

KERUX COMMENTARIES

COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

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A Commentary for Biblical Preaching and Teaching

ADAM COPENHAVER
JEFFREY D. ARTHURS



Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary for Biblical Preaching and Teaching

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PUBLISHER'S PREFACE TO THE SERIES

Since words were first uttered, people have struggled to understand one another and to know the main meaning in any verbal exchange.

The answer to what God is talking about must be understood in every context and generation; that is why Kerux (KAY-rukes) emphasizes text-based truths and bridges from the context of the original hearers and readers to the twenty-first-century world. Kerux values the message of the text, thus its name taken from the Greek *kērux*, a messenger or herald who announced the proclamations of a ruler or magistrate.

Biblical authors trumpeted all kinds of important messages in very specific situations, but a big biblical idea, grasped in its original setting and place, can transcend time. This specific, big biblical idea taken from the biblical passage embodies a single concept that transcends time and bridges the gap between the author's contemporary context and the reader's world. How do the prophets perceive the writings of Moses? How does the writer of Hebrews make sense of the Old Testament? How does Clement in his second epistle, which may be the earliest sermon known outside the New Testament, adapt verses from Isaiah and also ones from the Gospels? Or what about Luther's bold use of Romans 1:17? How does Jonathan Edwards allude to Genesis 19? Who can forget Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and his appropriation of Amos 5:24: "No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until 'justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream'"? How does a preacher in your local church today apply the words of Hosea in a meaningful and life-transforming way?

WHAT IS PRIME IN GOD'S MIND, AND HOW IS THAT EXPRESSED TO A GIVEN GENERATION IN THE UNITS OF THOUGHT THROUGHOUT THE BIBLE?

Answering those questions is what Kerux authors do. Based on the popular "big idea" preaching model, Kerux commentaries uniquely combine the insights of experienced Bible exegetes (trained in interpretation) and homileticians (trained in preaching). Their collaboration provides for every Bible book:

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Publisher's Preface to the Series

- A contemporary big idea for every preaching unit
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- Creative presentations for each primary idea
- Key questions about the text for study groups

Many thanks to Jim Weaver, Kregel's former acquisitions editor, who conceived of this commentary series and further developed it with the team of Jeffrey D. Arthurs, Robert B. Chisholm, David M. Howard Jr., Darrel L. Bock, Roy E. Ciampa, and Michael J. Wilkins. We also recognize with gratitude the significant contributions of Dennis Hillman, Fred Mabie, Paul Hillman, Herbert W. Bateman IV, and Shawn Vander Lugt who have been instrumental in the development of the series.

—*Kregel Publications*

PREFACE TO COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

As commentators, we certainly had great material with which to work. Colossians and Philemon are little gems that sparkle with many facets of the person and work of Christ and the composition and character of the church. Or to mix the metaphor, they are poems so compact in language and density of thought that they reward only those who give them their full attention. That's what writing this book has been for us: a chance to slow down and give the little books our full attention. Adam had a leg up on Jeffrey because he wrote his dissertation on Colossians, so Jeffrey had to catch up by slowing down. Adam was always out front cheering as he handed his exegetical analyses to Jeffrey the homiletician.

That handoff is the foundation of the Kerux series and the conviction held by the authors of this volume: God has taken the initiative to reveal himself through his inspired Word, so the preacher's job is first of all to understand with the mind, and imagine with the heart, what God has communicated. Then the preacher can cross the bridge of relevance to ask how the text can be contextualized in his or her particular milieu. Adam and Jeffrey have been of one accord with that conviction since day one, and that has made the writing of this volume a delight and not just a labor.

EXEGETICAL AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*For all who labor
as shepherds of the local church
in the spirit of Epaphras*

This commentary grows out of a decade-long love affair with Colossians and Philemon, both in various writing endeavors as well as multiple sermon series. These two letters from Paul are exciting and richly rewarding to preach. All congregations can relate to the story of conflict and reconciliation that hovers over both letters, as Paul aims to reconcile the slave Onesimus with his master Philemon through these two letters. The letters surely had a deep and lasting impact upon the young church in Colossae and they continue to have a similar impact upon the churches in which they are preached today—both in my own church and now, Lord willing, in your church as well.

Thanks are due to Kregel Publishers for their work in bringing this series to fruition, as well as to Herb Bateman, who has championed it for many years. Further thanks go to my congregation, Mabton Grace Brethren Church, and especially to my wife, Susie, and to my boys, Simon and Calvin, all of whom have endured countless sermons and lessons derived from Colossians and Philemon. Their questions, discussions, and reactions have shaped this commentary as much or more than my own study and reflection. Finally, thank you to Jeff Arthurs for being a true coauthor and a companion in this project. It has been a joy to write this volume together.

—Adam Copenhaver

PREACHING AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*For Pastor Robert Nitz,
my first pastor,
the first man to preach the gospel to me,
a true herald of the Word*

With thanks to God for giving us his inspired Word, especially the rich books of Colossians and Philemon, I dedicate this commentary to my fellow preachers worldwide.

