Portions: Back to the Table Memory Verse: Colossians 4:17

Feb. 12, 2023 Scripture Reading: Luke 12: 8-12

**SLIDE 1: Title**

 Today we come to the end of our study of Colossians. Though we have spent five weeks on this little letter, make no mistake, we could keep going for many weeks more. In this letter the apostle Paul has been providing some leadership and wisdom for a church that has been caught in a swirl of religious thought and superstitious practice. Thoughts on God and the afterlife were presented by persuasive teachers and those who claimed to have access to secret knowledge. The problems the Christians in Colossae faced were not much different from our own. We too live in the swirl of confusion. We too are surrounded by talented speakers who claim to know things that we do not. We too have to opportunity to wear the label “Christian” and yet continually consume other ideas and teachings that do not line up with the biblical account of the gospel. Or in my observation, we are constantly bombarded with factions within our culture who are constantly trying to redefine words. “Marriage” does not mean what it once did. Love is somehow now conveniently defined as love. Speech is now considered by some to be, not only hateful but also violence. The idea of “sin” has fallen out of vouge for some time now so much so that we can barely talk about it meaningfully. Truth is relegated to the world of opinion and tolerance now applies to anything expect those things that I disagree with. Even terms as basic as “man” and “woman” are quickly fading. The result is confusion and a whole lot of nonsense. And like a buffet line people pick and choose what they want to believe. It can be a tough choice, and we tend to choose what seems to taste good in the moment, what catches our eye, what everyone else seems to be eating. But Paul presents us with a better option. “Choose Christ! Fill up on him, in him is all knowledge and wisdom. Don’t shift away from what you have been taught. Keep your mind set on the things that are above. And all this is made possible through prayer! Chapter 4 verse 2 is where we left off last week… Paul writes “Keep on praying and guard your prayers with thanksgiving.”
**SLIDE 2: Keep on praying and guard your prayers with thanksgiving.**

 So picture this, in keeping with our series theme here…you have approached the buffet and you pick up an empty plate. You hold it in your hands as you survey all the offerings before you. Hinduism, Buddhism, Astrology, Skepticism, Historical Criticism, Naturalism, Christianity, Jewish, Universalism, Islamism, Humanism and on and on. You are struck by the vast array of choices. You realize there are no ingredients listed anywhere, you are not quite sure what makes up each of these dishes, so all you have to go on are sight, smell and the recommendation of others. And it is a buffet after all, a perfect chance to pick and choose, to try something new. Well, you for sure go for some of your tried and true favorite. You have to have that, but there are so many other tantalizing options…You feel like Eve in the garden….the fruit sure does look good to eat. You place your hand on the serving spoon of some unknown dish just to take a bite, but something, some still small voice tells you that you don’t need that. You sigh a little and leave the spoon in its place. “I can always come back later and give it a try,” you think to yourself, as you head back to your table.

 And this is where life is truly lived…at the table. The buffet line has all the options, but it is at the table where we partake. Here, the choices we have made play out, here we engage and interact with all the ideas before us. It is at the table where you consume these ideas and they actually become a part of us. It’s also at the table where we eat with other people; people who have put together their own plates and made their own choices.

 So you sit at the table with your serving of Christ and Christ alone. You have fought off temptation once again and you are determined to find your fill in Christ and in Christ alone. And as is customary, to bow your head to say a prayer of thanks for this meal. As you finish up your prayer, you can almost feel Paul’s hand patting you on the back. The shackles on his wrist rattle together as you hear him say, “Keep on praying! Keep on being thankful. For this is how we sustain our lives back at the table.”

 As we get into the end of Colossians, we are going to notice a few things…Paul has a lot of people he wants to commend and thank, so he drops a lot of names, most of whom we don’t know much about. Paul also makes it pretty clear, that suffering is a part of the deal. If we are going to subsist on Christ, if we are going to live with him as our all in all, if we are going to pursue spiritual maturity, then life back at the table, life in this world is going to be a struggle. Paul did not find himself in prison because he was going with the flow. Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to any and all who would hear him. Paul did not partake of the Gnostic notions of his day or worship at the altars of Roman deities. Paul was resolute to keep his mind on things above. Such a constant and singular diet landed him in prison. So as a read this last section, we are going to glean some more wise instruction, but I want you to take note of how much suffering is mentioned here.

**SLIDE 3-6: Colossians: 4:2-18 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[a] 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. 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. 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. 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.” 18 I, Paul, am writing this greeting personally. Remember that I’m in prison. Grace be with you.**

A large part of this section is just a list of names, but even within that list, we get a glimpse about the lives of these ancient Christians. Paul mentions Aristarchus, who is also imprisoned with Paul for the sake of Jesus, then a fellow named Mark and another guy named Justus are mentioned. And Paul does not bring these people up because they have some sort of social standing or because they have any influential connections. These people are listed here because of their service to the Lord. Paul has spent the whole letter laying out a plan for Christians to follow so that they might grow up into maturity in Christ, so that they might know how to interact with all the options and ideas the world has to offer, and now at as Paul comes to a close, he more or less says, “Here are some who have followed this advice and lived fully into the power of the gospel.” And as readers, we can notice, none of these people seemingly have it made. They are all either mentioned as slaves and servants, or as prisoners or as workers. Luke may be an exception as he is referred to as a “dearly loved physician” but that career path hardly held the prestige it does now. The point here is that following Christ, subsisting on him, will not lead to a glamorous or leisurely life. The walk of a Christian is one of humility, self-sacrifice, and it will have its fair share of suffering.

