more active. God is sovereign and good, and His work is not contingent upon our work, but is wholly sourced in His own love, His own will, His own wisdom, and His own affections. This sovereign love is exemplified in the gift of His Son “for us” while we were still enemies and haters of him.

Therefore, we are to fix our eyes upon Him, to see His works as completed on our behalf, to honor Him as the one worthy of our adoration, of our obedience, of our trust. And, seeing these things, we are to lay aside the old clothing of our old lives, when we were enemies of God, and instead dress in our new clothes befitting the family of God to whom we now belong because we are on His Son’s arm. We are to dress in the affections and the behaviors and the speech which Jesus, Himself, displays. Such changed hearts, changed values, changed words and works, should permeate our entire lives, altering the way that we view and appreciate and value everything, even into our very household relationships.

And now, having shown the foundational truth of the gospel underneath everything, and showing the logical connection of how it should alter our entire living and how

we relate to everything, particularly power, sex, control, and comfort, he now begins to close up the letter with the mention of several fellow workers in the gospel ministry.

In a way, these following verses, to the close of the book, are the envelope of the letter. But, they are written upon, front and back, and rather than teach directly the gospel truth, they exemplify through these men and women mentioned, that very gospel truth that since Jesus is sufficient, and we are bound to Him by faith alone and nothing else, then the result is gospel equality between people of varying classes, varying ethnicities, varying moral histories, and the like. God's people come from everywhere, and their common trait is faithfulness and belovedness.

So, I want to begin by looking at a few principles of what faithfulness in a servant of the Lord looks like.

First, faithfulness is necessary for a servant to be entrusted with the gospel and the care of the beloved Church, since it belongs to Jesus.

What is faithfulness? Faithfulness is trustworthiness. It is that character, proven by consistent attendance, of true, honest, and capable nature, able to complete the assignment which was been given to him or her by the master, for the reasons which the master has assigned it, and done in the ways and means which the master has required.

In short, it is simply being trustworthy to do God's commands, for God's reasons, by God's means.

And this is the characteristic which Paul as chosen to declare concerning his fellow workers. The first two men which he addresses to the Colossians are Tychicus and Onesimus. They are both described as "faithful".

We will begin by looking at Tychicus. Paul describes him as a "beloved brother". This is no surprise, because this is not the first time that we see Tychicus in the New Testament. His faithful brotherhood to Paul was evident in the fact that he always seemed to be near to Paul when Paul was in trouble. He is said to be Asian, along with Trophimus in Acts 20, and was probably with Paul when he was arrested in

Jerusalem. Here he is now, when Paul is imprisoned in Rome, close by and attending his friend. He always seems to be around. When Paul sends for Timothy to visit him from Ephesus, he sends Tychicus to replace him as pastor there. That means that Tychicus was with Paul. He does the same when Paul needs Titus. Tychicus is there to be sent to replace Titus as pastor as well. The man is a brother, and deeply loved by Paul and others in the church.

He is also described as a faithful servant. He has proved himself faithful to the Lord's mission, giving his life and resources away time and again for the furtherance of the gospel of Jesus and the building up of others. He is called the servant of the Lord, here. This word, servant, is the word from which we derive the office "deacon." It means a table-servant, a waiter, so to speak. It is not the word for "slave". He is naturally a servant, a person who wants to help others get what they need and have what they need. He desires to please the Lord more than men, trustworthy, holding the same firm passion for the glory of Christ in the churches, so that he is the one who is sent to deliver this letter with words of encouragement and love and who is capable of clarifying any questions concerning the gospel, concerning the condition of Paul's case before Caesar and the like. He is a competent leader, a courageous traveler, and a faithful servant.

Yet, Paul calls him something which he does not call Onesimus. He says that Tychicus is a "fellow-slave" in the Lord. First, he uses the word "fellow" or "co-slave", indicating that Paul and Tychicus are of equal status in the Lord. There is no authority/submission relationship here, only co-equals in the gospel ministry. Though Paul has been called by the Lord to take the gospel to the Gentiles, to present it to kings and magistrates and powerful people, he does not consider himself indispensable to the Lord, nor to be of greater consequence to the Kingdom of God than he does Tychicus. Both he and Tychicus are slaves of the Lord. They are not their own masters doing their own bidding. They are bound to Christ like a slave to a master. Christ is a good master, who laid down his life for his slaves, but he is the master. Tychicus knows this, and faithfulness to the Lord depends upon such a view.