For this engagement with Colossians and, for me, the unplowed field of Philemon, I have really enjoyed collaborating with Adam. From our first meeting in 2015 and through many email exchanges, phone calls, and face-to-face meetings at conferences, I have found Adam to be a kindred spirit. He has been encouraging, flexible, and insightful. I love the fact that Adam is a pastor, so he knows what will preach! I am also grateful for the editors at Kregel who kept the vision for the Kerux series front and center. My colleagues at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary have checked in with me regularly to spur me on to love and good works. This has truly been a team effort.

—Jeffrey Arthurs

OVERVIEW OF ALL PREACHING PASSAGES

Colossians 1:1–8

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul thanked God for the Colossians because they had heard and received the gospel message from Epaphras and because the gospel was now actively reaching more people and bearing fruit, even as their hope was producing faith toward Christ and love toward the saints.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

When people hear and receive the gospel, their lives are transformed as they grow in their faith in Christ, love for one another, and hope for eternity.

PREACHING IDEA

Let's thank God for the good news that changes us.

PREACHING POINTERS

Although Paul had not visited the small town of Colossae, his faithful companion Epaphras preached the good news there, and the first text of Colossians depicts a marvelous real-life picture of the power of the gospel. Greco-Roman culture promoted polytheism and licentiousness, but when some of the people of Colossae heard and understood the gospel, it took root, grew, and bore fruit. No wonder Paul thanked God for the Colossians (v. 3). For these converts, the gospel was more than a stripped-down message of sin and salvation (although it was not *less* than that). It was a full-orbed but shorthand way that Paul used to capture all that God is doing to save his people from sin and redeem this broken world. For Paul, the good news announced how the Colossians had been made blameless in the eyes of God through Jesus; it also produced the fruit of Christlike attitudes and behaviors, as with the Colossians.

The good news has the same power to produce the same results today as well. Too often a "profession of faith" produces little moral change. It has been said that Christianity in North America is a mile wide and an inch deep. The same is also true for many parts of Africa and South America. The "health-and-wealth gospel" produces "converts" who use God as their errand boy and genie. On the other hand, salvation can be framed in a way that implies a burdensome and guilt-producing obligation to please God lest he disown us. That doesn't sound like good news! The first passage in Colossians steers between these shoals, or rather, it rejects both and finds deep water elsewhere—in the good news of the gospel. There we learn how much God loves us and has done for us, and this produces the fruit of faith, hope, and love (vv. 4–6). So, let's thank God for the good news that changes us.

Colossians 1:9–14

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul prayed for the Colossians to know God's will in order that they might live worthy of the Lord and fully please him by doing good works, by growing in knowledge, by persevering, and by joyfully thanking the Father, who had delivered them into the kingdom of the Son.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers will walk worthy of the Lord and aim to please him in every way when they know his will and the salvation they have received.

PREACHING IDEA

By experiencing God and understanding what he wants, we can live lives of good works that please him.

PREACHING POINTERS

The apostle Paul lifts up a soaring prayer for the believers in Colossae with intercession following thanksgiving (a good pattern for any prayer meeting!). In one long, magnificent sentence that continues through verse 23, Paul and his team pray for the saints living in the small town of the Roman province of southwest Asia Minor, that they would know God's desire—namely, that they would live for God even as they were empowered by God. In this passage, Paul likely has in view concerns that emerge later in the letter, including the pressure the Colossian believers experienced from false teachings and the unresolved situation between Onesimus and Philemon. Here he prays for them in a general sense that they would know God's will and walk in it. The prayer asks for knowledge, strength, and joy.

Those qualities seem to be in short supply today. For instance, consider joy. The "World Happiness Report" found that in 2018, Americans were less happy than they were the year before and ranked nineteenth, behind Australia and Canada. According to *The New Republic*, psychologists reported in 2019 that anxiety was on the rise.

Closely connected to joy is the issue of strength. Christians often feel powerless to overcome bad habits and besetting sins. Depending on willpower alone to break those habits turns into drudgery and leads only to short-term change, but when we are motivated by joy, strength follows. Obedience becomes a delight.

Where are strength and joy to be found? This rich passage tells us: in deep, experiential knowledge of the salvation Jesus Christ provides. By experiencing God and understanding what he wants, we can exhibit lives of good works that please him.

Colossians 1:15–23

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul used poetic language to describe the surpassing nature of Christ because of his great work in creation and redemption, and therefore Paul appealed for the Colossian believers to

Overview of All Preaching Passages

remain faithful to Christ until they are presented blameless with him before God, for there is no one more exalted than Christ.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers must remain in the faith they learned in the gospel, for Christ is exalted over all things in creation and redemption, and he has even reconciled believers to God in order to present them perfect before God.

PREACHING IDEA

Christ is above all, he has done it all, and now we have it all—so don't move at all.

PREACHING POINTERS

In a soaring “hymn,” the apostle Paul reminds the believers in the little town of Colossae that Jesus is, as theological formulations would later summarize, the exalted second person of the Trinity. That message hit home because in the Greco-Roman world, multiple gods vied for attention. If people had heard about Jesus, he was probably seen as just the newest deity on the block. The Christ-followers in Colossae knew differently, but the pressure of culture was strong, so Paul reminds them who Jesus is: the firstborn from the dead in whom the fullness of God dwells.

