



Sermon – October 3, 2021  
Phillip Bethancourt

**Verses Covered This Week**

*Colossians 4:14 – 18*

*2 Timothy 4:10*

And as you grab your seats, let me invite you one more time. Let's open our Bibles to the book of Colossians, chapter 4. We're going to start in verse 14 this morning. And as you're turning there, will you let Kert and Kerry know how much you enjoyed them being with us today? Back 15 or 18 years ago, while Kert and I were both in school, I had the chance to spend some time over in London, England. And while I was there working, I took a week to head down to do some ministry and some sightseeing in Egypt. I was just fascinated by the architecture there. So much ancient history. I remember getting to go and see the pyramids and to view the Sphinx. It was just overwhelming to see the grandeur and the magnitude of those architectural accomplishments. These wonders of the world. But one of the other things I remember about my time in that country was not just the buildings that I saw that were finished, that were ancient, I have it etched in my mind how many buildings around those communities I saw that were started but never completed. A foundation was laid. Maybe even it was begun to be built up. There was rebar sticking out of the concrete. Some even had the exterior paint on them. But even though they started well, they never finished.

Paul's going to speak to us about that reality this morning in our spiritual lives. What does it look like to finish well? If you remember, last week we saw him talking about what it means to be faithful in our friendships. Now he's going to speak to us about what it looks like to be faithful in our finish. And as we prepare our hearts for that, I want to remind you that at the conclusion of the message this morning, we're going to respond in many ways. But one of those is through the Lord's Supper. So if you're part of the family of God, I want to invite you to grab the elements as we sing the response song and ready your hearts to partake of that family meal. In addition to that, if you've been here at Central and you're thinking about taking a step towards membership, I want to just encourage you today to move in that direction during the response time. Because in just two weeks, we'll be having our next New Member Workshop and we would love for you to be a part of it. Now let's see what Paul has to say to us this morning as we read down from Colossians 4:14 through the end of this encouraging book. In fact, let's start just a few verses before that in verse 12. Here's what he says.

<sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. <sup>14</sup>Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. <sup>15</sup>Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.”

<sup>18</sup>I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Let's pray together.

As we turn our hearts to pray this morning, I just ask you for a moment in the quietness of your own heart to ask God to speak to you today. Clear the distractions. To set your eyes on Jesus. Take a moment to do that in the quietness of your heart.

Father, our desire this morning is that we might decrease so that You might increase. That You might shape our hearts so that our lives might reflect the way You've designed us to live for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We pray these things in His name. Amen.

Well, if you and I could have been gathered there that first morning when the Colossians gathered in that house in order to hear this word from Paul, we probably would have had a very different experience at church than we're having today. There would have been no choir there. There would have been no pulpit. There wouldn't have even been a fully completed word of God at that point. And even a little more dicey than that, if we're being honest. There was no electricity. No indoor plumbing. No air conditioning. For a day like today when it's still going to hit the 90's in October. It would have been a very different feel in that moment. But if you were there, you would've sensed the excitement. The people were gathered. They were ready to hear the word from Paul. They were ready to respond to this reality. And as Paul works his way through this letter, you remember the whole last year as we spent our time through it; the central focus of this word to the Colossian church has been the centrality of Jesus for every aspect of our life. Jesus is the center. And as he comes to the end of this text, he is showing us what it looks like for Jesus to be the center of our lives as we finish well in the life and ministry that God has called us to. And the way that he does that is not by highlighting some rock stars in the Christian church, some semi-famous preachers, or significant figures. The way he does it is by celebrating the forgettable faithfulness of men and women in and around the Colossian church. The type of forgettable faithfulness that he is calling us to as we seek to forge a path forward in the Christian life.

So think about what's happening here. Paul ends this letter like he does so often in the other letters that we have from him in the New Testament. With a word of greeting. The word greet or greeting shows up five times in this text. And as he brings this closing word, as he finishes this letter, he gives us a window into what it looks like to finish well in our Christian lives. That's your goal this morning. If that's your heart, if you don't want to be like one of those unfinished buildings where God began a good work in you but you didn't walk faithfully to the

finish, Paul is going to give us the picture of what it looks like to finish well. And if we want to walk well for the rest of our Christian lives, you're going to notice that he lays out three realities in this text that we need to embrace as we pursue God to the finish of our lives. And notice the first one back in 12 and 13. He speaks about how if we want to finish well, we need to pray for spiritual growth. He talks about this call to prayer for spiritual growth by highlighting this man named Epaphras. Who was he? Well, if you remember all the way back to last year, we saw him show up in chapter 1 in verse 7. He was influential in bringing the Gospel to this region. Seeing this church planted. And when Paul writes about him back in verse 7, he highlights him as a servant leader, a faithful leader, an encouraging leader. And now as he begins to speak about Epaphras again, he shows us what it looks like to pray for spiritual growth. Because Epaphras' prayer for the Colossian church gives us a window in what it looks like to pray for our own spiritual journey. So that we might finish well. That shows up both in what he prays and how he prays.