**SLIDE 7: Christian is one of humility, self-sacrifice, and it will have its fair share of suffering**

 Now let me be clear about this idea of suffering. There are two kinds…the general storms of life that affect us all…a hurricane, a pandemic, an accident of some kind. This is a type of suffering that comes with living in reality. But then there is a suffering that we experience specifically because of our faith in Jesus. For some Christians around the world, this type of suffering comes in the form of potential or actual incarceration. In many places around the globe, those who turn to Christ or ostracized and cut off from the accommodations of their normal society. For those of us who live in a free country, we experience suffering as well. Maybe it comes in the form of financial faithfulness. We might choose to offer up finances to God and so miss out on that new thing we wanted to purchase. I understand that is a far cry from potentially going to prison, but we do live in a culture that says that we deserve that new thing, and we should get what we want. And so by choosing to live with different priorities on purpose, we feel the sting of that decision. We might forgo a nice vacation and instead attend a mission trip serving those in need and extending the love of Jesus. Again, not prison, but an example of denying ourselves for the sake of Jesus. We might go through the exceedingly laborious task of minimizing social media and screens within our home. It’s a hard and thankless job but we take it on so that Christ might be more glorified. We don’t watch certain movies or attend certain events. We open ourselves to being made fun of or ridiculed. We refrain from certain activities and consistently refuse to sleep in on Sunday mornings because we want more of Christ. There are a lot of ways in which my life could be easier, but would it be better? These Christians that Paul mentions know that Jesus is worth their soul, their life, their all.

**SLIDE 8: Praying Hands**

 A final way we enter into suffering or maybe a better word is labor…and that is in prayer. Look at what Paul says about Epaphras in verse 12. Remember, Epaphras is basically the founding pastor of the Colossian church. He was saved by Jesus through the message Paul had preached in Ephesus, and when Epaphras went back home, he brought the power of the gospel with him. Paul gave him a shout out at the beginning of the letter but in verse 12 he describes more fully Epaphras’ role. Naturally Paul describes him as a slave, but he is decidedly the slave of Jesus Christ and as such, Paul says, he wrestles for you in prayer. See, prayer is not always a quiet peaceful, somber experience. For Epaphras, prayer is a fight! He wrestles, we labors, he exerts himself on behalf of his church so that they might stand firm and be fully mature and complete in the entire will of God. Wow, what a goal! What an impossible goal! How can any human, let alone a group of them become fully mature or completely know God’s will? But Epaphras labors on toward that goal.

 As your pastor, I want you to know, that I am preaching to myself here as well. I want us all to attain maturity and completeness in Christ. And I know that prayers that address this type of heart change, when spoken, are fighting words. I want to be a contender in that fight. I want you to in turn fight for me as together we fight for this community, for our families for our friends. We accept some forms of suffering, we purposefully engage in hard work, all for the sake of Jesus.

 In other words, after we choose Christ, leave the buffet and get back to the table…real life begins, the work begins in earnest and we learn that the real presence of Christ sustains us and fuels us so that we can give even more of ourselves. Christ gave his all so that we could give our all. We don’t let inconvenience, or exertion, or ridicule or prison or even death stand in the way. As Paul admonishes Archippus in verse 17, “We see to it that we complete the ministry that we have received in the Lord.”

**SLIDE 9: Colossians 4:17 We see to it that we complete the ministry that we have received in the Lord.**

Are we determined to do that? Are we willing to put up with some suffering in pursuit of completing the ministry that we have received?

 If you recall, a few minutes ago I mentioned the mass confusion many people find themselves in, especially young people. As society veers further and further from the moors of a two-parent home, a religious undergirding, and an understanding of moral absolutes, confusion reigns. In fact, a new term has been coined in order to name this trend. It’s called the quarter-life crises. To quote from a university website: “Similar to the more widely recognized midlife crisis, the quarter-life crisis is a period of uncertainty and questioning that typically occurs when people feel trapped, uninspired and disillusioned during their mid-20s to early 30s.” Notice these words here: uncertainty, trapped, uninspired, disillusioned…For us as Christians, as we live more fully into maturity and knowing the will of God, we find Christ becomes the answer to our feelings of being trapped. Christ become our inspiration, Christ becomes our reality so we no longer have to wallow in disillusionment.

 I want to leave you with a Paul’s words for verse 5 and 6. When it comes to our life back at the table, act wisely toward those you are eating the junk served up by the world. Make the most of every opportunity, every conversation, every interaction…take the extra step of suffering to make those opportunities your ministry…it’s easier not to, but do it for Jesus’ sake.

**SLIDE 10: do it for Jesus’ sake**

And as you interact with others at the table, your speech should be gracious and sprinkled with salt, Paul uses the word salt here. Meaning, we do not speak harshly, or pick fights or spout off like a know it all. Rather we speak with measured words, with purpose and as the CEB says, insight. We want our speech to be tasty and not bitter. At the table we want to be able to respond to every person while standing firm in our faith. And in those moments of testing, we can thank God for the promise spoken by Jesus in Luke 12:12, “The Holy Spirit will tell you at that very moment what you must say.” So to sum up, once we head back to the table and take our seat amongst those who may not share our faith, we are to act wisely, speak graciously and respond to every person.

 Christianity is not for the faint-hearted, or the weak-kneed or the skittish. In Christ we wrestle in prayer, we work hard for the Lord, we engage those around us and we stand firm on the gospel that brings our salvation. We are called to faithfully share Christ and when he is our portion, there is plenty to go around.

**SLIDE 11: “See to it that you complete the ministry that you received in the Lord.”**

One more time, verse 17: “See to it that you complete the ministry that you received in the Lord.” Amen.