Today the situation is similar. People choose religious beliefs from multiple options. One of the options is even “none,” which James Emery White claims is the fastest-growing religious demographic (*The Rise of the Nones*, Baker, 2014). A 2020 report from Religion News Service indicates that the “nones” are as numerous as evangelicals or Catholics: 23.1%. Many people are attracted to Jesus (even while they are turned off by organized religion), but they may be creating their own version of the Son of God. Views about Jesus abound: he is a good man, a revolutionary, a sage, and so forth. This passage from Colossians sets the record straight. In the face of religious pluralism, the modern preacher can follow the apostle Paul: lift up Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God and urge listeners to remain steadfast in their faith because Christ is above all, has done it all, and now we have it all—so we should not move at all.

Colossians 1:24–29

EXEGETICAL IDEA

As an apostle, Paul was entrusted by God with an obligation to proclaim the mystery of Christ to all people, including the Gentiles, that all people might be united to Christ and brought to maturity in Christ. Toward this end, Paul labored exhaustively and suffered extensively.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

In Christ, God's mysterious plan has been made known, so that all people are invited into saving union with Christ, exhorted to grow to maturity in Christ, and called to embrace the mission of making Christ known to all people.

PREACHING IDEA

The mystery of Christ concealed is now revealed.

PREACHING POINTERS

With a touch of autobiography Paul returns to the theme of his own ministry as an apostle—how he suffered and labored to present everyone mature in Christ. Yet even as he speaks of his afflictions, there is also joy and confidence because the suffering came in his role as a minister of the mystery that was hidden for ages. That mystery is summarized as the “gospel,” or “good news,” the whole magnificent story about the person and work of Jesus—his divinity, incarnation, sacrificial death, resurrection, intercession, and imminent return. By making peace through the cross, Jesus broke down the wall to include Gentiles as part of his covenant people, so that his righteousness and honored standing before God became theirs also. Thus, the Gentiles experienced the “hope of glory” (v. 27). That is the good news, and ministers like Paul made it known.

The same good news operates today as well. And God still uses spokespeople like Paul to steward the message. Yet some followers of Christ find it difficult to manage their stewardship. We tend to be reticent in sharing the good news, the hope of glory. Perhaps we find it easier to talk about current events or personal ailments. This is understandable in our pluralistic culture, where certainty can be seen as close-minded and sharing might be seen as proselytizing. This passage challenges and encourages us to work hard in evangelism with the inspiration and courage God provides to make the good news known, because the mystery that was once concealed is now revealed.

Colossians 2:1–5

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul described how he worked specifically for the Colossians: that they would be able to stand against deception because they were a tight-knit church community, and because they stood firm in the full treasures of knowledge in Christ.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

To avoid being deceived and led astray in our faith, God’s people need strong relationships with other believers and good teaching about Christ.

PREACHING IDEA

When we’re knit together in love and knowledge, deception won’t unravel us.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul was laboring to protect the little church in Colossae from false teachers. He called this a “great struggle” (v. 1). The problem of false teachers and teaching is described on many pages of the New Testament such as Galatians where some people were propounding a combination of grace and legalism; and 1, 2, 3 John, which battled the “antichrists.” Heresies continued to plague the early church, and the problem has not abated since then. The message of the false teachers will be discussed later in Colossians (2:16–23), but in this text Paul rings the warning bell about their “plausible arguments” (v. 4).

Today false teachers continue to offer plausible arguments through print media, blogs, podcasts, and television. The teachers might say that Jesus is just a man or that God is an impersonal

“force.” A brilliant scientist like Richard Dawkins uses interviews, articles, and books to sound his shrill message of atheism. In *The God Delusion* (2006) he says: “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.” A white witch named Starhawk calls nature “the Goddess.” In *The Spiral Dance* (1979) she opines, “The Mysteries are teachings that cannot be grasped by the intellect alone, but only by the deep mind made accessible in trance. They may be conveyed by an object . . . by a key phrase, or symbol. . . . Only within the framework of the ritual does it take on its illuminating power.”

Colossians 2:6–15

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul appealed to the Colossians to live faithfully with Christ as their Lord, resisting all teachings and powers contrary to Christ, for by faith they have been united to Christ in his death and resurrection, so that they shared in the full blessings of Christ.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

When believers understand the fullness of blessings they have received by union with Christ, they will hold fast to Christ and not be captured by false teachings or defeated spiritual powers.

PREACHING IDEA

Jesus is better than religion, so don't let religion take you captive.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul was concerned about the false teachings that circulated in the Greco-Roman world. Some of those philosophies made their way into the church in Colossae, or at least threatened to infiltrate it. The church in Colossae was surrounded by a culture that worshipped many gods. In the ancient world shrines dotted the landscape, and feasts and festivals punctuated the yearly calendar. The philosophies of the day offered their own take on values, personhood, the afterlife, community, knowledge, and theology, and the teachings tempted the Colossians to stray from Christ.