So look at the second half of verse 12. Look at these two things that he prays for specifically. First, he prays for clarity. That's why he says there that he desires to stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. There is a prayer both for maturity and clarity that is anchored here in what he says. And this prayer for maturity, we see him mentioning there when he talks about standing mature. It's this idea of the work being finished. Carried fully to completion. It's like that ripened fruit that is finally ready to be harvested off the vine because it's become everything that it's designed to be. You can tell if someone is mature in Christ if they show a consistent pattern of thinking God's thoughts after Him, of crucifying their flesh to live out the desires that God has embedded in their life by the Holy Spirit. And when I think about this prayer for spiritual maturity, I'm just reminded. I have the words echoing in my ears of one of my old seminary professors who died from cancer. His name was Chip Stam. And one of the things he said that has stayed with me 15 years later to this day is this: mature Christians are easily edified. Mature Christians are easily edified. That's the picture that Paul is speaking of here. This prayer from Epaphras that we might grow in Christ. We might stand mature is reflected by how easily edified we are by the singing of God's word, by the preaching of God's word, by fellowship with one another. He prays for maturity. But notice the way it goes on at the end of verse 12. He also prays for clarity. That you would be fully assured in all the will of God. I imagine it's a fairly common experience for you, just like me, to pray that God would make His will known for your life. What do you want me to do, God? I'm at a crossroads. I need direction. Guide me to what's next. But I want you to notice something very specific about the language that's used here. This prayer for clarity is worded in this way. Look back at verse 12.

<sup>12</sup>.....fully assured in all the will of God.

Notice that word, in. He doesn't say, fully assured of the will of God. He says, fully assured in the will of God. What's the difference? It's the difference between clarity and commitment. You can be fully assured of the will of God. You know what, I know now what You want me to do. But to be fully assured in the will of God is not only, do I know what You are calling me to do, but I am committed to seeing it through to the end. We've got a woman in our church who's waiting on the lab results to receive what she anticipates will be a cancer diagnosis. And when those results come, if it comes back and it confirms that it is cancer, she can be fully assured of the will of God in that moment. Those test results show that it is God's will that she is allowed

to go through this suffering. But there's a difference between being fully assured of the will of God and fully assured in the will of God when you're facing something as difficult as a cancer diagnosis. It's not just embracing that this is God's will for my life, but trusting that He will carry me through it. Not just that I can trust the test results, but I can trust the testing that will come through those test results in my life so that God might use it to grow me to make me more like Jesus. That's the kind of prayer that Epaphras is praying for the Colossian church. And so you see that in the way that he prays. He's praying for our spiritual growth, but notice also how he is praying. You can see a window into this at the beginning of verse 12 when it talks about how Epaphras prays intensely. Look at how intense the prayers are there at the start of verse 12. Always struggling on your behalf in his prayers. This word struggle is to fight. It's to battle. In the original language, it's the word that we get our word today, agonize, from. You can see the intensity there with which Epaphras is pleading for this people. We'll often use the phrase prayer warrior. That's what he is embodying in this text. He is ringing himself out for the sake of this church that he has helped to begin. Praying with intensity for their spiritual development. But notice in verse 13, we see he's not just praying with intensity, he's also praying with intentionality. That's why verse 13 tells us,

<sup>13</sup>For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and those in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

These three cities that were all in the same community. It tells us Paul celebrates how Epaphras worked hard as he prayed hard. There was an intentionality that was there. This word for worked hard gives this picture of great pain, deep affliction, suffering that is brought about by the work. That is the level of intensity and intentionality that Epaphras was using to pray for their spiritual growth. Can't help but wonder this morning as we look at this text, how often is it that the way we pray is different than the way he prayed. If we were to look at your prayer life, I can imagine that oftentimes it looks more like a list of problems to be solved than what we see right here. That we just want answers to our problems, solutions to our challenges instead of more of Jesus. So just to be real specific, when's the last time you prayed to God something in the category of, will you use my situation to grow my maturity in Christ? Not, will you take this away, but will you take me through it so that I can be fully assured and fully committed to Your will no matter what it is, no matter what the cost. If we want to finish well in the Christian life, we need to transform the way we pray. Because those prayers are the pathway to the perseverance that Paul is calling us to.