Now, Onesimus is not called a “fellow-slave”. Why not? Was he less faithful? Was he somehow more free to do whatever he wanted? Of course not! However, Onesimus was an earthly slave of an earthly master, named Philemon. He has experienced the shame of being owned by another human being, whatever the circumstances of his slavery were. His identity is, most likely, very difficult for him to grasp. Therefore, Paul steers clear of using slavery language for Onesimus in order to emphasize his equality, his faithfulness *as a brother*, and that he is dearly loved by the rest. In fact, you see this very same emphasis in Paul’s letter to Onesimus’ earthly master, who is also a Christian, in the letter addressed to him, Philemon. In it, Paul emphasizes both this love and this brotherhood status, seeking to honor and elevate Onesimus’ status to his master.

READ PHILEMON – In v10 Paul calls Onesimus “my child”, and tells Philemon that “though he was not useful to you once, he is useful to you and to me now” (v11), and that Onesimus “serves me for the sake of the gospel in my imprisonment.” Finally, the blow fatal to the inequality of honor inherent in their previous master/slave relationship, Paul states that Onesimus is “more than a slave, a beloved brother, and more so to you now.” (v16)

Now, consider what Onesimus’ history is up to this point. It is clear that he was deemed “useless” to his master, a runaway slave who had, illegally according to Roman law, escaped and fled his master, and who clearly was treated as “less than a brother” in his previous experience. Now, consider that Onesimus is the one travelling back to Colossae, to his old slavery town, to the church where his master is connected, to deliver this letter. What risks did he take? What fear might he have felt? What courage is in this man? This is faithfulness to the Lord’s mission! The very fact that Onesimus returns to Colossae is evidence that he values the things of God more than the physical freedoms of this world!

Faithful servants set the things of Christ as more worthy of our lives than the things of the earth. Tychicus and Onesimus are fellows in this Christ-exalting and Church-edifying work with the apostle Paul, faithful brothers and fellow workers.

The second principle that we see is that faithfulness can come from anyone of any background.

We see a free man and a slave, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, each participating in and being called co-equal partners with Paul. Look at these: Tychicus was a courageous Asian, a man so capable and courageous and trustworthy, so intellectually gifted and relationally competent and wise that Paul sent him to replace both Timothy and Titus over the large church in Ephesus. He is an example of a competent, capable, courageous leader who was instantly respected because of his giftedness.

Onesimus was a runaway slave. Though now a trustworthy brother, he was not known for his courage, but his flight. He was not a renowned leader, but a slave, whose usefulness, or competence, had been questioned, but which Paul was declaring to be useful because of the gospel hope.

Then, we have ethnic differences, differing religious histories, and yet equal partnership. Tychicus and Onesimus were Gentiles, Asians and Greeks. Aristarchus, Jesus (Joshua the Just), and Mark were Jewish believers, co-workers in the Kingdom of God along with Paul. The Kingdom of God, of His beloved Son, is what all who are united to Christ Jesus are transferred into from the domain of darkness, said the apostle, whether one had all the benefits of the history of God's working with the children of Abraham or whether one was raised in the ignorance of paganism in the corners of Bithynia. All can enter the Kingdom of God the exact same way, though Jesus Christ alone, for it is His kingdom as the beloved Son of the Father into which we are all transferred. It was this kingdom which Paul preached to Jews and Gentiles, according to Acts 28:30-31, there in Rome he "welcomed all who came to him [Jews and Gentiles] proclaiming the kingdom of God, even the teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."

Then there is the greeting to Nympha and the church in her house. Like Lydia in Philippi, the church was sheltered and gathered in this woman's house or estate, and she is considered a faithful co-worker in the kingdom because of this. She was

probably wealthy and had a house large enough to house the church and the courage to accept her neighborhood's disdain of it.

These co-workers, whether Jewish or Greek or Asian, male or female, slaves or previous failures now restored, were working together for the same Master, with the same goal, using the same means and considered to be faithful.

Your ethnicity, your cultural background, your former ignorance, your former shame or failures, your gender or your giftedness, does not define nor determine your faithfulness or present ability to serve the Lord and His kingdom.

The third principle that we see is that faithfulness to the Lord involves encouragement and truth-telling.

Tychicus and Onesimus were charged with bringing “encouragement for your hearts” by telling the Colossians the whole story could not be written down in the letter. Paul knows that the Colossian believers desire to know how his health and conditions are, how his trial is progressing, etc. but he does not write it down. He asks these two men to do it for him. There is great service in giving news of fellow believers, their conditions, their hopes, their good and their struggles, and what requests of God can be made for them in our prayers. That is faithfulness, for it fixes its vision upon the things of Christ and not on the things of the world as if such things were the final word. It, instead, relates them in the light of eternity, in the light of the resurrection, in the light of the hope of God's redemption in Christ Jesus.