Today in the West, the worship of idols is not as overt as it was in the first century with shrines and temples, although neo-paganism seems to be on the rise. James Emery White (2019) summarizes the present situation: “Most Americans mix traditional faith with beliefs in psychics, reincarnation and spiritual energy that they say can be found in physical objects such as mountains, trees and crystals.” In addition to the mainstreaming of such ideas, the more traditional “isms” of nationalism, materialism, and agnosticism are magnets that try to draw the hearts of Christ-followers. The rise in both neo-pagan and secular philosophies prompted Pope Francis in 2019 to state starkly that “we are not in Christianity anymore.”¹ The United

1 Francis X. Rocca, “Pope Francis, in Christmas Message, Says Church Must Adapt to Post-Christian West,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 21, 2019.

States and Canada should now be considered mission fields. Whether the philosophies are religious or secular, this text from Paul to the Colossians warns, “Don’t be led astray!” Jesus is better than religion, so we are on our guard to not let it capture us.

Colossians 2:16–23

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul warned the Colossian believers against submitting themselves to teachings and practices that were unable to save them from the sinful flesh, whether Jewish laws that were outdated in light of Christ or pagan religions that were the vain fruit of human imagination.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers must be on their guard against false teachings and religious practices that purport to offer something better than Christ when in reality they are empty, vain, and useless for conquering the flesh.

PREACHING IDEA

Shadows can’t save us, but the Son can.

PREACHING POINTERS

In Paul’s day, the Jewish and pagan teachers counseled, “Touch not, taste not, handle not—that’s the way to conquer sinful desires!” But the apostle said: “Wrong!” Neither Jewish regulations nor the rituals of pagan worship could curb sinful desires and change the heart. Furthermore, the teachers in Paul’s day were judging the members of the Colossian church for failing to follow Jewish and pagan rules, and Paul responded: “Don’t let them do it!” Returning to the old practices, whether Jewish or polytheistic, is tantamount to abandoning Christ, and doing so would disqualify the Christ-followers in Colossae from receiving their reward.

Asceticism and legalism are alive today too: crawl up the towering flight of stairs on your knees, and you will earn God’s favor; fast until your bones protrude, and you will get God’s attention; deny yourself sex with your spouse because that’s what the cult leader says to do, and then you will be free from carnal desire. This passage addresses people who have been saved from heavy-handed, false religions. Ironically, some Christians are tempted to return to those old ways. Legalism goads them: do more, do better, and then God will give you grace. But religious rules are just a shadow of the deeper reality that is Christ. He has already defeated the flesh, so we must cling to him alone. Making an idol out of anything—even spiritual practices like fasting, prayer, and self-denial—leads to shame and withdrawal when we fail, or pride and scoffing when we succeed. Legalistic rules and man-made religious ideas are just a shadow, and shadows can’t save us, but the Son can.

Colossians 3:1–4

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul exhorted the Colossians to seek to live in light of heaven, where Jesus reigns as Lord, and in light of their identity in Christ—for they have died and been raised with Christ in the

Overview of All Preaching Passages

past, their lives now belong to Christ in the present, and they will in the future be revealed with Christ in glory.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers must reorient their present lives on earth around the heavenly reality that Jesus lives as the exalted Lord in heaven and that they have a new identity in Christ and will one day share in his eternal glory.

PREACHING IDEA

Live on earth by thinking of Christ in heaven.

PREACHING POINTERS

Having lifted up Christ and put down the false teachers in the previous sections of Colossians, Paul now turns toward application to daily life. But before becoming intensely practical, Paul has a few more words to say about the mind: fix it on “things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (v. 2). The mind was valued highly in Greco-Roman culture. When he was in Athens, he debated in the marketplace every day and then gave an extended address on the Areopagus (Acts 17:17, 19–31); in Ephesus, not far from Colossae, he reasoned daily for two years in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9), presumably a venue for the TED Talks of the day.

The mind matters today just as it did then. How we think, and what we think about, have an enormous influence on how we live. Like “garbage in, garbage out,” poor thoughts in, poor actions out. This cause-effect dynamic may be reflected in the dramatic increase in the suicides in rural areas of the United States. The Center for Disease Control recorded 1.4 million total attempts and 47,173 suicides in 2017. The highest rates were in Montana, Alaska, Wyoming, New Mexico, Idaho, and Utah. Poverty, isolation, and the easy availability of guns were key factors, but according to one researcher, the men’s mentality was also a factor. As quoted in Stephen Rodrick’s *Rolling Stone* article “All-American Despair,” Dr. Craig Bryan of the University of Utah, who studies military and rural suicide, put it this way: “There’s been an increase in the ‘every-man-for-himself mentality.’”

Positive thinking is also beneficial: heavenly thoughts in, God-honoring actions out. In this text, the Lord commands us to “set our minds on things above” and to “seek the things above.” We live on earth by thinking of Christ in heaven.

Colossians 3:5–11

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul exhorted the Colossians to stop living in their former way of life apart from Christ, by putting to death the practices of that former life and embracing their identity as new persons being transformed into the image of Christ, as members together in the body of Christ.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers must be transformed into the image of Christ by putting off their old habits of sin, and by living out of the new nature and identity they have received in Christ and in the body of Christ.