But notice what happens next as he goes on in verses 14 through 16. We'll see a second dynamic here. If we want to finish well, we must pursue spiritual community. And that's what he talks about when he begins to speak about Luke, about Demas, about Nympha. These three individuals and each of them gives us a different insight into what type of spiritual community we need to foster in order to press on in the faith. You'll notice when he speaks about Luke that he's showing us that we need to pursue spiritual community that celebrates our gifts. So look at how he talks about Luke there. He says,

<sup>14</sup>Luke the beloved physician greets you,

And isn't that one of the amazing things about Paul. He is thrilled to highlight these other leaders. It's not all about him. He speaks here of Luke. And in the text he's spoken of as a

physician. One of the only three times that Luke is mentioned by name. But here's what we know about him. This man may have been a doctor by trade but God used him side-by-side with Paul for the advance of the Gospel. He took an ordinary guy and did extraordinary things because he was in a spiritual community that celebrated his gifts. He travelled with Paul on some of his darkest journeys, even all the way to Rome. The way the text reads, it's as if Luke is there with him now. And we know exactly who this Luke is. He's the one that gave us nearly ¼ of our entire New Testament. Because the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts came from his pen. And he was cultivated. He was built up in a spiritual community that celebrated his gifts and empowered him to flourish beyond his profession. And that's true, not just of him, but look down at verse 15 to this other person that Paul speaks of there; this woman named Nympha. It says:

<sup>15</sup>Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

Now it would have been rare back in that time period, in ancient culture, for someone writing a letter to mention a woman by name. And yet all throughout the New Testament you see women celebrated and affirmed for the valuable gifts they bring to the kingdom of God. Whether that's Mary, the mother of Jesus, or Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. Maybe Mary Magdalene or Priscilla or a number of different women that are in the text. Over and over again you see this pattern emerging where God uses faithful women, he employs their gifts, he leverages their hospitality for the sake of Gospel advance. And that's what we see right here in this church at Laodicea. They are gathering in her home, growing in God's word because she is thriving in a spiritual gift that celebrates her giftings; a spiritual community that celebrates her giftings. And as I read this text, I have been crying out to God all week, "Lord, will you raise up more Nymphas in this church? Women of strength who use Your giftings, who use Your hospitality just like her for the sake of the Gospel." And I've been pleading with God, "Raise up more Lukes, men and women in ordinary professions who do extraordinary things for Your kingdom because they are being poured out for Your Gospel. They are being celebrated and empowered in their giftings." That's the kind of spiritual community that will help us finish well. But notice right there, sandwiched between them, Paul also gives us a warning. That we need to pursue spiritual community that doesn't conform to the world. He speaks about this one, Demas. Do you see his name there at the end of 14? And he's celebrated just like everybody else. As a faithful worker. As a fellow servant. It seems like everything is going good with him. But if you have your Bible, feel free to join me by turning over to 2 Timothy chapter 4. Just a few books to your right. And as Timothy is finishing his last written words that we have recorded in the last book of the Bible, he is finishing with the kind of greetings he finishes here. Look with me about the way he speaks about Demas in 2 Timothy 4:10. It gives us a different picture.

<sup>10</sup>For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

So notice what happens here. This one that is celebrated in Colossians is now a source of heartbreak just three or four years later when he is writing the book of 2 Timothy. And why is it? You see the reason why Demas deserted him? What does it say there? His love with this present world. The world distracted Demas from the word. And what happened is that a delight in the world caused him to abandon and to desert Paul. There is this pattern here where what's taking place is as he goes through these next three years, his love for the world causes him to

leave community. His delight in the world causes him to desert his mission. His focus on the world causes him to forsake his mentor, Paul. He's abandoned. And if you remember last week, we talked about Mark already. And what we find here with Demas is almost an anti-Mark. The opposite situation. Remember, in Mark's case, Mark abandoned Paul. He was faithless and now he is celebrated as faithful. In this case, Demas is walking well with Paul, but he is faithful now but he is faithless later on. And the reason for that is because of this love for the world. Can you imagine the pain of abandonment that Paul went through when Demas deserted him? You know what it's like to be abandoned. To have that family member turn their back on you. That friend to give up on you. That prodigal son or daughter to go to a far country. That fellow worker in the gospel who is now living for the world instead of living for Jesus. And we see that right here. You can imagine the crush, the break, the heartache that he would have experienced. And I can't help but wonder as we stand here in a room filled with so many of you and others that are watching online. Could it be that right now, whether you know it or not, some of you are walking to the same destination as Demas. Where a love for the world might lead you astray from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Might lead you astray from what God has called you to. And what Paul is reminding us of here is if we want to be faithful to the finish, we need to be in a spiritual community that doesn't conform to the world as Demas did. That stands firm no matter the cost. That delights in Jesus Christ and the resurrection that we have in Him, the salvation we experience only in Him rather than the things of this world.