In fact, this word “encourage” is the same word used of the Holy Spirit, *parakletos*, and the goals will be the same as the Spirit's goals: encouragement, compassion, and truth-telling.

What an amazing example of Christ Jesus these two men must have been. Paul left it up to them to explain the gospel if there was any clarification needed regarding the letter. He left it up to them to communicate his imprisonment in a gospel-centered way, with the hope of God's presence obvious. And knowing what we know of Paul and his enormous emphasis on the glory and praise of Jesus, he must have expected

Tychicus and Onesimus to glorify and praise Jesus for all of this as well and to put their suffering in the context of the gospel: cross and resurrection to glory.

Faithfulness puts *everything* in the gospel context.

In this way, faithful service is always exalting Christ, centering our experiences upon Him, and serving His goals by His means. These two men's slavery, their service, was "in the Lord" and "for the Kingdom of God." Faithful servants do their master's work, for their masters' glory, in their master's way. **Therefore, if we want to be faithful servants, as we are called to be, we must know our master.** We must know His goals and His promises. We must know the means by which he has said to accomplish those goals: His Word and His Spirit. This is why EBF's mission statement reads like it does. It is our master's proclaimed goal and means: "We exist to glorify God by making disciples of Jesus Christ through proclaiming His gospel in dependence upon the Holy Spirit." We preach the gospel. We pray in dependence upon His Spirit to work powerfully. Everything should be moving towards this goal by these means.

So, how do we do this? How do we become faithful? How do we grow in faithfulness?

Well, I think it is right in front of us, even in this passage, but it's easy to miss. The one adjective of these men is faithful. What is the other? It is "beloved." That, my friends, is not an active word. It's now what these men are doing. That would be "loving." No, it's what is being done to them. They are being loved.

Our ability to be faithful in the Lord is rooted in our apprehension of how greatly we are loved by the Lord. We are told by the apostle, John, that "we love Him because He first loved us." (1 John 4:19) The greatest commandment is to love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. We are faithful when we love the Lord, and when we lose sight of His loveliness we cease to be faithful.

Therefore, let us strive, as long as today is today, to know the love of God exemplified and extravagant in the gift of His Son, whom He gave on our behalf to answer for our guilt with His own holy blood, to share His own inheritance with us in honor

and belonging at His own expense, and who has so faithfully loved the Father and loved us, even to the point of death, so that our hearts will be wooed by His loveliness to strive faithfully for His goals.

I love the way that my dear friend, Octavius Winslow, puts this very thing in his work *The Fullness of Christ*, as he shows how our faithful service of one another, as those charged and assigned by Christ to do so with faithful love for one another, is rooted and grounded and empowered by our apprehension of God's faithful love to us in Jesus:

“Are we not all of us, as saints of God, dependent upon Jesus? – are not all of us hanging upon Jesus? – Do we not all receive from Jesus? The blood that cleanses us, the righteousness that justifies us, the grace that sanctifies us, the sympathy that comforts us, the hope that cheers us – is it not all derived from the fullness that is in Christ? Are not all clinging to that one dear Savior, depending on His finished work, and all drawing from His infinite resources? Oh, yes! Where do the saints of God the most frequently meet? Is it not at the feet of Jesus?...of His fullness have we all received; and all alike living upon Christ's fullness, nourished by His grace, kept by His power, soothed by His love, fed by His hand, guided by His counsel, and bound together in the same heart of God, supplies us with one of the strongest and most persuasive motives why we should love one another...”

Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus so that we serve one another well as we gratefully serve Him. You see, our faithfulness is bounded by the edges of our apprehension of the glory of Christ Jesus. The greater that we apprehend His beauty, His loveliness, His grace towards us, His promises made to us, and His faithfulness to complete them, as He is assigned by the Father, then we are emboldened by fearlessness and courage to lay down our lives for the sake of our brothers and for the sake of the glory of Christ Jesus. So, let us make every effort to know this Christ, and to know Him rightly, as He has revealed Himself in His Word, that we might be encouraged by His Spirit to walk faithfully with Him and for Him in all things.

And may the earnest prayer of the apostle, which he explained to the Ephesians, be found to be active and powerful in our own hearts, that being rooted and grounded

in the love of God for us, displayed most eminently in His cross, and which gives us the most courage by His resurrection, we might be filled up with all the fullness of God at our heart's beholding the greatness of His love:

“that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ even to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.” (Eph. 3:14-19)