Overview of All Preaching Passages

PREACHING IDEA

Now that we are spiritually alive in Christ, let's put to death the old ways.

PREACHING POINTERS

In the previous passages of Colossians, Paul focused on pagan beliefs, and in this passage he focuses on pagan lifestyle. The church in the village of Colossae was an island in a sea of paganism. The Colossians should no longer display the old habits of paganism because they were now alive in Christ. That spiritual reality was to be demonstrated in daily living: no sins of passion such as sexual immorality; no sins of anger such as slander; and no sins regarding material wealth such as greed. The Colossians knew well the old ways because they used to drift in the stream of their culture, but then they became new in Christ. Impurity, malice, and greed must be put to death and put off like a dirty garment

The lists of sins Paul gave the Colossians could have been gleaned from today's talk radio, evening news, advertisements, schools, and workplaces. Little has changed in two thousand years. Politicians slander each other with vituperative malice; sitcoms parade obscene talk with a wink and a titter; and websites make sexual impurity just a click away. The Pew Research Center found that in 2019, more Americans cohabited than were married: 59% and 50%. (In 2002 the figures were 54% and 60%.) Sixty-nine percent of Americans say that it is okay to cohabit even if they don't plan to marry, and 78% of respondents under the age of thirty say it's okay. (These statistics can be found at Pew Research.) With sins like polyamory and virtual sex with robots on the rise, this passage has much to say today.

Christ-followers have been made new, so they must act like it by putting to death impurity, greed, and anger, along with factions. All of that belongs to the old way, but we are now spiritually alive in Christ, so let's put to death the old ways.

Colossians 3:12–17

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul exhorted the Colossians to put on the virtues of Christ, especially love, that they might have peace and unity together as the body of Christ, where the word of Christ dwells richly among them and they bring honor to the name of the Lord Jesus in all that they do.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers must put on the virtues of Christ that will allow them to live in peaceful unity with one another as the body of Christ, to grow together through the word of Christ, and to honor the Lord Jesus in all things.

PREACHING IDEA

Only Jesus can dress you for church.

PREACHING POINTERS

When Paul spoke to the church in the little town of Colossae, he addressed a surprisingly diverse group of people: Jew and Gentile, slave and free, barbarian, and Scythian. Christ had

Overview of All Preaching Passages

called and regenerated people from many backgrounds and strata of society. That diversity testified to the power of Christ's call. The door to his kingdom is narrow, but all who desire to enter may do so. But this inclusivity was not only inspiring; it was also challenging, because diversity easily brings disunity. That was the challenge this first-century church faced, and percolating beneath the surface of Colossians is a particularly divisive issue—Philemon and his slave, Onesimus. How could master and runaway slave, brothers in Christ, demonstrate the unity of their spiritual standing?

Today we also face the issue of divisiveness. Racial, economic, cultural, and political diversity must not be allowed to divide Christ's body. One member of the church tunes in to a conservative news station and another to a progressive station. One member works at manual labor and another works in the world of ideas. Still another speaks with an accent and sometimes feels left out. Cultural differences and personal preferences, not to mention the daily irritations of living in community, must not trump the fact that we are one in Christ. How is this ideal to be actualized? By putting on love and the qualities that flesh out love: kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and thankfulness. Now that we've put off the dirty clothes associated with life before believing in Jesus, it's time to dress in those beautiful garments. Let's let Jesus dress us for church.

Colossians 3:18–4:1

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul instructed the Colossians regarding how they ought to live out their new life of Christ within their former household roles in a transformed manner, so that they will please the Lord Jesus in whatever they do as wives and husbands, children and fathers, and slaves and masters.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers must learn to serve Jesus as Lord within every aspect of their lives in the world, including their household roles and other circumstances that they are powerless to change, for the Lord Jesus is more concerned with their internal transformation than he is with their external situation.

PREACHING IDEA

In the Christian household, we have different roles but the same Lord.

PREACHING POINTERS

Although Paul was not married and lived as an itinerant missionary, he wrote often about home life. In this passage, he takes up that theme and draws out the practical implications of being "in Christ" in the home. Households in Colossae, including Christian households, followed traditional Greco-Roman codes that specified how husbands and wives, fathers and children, and masters and slaves were to treat each other. This passage is similar to those household codes, so in one sense, Christianity in Colossae was traditional and conservative, but Paul also introduces a progressive, even revolutionary, approach to family life. Wives, children, and slaves are elevated, while husbands, fathers, and masters are tempered. Paul treats all members of the household as responsible moral agents.

Overview of All Preaching Passages

In a day when the concept of family is being redefined, Colossians 3:18–4:1 takes Christ-followers back to their roots and shows them what it looks like to be in Christ under one roof. Our spirituality rises no higher than the way we treat our families. As the old Firestone tire commercial says, this is “where the rubber meets the road.” In this passage theology is put into practice in the most mundane and constant of our environments, the home. Christianity is neither exclusively traditional nor exclusively radical. The Christian home transcends those categories because all members of the household dethrone self and enthrone Christ. The theology of the first three chapters walks into our homes and arranges things in surprising ways because in the Christian household, we have different roles but the same Lord.