And how can that happen? It's by embracing the next reality about the spiritual community that we see in verse 16. Because Paul is telling us that we need to pursue spiritual community that centers on the word of God. So look how he says it there in verse 16.

[<sup>16</sup>And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see also that you read the letter from Laodicea.](#)

Now he is speaking here about a common practice. In that day and age, you didn't have a printing press. You didn't have high rates of literacy. And so the most common way to communicate in these lengthy forums was by written letter that would be carried by a messenger. It would arrive in a place and be read. And because it was so precious, such a limited resource, Paul is encouraging them to bring this letter to the Laodiceans and read it. And to take what he has sent to them and to read it at Colossae. There is a centrality of the word of God that we see on display here. You can get a sense for Paul's awareness of his own authority in his writings. He is saying what's originally intended for you and the Colossian church can also be of value in the Laodicean church. And if you've ever wondered, how is it that you and I can sit here and read an ancient book like this and expect to get something out of it for ourselves, to understand it, to apply it to our lives, Paul is giving us the grounds for that right here. He says, this letter was originally intended for you, Colossians, but it can bring value and impact to the Laodiceans. Therefore, have it read there. And that's why we take up and read God's word. We desire to be a community that builds our life around His word so that it might shape our hearts. And can't you imagine this moment when the messenger showed up and the word began to spread amongst the Christian community. You can imagine a rush to get together, a longing to hear these words from Paul. They've never met him, they don't know him, but they know his reputation. They know his impact and there's a longing to hear the word of God in their midst. I just can't help but wonder, have we lost that longing for God's word? Do you have the same hunger in your heart for God's word as you did when you were a new Christian? Or what you did when you

came off that mountaintop experience of a spiritual journey in your past. Or as you did in those desperate moments where you knew the word of God was the only place to turn. The danger is that we as individuals or us as a church community could become complacent. Take this for granted. They would do anything to hear a word from Paul, yet your homes are probably filled with Bibles collecting dust. On your phone you go right past your Bible app to get to the news or your e-mail. And you wonder why things are dry, stagnant. It's because Paul is reminding us, if we want to be a people who press on to the finish, if we want to be a community that embodies what Christ has designed for us, we must be grounded in the word of God. And when those realities are true, we're going to see one final charge that Paul gives us as this book comes to a close in verses 17 and 18 where he shows us, if we want to finish well, we must persevere in our spiritual calling.

So he begins to talk about this man Archippus and he gives a very specific instruction in verse 17 that goes both to a person and to the church at large. So who was Archippus? Well, the scholars suggest that he was a leader in the Colossian church. One who had been marked out for vocational ministry there who was pouring out his life for the sake of these people. And Paul gives him a word. But that word comes indirectly, not straight to Archippus, but through the church who is intended to give it to him. And what are those instructions that Paul gives for him? Look at verse 17.

<sup>17</sup>And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord."

Paul is calling Archippus to embrace this call to ministry that's put on his life. It suggests if he's having to give him this challenge, this charge, that perhaps things are difficult in this moment. Maybe these false teachers that are leading some of the Colossians astray have brought great difficulty into his life. We don't know all that's going on. Here's what we do know. He is pressing Archippus to be steadfast in the start of his ministry and faithful in the finish of his ministry. I still remember the moment, back when I was a junior here at A&M when God changed my life forever. The longer the Lord has me here, you'll probably hear me talk about my call to ministry experience in a number of occasions. For me, I was, as a counselor at Impact camp, a camp for incoming freshmen at Texas A&M. And the speaker was preaching on God's vision for your life. And in that moment, as I listened to God's word, the Holy Spirit prompted me in a way that changed my life forever. I was heading towards being a faithful Christian businessman, but God had different plans. And you know what changed everything for me? It was as if that day the Spirit was prompting me with a question. And the question that I was wrestling with was this; am I going to ask God to bless my vision for my life or am I going to surrender to God's vision for my life? And I wonder if some of you in the room or online need to be wrestling with that same question today too. Maybe the reason you find yourself restless at work, maybe the reason your degree plan isn't going according to plan. Maybe the reason you find yourself being drawn back to the things of God or investing your life here in this church is perhaps the Spirit is giving a stirring, just like it was doing through Paul to Archippus towards a call to ministry. To surrender your desires for your life for His desires for your life. Man, if that's true, I would love to talk with you more about that. To help you wrestle with that in the same way Archippus would have been when he received these words. But I don't want the rest of you to miss this as if there's nothing for you here in verse 17. Because I want you to notice,

there's a very simple word at the start of verse 17 that you might have overlooked on the way to what Paul says to Archippus. And it says this:

<sup>17</sup>And say

You see that word say? The word say in the original language, it's plural. In other words, this is an instruction given to the entire Colossian church. Paul is not speaking directly to Archippus; he is speaking to the congregation so that they might say, encourage, challenge, and encourage Archippus to pursue this calling. There is this word to the church as there is a word to him. And the reason for that is because it's not just those who are called to vocational ministry who are called to serve. Every one of us has a job to do in the kingdom. We're fellow workers for the sake of the Gospel. And in this particular passage, we see that part of the work is through a ministry of encouragement. That they would speak to him, say to him, challenge him to pursue the fulfilment that God has called him to. Over the last couple weeks I've had the opportunity to be with several different groups of pastors. And I just want you to know, pastors around the country are feeling the heaviness of the last 18 months of Covid. It's been difficult for all of us, but perhaps uniquely difficult for spiritual leaders who face criticism, discouragement, changes in their ministry context. I've just watched close friends overwhelmed by the weight of things. In other words, if there was ever a time that the spiritual leaders in your life could use encouragement, it's times like this. As I was just looking at this, and seeing this way that Paul is setting this model for a ministry of encouragement for all of us. And it happens to coincide right with the launch of October which is known as Pastor Appreciation Month. And I want to give you a challenge, Central family. Would you make a commitment, even this week, to identify somebody on the team at Central and encourage them. To strengthen them in the work. To come alongside our ministers and challenge them to keep pressing on to fulfil the ministry God has called them to. Just like Paul is doing here with Archippus. And one of the things that as you make your plans to do that, I want you to remember is that so often actions speak louder than words. So if you say, "Hey, I'm going to do what the pastor tells me. When I pick up my kids, I'm going to find Chris Gary and say, 'Chris, I love what you're doing in the Kid's Ministry, keep it up. Our kids enjoy it.'" That will mean a lot to him. You want to know what will encourage him even more? If you finish that by saying, "and how can I help?" And he'll let you know we've got so many kids coming on Sunday nights to Awana, we're still 3 or 4 volunteers short. And you could jump right in there in the midst and make a difference for the sake of his ministry impact. See, Paul is pressing the Colossian church to invest in Archippus through this ministry of encouragement, through this ministry of service. But notice how he does it. Look at verse 18 when he writes this personal farewell. He is writing in chains. He's writing to a church that he didn't start. A church he's never seen. A church he can't even attempt to visit. And as he is doing it, his final words are that the church might invest in next generation leaders who continue the faithful ministry that is already been started there. Which is one of the reasons, before we move our hearts towards the Lord's Supper, that I can't wait to come back and join you next Sunday. Because we're going to be starting a new series next Sunday called, Every Generation Reaching the Next Generation. Embodying Paul's heart here for what it looks like for us to invest in the next generation of the church so that we can see the Gospel flourish and to go forward. As we turn our minds and hearts to the bread and the cup, just think about this month. When the Colossians finish this letter, you can imagine they were overwhelmed by all that Paul had to say. Perhaps they responded in worship. Perhaps they even responded by taking the bread and the cup as we are right now.



I want to remind you, as we move to the Lord's Supper that this is something we celebrate once a month to remind ourselves of what God has done for us in the Gospel. The broken body and shed blood of Christ exemplified through the bread and the cup. And we invite you to partake in this family meal. If you know Jesus, if you've followed Him in baptism, this is for you. And as we ready ourselves for this, I want to remind you, during the response song, you can make your way to the tables, pick up the elements. But before we do that, I want to challenge each one of us to examine our hearts as Paul speaks about in 1 Corinthians 11 when he says this:

<sup>27</sup>Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup>Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

Let's pray together.

Father, we want to be faithful in our finish. We want to press on to the end. And we're pleading with you now that You would use this moment as we reflect on Your word, as we partake of Your supper, to show us what You've done for us in Jesus. To shape our hearts to change us, to convict us of sin, to renew our desire to follow You with all our lives and to do it in the community that is centered on Your word, not conforming to this world. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.