

Life group Colossians Twelfth meeting

Maturity put to the test

Colossians 4: 7-18

Introduction:

We often tend to think about Christianity as about a religion. Those who preach it, we regard as those who work for this religion. However, to think this way might diminish our sight on what Christianity actually is. In our passage of today, Paul refers to his fellow workers as to fellow workers for the kingdom of God. It's a kingdom. Let's remind ourselves of that. It's a kingdom, with a King Who rules, with servants of the kingdom, with people that belong to the kingdom and obey the King and people who don't. Because Christianity relates to a Kingdom, it's essential that it relates to real people as well. To be a Christian on your own, without connections to a church, to fellow Christians, to other churches, to the ministry of the church doesn't make sense. Christianity is not a religion – personal inspiration to live a good life – it's a real kingdom with a real living King!

Read: Colossians 4: 7-18

Some observations concerning the structure of the text:

The passage consists of four parts:

- 1) Those who come to Colossae.
- 2) Those who greet as Paul's co-laborers, consisting of Jewish and non-Jewish co-laborers.
- 3) Instructions for Colossae
- 4) Final greeting

Text:

1. Those who come to Colossae (vs. 7-9)

Remember that Epaphras had come to Paul and his fellowship to let them know how they were, so that they could thank God and pray for the Colossians (1:4,8,9). Now Tychicus and Onesimus come from Paul to the Colossians to inform them how they are. They are also able to answer questions concerning the letter and to explain it. The purpose of sending them and of sending the letter is to encourage the Colossian Christians.

Observe the way Tychicus and Onesimus are described. From the letter to Philemon we know that Onesimus is a slave. But Onesimus is no longer referred to as a slave. Now that he believes in Jesus Christ, he is a brother. But to himself, to Tychicus and to Epaphras, Paul refers as to slaves/servants of Christ. In Christ's Kingdom slaves become free and people who were free become slaves of Christ.

2. Those who greet as Paul's co-laborers (vs. 10-14)

Three Jewish and three non-Jewish co-laborers are mentioned. Mark had left Paul and Barnabas during their mission trip (Acts 15:38) and this was probably publicly known. Therefore, Paul urges the Colossians to see him as his rehabilitated co-worker, no one should look down on him, since this problem has been solved.

Although one might expect that the Gospel about the Jewish Messiah would easiest be understood and mostly believed by Jews, who were familiar with the Bible, most of Paul's fellow workers appear to be non-Jewish. In Christ's Kingdom old boundaries between Jew and gentile are broken down.

It's very clear now that Epaphras was a faithful minister of Christ on behalf of the Colossians. The Colossians must not shift away from the hope of the Gospel and from the faith in Christ, listening to new, popular teachings. They must strive to be the answer on Paul's writing and on Epaphras' praying for their maturity.

Among the non-Jewish fellow workers Luke is mentioned. Observe that Paul and the two evangelists Mark and Luke were together there! Demas is mentioned, but without any further description (like 'beloved brother, faithful minister' etc.); read II Timothy 4:10 – were there already problems here?

3. Instructions for Colossae.

The Colossian church must also be related to the Laodicean church (and vice-versa). Probably both churches were founded by Epaphras. Churches should never be as unconnected islands, since churches are like embassies of the one kingdom of Jesus Christ.

... And to Nympha. It's possible that this doesn't mean a third group or church, but that the church at Nympha's house is the church at Laodicea (in Greek it's possible to translate 'and' with, 'namely').

It's clear here that the letters that Paul wrote had meaning for the church that was going further than Colossae only. Here we get some insight in what happened in the early church. The authentic writings of Paul were copied and read in other churches as well, to be instructed in the faith in Jesus Christ. Here we see how the New Testament canon begins to develop.

Archippus must fulfil the ministry he has received. He hadn't chosen this ministry; it had been given to him. He had been given responsibility for this part of Jesus' kingdom. We can imagine he needed courage, because there were new, popular teachers at Colossae. And to be a faithful minister, he had to stand for the true and faithful preaching of the Gospel and to reject other teachings. This verse reminds ministers of all times to be courageous and faithful in the ministry that they received in the Lord.

4. Final greeting.

Some modern interpreters deny that this letter was written by Paul. Then what is written here wouldn't be correct. There are no arguments to assume that the letter was not written by Paul; to the contrary: Paul wrote his own signature under it, to mark it as authentic.

Faithful ministry always comes with suffering. When the Colossians think of Paul, they know the great apostle was suffering for the Gospel. This is a mark of his true apostleship. He suffers, like his Master has suffered. New, popular teachers sometimes want to attract a lot of people. But do they really love the people as Christ's flock? Or do they love their own popularity? Paul didn't want to complain. But this short sentence reminds them also that they should continue to pray for Paul.

Paul ends his letter as he ends most of his letters: Grace be with you. We are saved by faith only. And this faith was not our own work. It's grace that God, through the Gospel preaching, led us to faith, it's His gift. And we need His grace to continue in the faith, to grow in maturity, in holiness, in love, personally and as a fellowship. And we must avoid to fall away from grace, which is a horrible possibility (see Gal. 5:4).

Main idea of the text:

The mature fellowship should pay attention to its relationships. A mature Christian and even a mature Christian fellowship are never without healthy connections. Reading the passage we see a lot of possibilities for the Colossians to lose such connections. For example:

- Will they connect to Onesimus, the run-away-slave as to a brother?
- Will they welcome Mark, after his past and rehabilitation?
- Will Jews and gentiles stay connected?
- Will Laodicea and Colossae stay connected?
- Will they stay connected with the letters, with Scripture, with Paul's teachings, with Epaphras?
- Will Archippus stay connected to the ministry he has received?

The passage invites us to investigate our own connections. Not only is it no option to be a Christian on your own, without being connected to a Christian fellowship. A fellowship must also see whether it is willing to have the kind of connections that we need to have to be a mature Christian fellowship.

IDEAS FOR THE LIFE-GROUP EVENING

Here are some ideas to have a (rather) short and powerful meeting:

1. **Start.** Take some time for worship and prayer.
2. **Read Colossians 4: 8 - 18 twice.** Take no longer than ten or fifteen minutes to dive deeper in understanding the text and answering questions.
3. **Share:** Which verse draws your special attention? Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in this. Share and try to figure out why it draws your attention.
4. **Prayer:** The group leader must ensure there is enough time to pray together. Pray for each other concerning what you have shared. And pray for the fellowship and for the growth of Jesus' Kingdom.