Colossians 4:2–6

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul instructed the Colossians to make the gospel known by praying for him in his global mission of proclaiming the gospel in new places, and by embracing their local mission in Colossae of answering knowledgeably about the gospel when asked about their transformed speech and conduct.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

All Christians bear the responsibility to make the gospel known, not only by persistently praying for preachers and missionaries but also by faithfully honoring Christ in how they live, by speaking graciously in every situation, and by answering the inevitable questions that arise about their faith.

PREACHING IDEA

To spread the good news, pray for the preachers and salt your own speech.

PREACHING POINTERS

Writing from jail, Paul asks the Colossians to pray that a door would be opened, so that he could return to his work as an apostle, declaring the mystery of Christ. He also asks them to pray that he would make that message clear. Working in conjunction with the public ministry of preaching was the interpersonal witness of church members. Paul exhorts them to walk in wisdom toward “outsiders,” use gracious speech, and then be ready to explain why they lived differently than the people of the Greco-Roman world. In this passage, Paul puts evangelism on center stage.

The same emphasis is needed today. Few churches in North America are growing from conversions, but partnership between public proclamation and interpersonal witness is a timeless combination, as effective in our day as in the first century. Thom Rainer observes that excellent preaching is crucial to what he calls “breakout churches,” congregations that are growing because of conversions. He states that preaching is the “number one correlated factor related to the evangelistic growth of the church. . . . It is hard to overstate how important the centrality of preaching was in these breakout churches” (Rainer, n.d.). I suspect that behind the clear, passionate, and relevant expository preaching that Rainer discovered in these churches there is also a host of members who have formed relationships with

“outsiders,” to use Paul’s term (v. 5). They witness by their words and lifestyle and invite their friends to church to hear the Word of God. Public proclamation and interpersonal witness is a winning combination, so to spread the good news we pray for the preachers and partner with them by salting our own speech.

Colossians 4:7–18

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul closed his letter with a series of greetings and instructions that connected the Colossian church with the broader body of Christ, for the purpose of mutual encouragement and regional partnership together in the global mission of proclaiming the gospel and strengthening believers in Christ.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

When local churches partner together and strive to encourage one another and work together for the gospel, they are mutually strengthened and together they accomplish the mission of living and proclaiming the gospel.

PREACHING IDEA

To spread the good news, work locally and partner globally.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul wraps up his epistle with the standard form of first-century letters. He sends greetings from his team, makes a few “announcements,” and gives a few directives. That was the conventional way to conclude, but Paul uses the convention to drive home some of the key themes of Colossians one more time. Those themes are the advance of the gospel and the nature of the church. With references to house churches such as the one that met at Nympha’s (v. 15) and the citywide church in towns like Laodicea (vv. 15–16), we see that the church was a regional body. Paul and his team had a vision to reach the whole district.

Today that vision is needed as well. The legacy of the Protestant Reformation is separation more than unification. According to the authoritative *World Christian Encyclopedia*, there are more than thirty-three thousand denominations, so Jesus’s prayer rings urgently today: “that they may all be one” (John 17:21). A vision of unity and partnership between churches is the heart beneath Colossians 4:7–18 and perhaps by preaching on this final section, it can become the heart of our churches too. Evangelism is best done when churches partner with each other. To spread the good news, the church should work locally and partner globally.

Philemon 1–7

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul addressed his letter to Philemon and the church in Colossae, and rather than malign Philemon’s character because of his conflict with Onesimus, he gave thanks to God for Philemon’s genuine Christian faith and love that had benefited many Christians, including even Paul himself.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers must discipline themselves to give thanks to God for one another and acknowledge the positive work of Christ in one another's lives, including and especially in the context of conflict that must be addressed.

PREACHING IDEA

When there's a conflict, what you share is better than what you win.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul opened this letter, the most personal one he wrote, by greeting and blessing Philemon, a well-to-do patron of a house church. That kind of opening was typical in ancient letters, yet in the introduction of this letter to Philemon, Paul goes far beyond convention. The introduction cultivates the soil for the seeds to be planted later—a command and appeal to receive back the runaway slave, Onesimus. Paul cultivates the soil by emphasizing his interpersonal relationship with Philemon, full of genuine affection and sincere admiration. But cultivation was more than a rhetorical device designed to put Philemon in a receptive state of mind, because Paul meant every word.

Thus, Paul sets a good model for us today when dealing with conflict. At a tense board meeting or when the family can't get along or when the congregation is divided, before planting seeds of exhortation, cultivate the soil with prayer, thanks, and encouragement. Before trying to persuade someone, begin by affirming them. Unfortunately, today persuasion is often carried on with rancor. Accusations, overstatement, sarcasm, and one-sided arguments may win applause from those who already agree with our position, but those tactics do nothing to persuade skeptics or heal divisions. A better way, the one modeled by Philemon 1–7, is to begin with humility, prayer, thanks, and praise. Conflict is unavoidable in the world and in the church, so to bind together what has come loose. Let us first remember the tie that binds. When there's a conflict, what you share is better than what you win.

Philemon 8–16

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul appealed on the basis of love for Philemon to do the proper thing toward Onesimus, for God had perhaps superintended the entire situation so that Philemon would embrace Onesimus no longer *merely* as a slave, but as *more than* a slave, as a beloved brother.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Believers must recognize the work of Christ in one another's lives and thereby come to no longer view one another in worldly terms, *merely* as objects to be utilized or rejected for personal gain, but must learn to embrace one another as *more than* such objects, as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ.

PREACHING IDEA

Before believing, we were “merely”—but now we are “more than.”

PREACHING POINTERS

Tension pulses under the surface of Paul's seemingly simple letter—the tension of a runaway slave and his offended master. Roman law was clear that Onesimus should be returned to his master, but the situation was more complex than that, because God had arranged things so that Onesimus came under the ministry of Paul and was converted. Onesimus and Philemon now had a new relationship in Christ. The one who was “useless” in Philemon's estimation had become a disciple and was now “useful.” Paul wants to make him part of his church planting team, helping the old apostle especially while he is still in jail, so he writes to Philemon to receive his new brother in the Lord. The church that met in Philemon's house probably leaned in to hear Paul address his friend. How would the old veteran address Philemon, his fellow-soldier? Would he command him or shame him? Would he abandon Onesimus, his spiritual child? No. All three of the men were brothers, so Paul appealed to Philemon, not commanded him. Onesimus is no longer what he was, “merely” a slave; he is now “much more” and should be treated as such.

The same reasoning is needed today. We see a propensity to dehumanize people by reducing them to hits on social media. A better propensity is based on the theological sociology modeled in Philemon. Everyone (including slaves!) is made in the image of God, and all followers of Christ have one Father. In the church, we are not “merely” objects or statistics, we are “more than” that; we are fellow workers in God's vineyard (v. 1), fellow soldiers in the fight (v. 2), brothers and sisters (vv. 7, 16), spiritual children (v. 10), formerly perceived as useless, but now useful in the Lord's work (v. 11). Before believing, we were “merely”—but now we are “more than.”

Philemon 17–25

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Paul instructed Philemon to welcome Onesimus as if he were Paul himself, and if Philemon will embrace Paul's theological vision and do what Paul asks—and more!—then Philemon will have refreshed Paul's heart and prepared the way for Paul to visit Colossae, so they could have fellowship as mates together in Christ.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

When believers develop a Christ-centered theological vision through which they see the world, then they are equipped not only to obey the direct commands of Christ but also to discern how to honor Christ in every situation, so that they are mutually refreshed as they welcome one another as mates together in Christ.

PREACHING IDEA

Let's refresh one another by welcoming one another.

PREACHING POINTERS

Paul wraps up the letter to Philemon by finally delivering some imperatives. The old apostle has taken a long on-ramp to these imperatives, but in this passage he pulls into the fast lane with four commands in quick succession: *welcome* Onesimus (v. 17), *charge* his debts to my account (v. 18), *refresh* my heart in Christ (v. 20), and *prepare* a room for me (v. 22). Welcome

Overview of All Preaching Passages

Onesimus? Easier said than done. Onesimus had shirked his duty, broken their relationship, and shamed his master in the process. But the command was still given: welcome him as you would welcome me. Grace like that would refresh the old apostle.

In the church there are no Greeks or Jews, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free (Col. 3:11). Today we might say that in the church there are no employers or employees, young or old, male or female, Filipino or Japanese, British-Canadian or French-Canadian. Every member of Christ's body is there because of grace, not merit, and all members love and fear the Lord, our master in heaven (Col. 3:22–4:1). That theological vision is the basis of Paul's command to welcome Onesimus who has become part of the body. So, let's refresh one another by welcoming one another.

Today in our polarized culture, welcome is offered to people we agree with—those who vote the way we vote, scoff at the things we scoff at, and dress the ways we dress. But to be part of the church, one does not need to know the “secret handshake.” One simply has to confess that Jesus is Lord. That is the basis for why we welcome one another to the family.

ABBREVIATIONS

GENERAL ABBREVIATIONS

A.D.	in the year of our Lord (<i>anno Domini</i>)
B.C.	before Christ
B.C.E.	before the Common Era
C.E.	Common Era
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament

TECHNICAL ABBREVIATIONS

ca.	circa
ch(s).	chapter(s)
cf.	<i>confer</i> (compare)
ed.	edition
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> (for example)
et al.	<i>et alii</i> (and others)
etc.	<i>et cetera</i> (and so forth, and the rest)
fn.	footnote
gen.	genitive
idem	the same
i.e.	<i>id est</i> (that is)
inf.	infinitive
instr.	instrumental
p(p).	page(s)
pass.	passive
perf.	perfect
pres.	present
ptc.	participle
sbjv.	subjunctive
subj.	subject
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> (under the word)
temp.	temporal
trans.	translation
v(v).	verse(s)
vol(s).	volume(s)

Abbreviations

BIBLICAL SOURCES

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis
Exod.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1 Sam.	1 Samuel
2 Sam.	2 Samuel
1 Kings	1 Kings
2 Kings	2 Kings
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh.	Nehemiah
Esther	Esther
Job	Job
Ps./Pss.	Psalms(s)
Prov.	Proverbs
Eccl.	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Dan.	Daniel
Hos.	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah
Jonah	Jonah
Mic.	Micah
Nah.	Nahum

Old Testament (continued)

Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah
Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom.	Romans
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians
Col.	Colossians
1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim.	1 Timothy
2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Philem.	Philemon
Heb.	Hebrews
James	James
1 Peter	1 Peter
2 Peter	2 Peter
1 John	1 John
2 John	2 John
3 John	3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev.	Revelation

EXTRABIBLICAL SOURCES

Apocrypha

Sir	Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach (Ecclesiastucs)
Bar	Baruch
3 Macc	3 Maccabees
4 Esd	4 Esdras

Abbreviations

Old Testament Pseudepigrapha

2 Bar. 2 Baruch (Syriac Apocalypse)
4 Ezra 4 Ezra

Papyrii

P. Oxy. *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*
P. Par. *The Paris Papyri*
P. Wisc. *The Wisconsin Papyri*

Apostolic Fathers

Did *Didache*
Diogn *Diognetus*
Ignatius (of Antioch) Syrian bishop, church father; ca. A.D. 50–ca. 110
Eph *To the Ephesians*

Other Sources

Apuleius
Metam. *The Golden Ass (Metamorphoses)*
Aristotle
Eth. nic. *Nichomachean Ethics (Ethica nichomachea)*
Metaph. *Metaphysics (Metaphysica)*
Pol. *Politics (Politica)*
Cicero
Rep. *On the Commonwealth (De Republica)*
Verr. *Against Verres (In Verrem)*
[Cicero]
Rhet. Her. *Rhetoric: For Herennius (Rhetorical ad Herennium)*
Clement of Alexandria
Strom. *Miscellanies (Stromata)*
Columella
Rust. *On Agriculture (De re rustica)*
Dio Chrysostom
Troj. *Trojan Discourse (Trojana [Or. 11])*
Dionysius of Halicarnassus
Ant. rom. *Roman Antiquities (Antiquitates romanae)*
Epictetus
Diatr. *Discourses (Diatribai [Dissertationes])*
Eusebius (of Caesarea)
Hist. eccl. *Ecclesiastical History (Historia ecclesiastica)*
Herodotus
Hist. *Histories (Historiae)*
Iamblichus
Myst. *On the Mysteries (De mysteriis)*
Josephus
C. Ap. *Against Apion (Contra Apionem)*

Abbreviations

<i>A.J.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities (Antiquitates judaicae)</i>
<i>B.J.</i>	<i>Jewish War (Bellum judaicum)</i>
Justin	
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogue with Trypho (Dialogus cum Tryphone)</i>
Justinian	
<i>Dig.</i>	<i>Digest (Digesta)</i>
Longinus	
<i>[Subl.]</i>	<i>On the Sublime (De sublimitate)</i>
Philo (of Alexandria)	
<i>Leg.</i>	<i>Allegorical Interpretation (Legum allegoriae)</i>
<i>Spec. Leg.</i>	<i>On the Special Laws (De specialibus legibus)</i>
Plato	
<i>Theaet.</i>	<i>Theaetetus</i>
Pliny (the Younger)	
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Letters (Epistulae)</i>
Plutarch	
<i>Aem.</i>	<i>Aemilius Paullus</i>
Quintilian	
<i>Decl.</i>	<i>Declamations (Declamationes)</i>
Seneca	
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Moral Epistles (Epistulae morales)</i>
Strabo	
<i>Geogr.</i>	<i>Geography (Geographica)</i>
Suetonius	
<i>Claud.</i>	<i>Divine Claudius (Divus Claudius)</i>
Tacitus	
<i>Ann.</i>	<i>Annals (Annales)</i>
Xenophon	
<i>Anab.</i>	<i>Expedition (Anabasis)</i>
<i>Mem.</i>	<i>Memoirs (Memorabilia)</i>
<i>Oec.</i>	<i>Economics (Oeconomicus)</i>

PERIODICALS

<i>AJA</i>	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSPL</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>

Abbreviations

<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

SERIES

AB	Anchor Bible
ASBT	Acadia Studies in Biblical Theology
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
EGGNT	Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JRASS	Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Meyer-Kommentar)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
NCC	New Covenant Commentary
NICNT	The New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	The New International Greek Testament Commentary
NTL	The New Testament Library
PCNT	Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament
PNTC	The Pillar New Testament Commentary
PPS	Popular Patristic Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
THNTC	Two Horizons New Testament Commentary
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WEC	The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary

REFERENCE

<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
BDAG	Danker, F. W., W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed.
BDB	F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, <i>The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i> .
HALOT	L. Koehler, and W. Baumgartner, <i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
LSJ	H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H.S. Jones, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9 th ed.

Abbreviations

<i>PGM</i>	K. Preisendanz, ed. <i>Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri</i> .
<i>TDNT</i>	Kittel, G., and G. Friedrich, eds. <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Trans. G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols.

Bible Translations

ESV	English Standard Version
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NET	New English Translation
NIV	New International Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version