

February 1, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Beloved Brothers, Faithful Servants, Fellow Bond-slaves

Colossians 4:7 – 18

I want to conclude this study of Colossians with this short word about **beloved brothers, faithful servants and fellow-bondslaves**. Each term describes the Christian's relationship to those believers surrounding him; to the Body of Christ, the church; and his relationship to God. **In relation to each other, there ought to be a fellowship and atmosphere of brotherly love. In relation to service and ministry in the church, we ought to be found faithful. And in relation to the Lord, we ought to consider ourselves fellow-bondslaves.** Paul ends this letter to the Colossians by mentioning several of his fellow-workers in the gospel as examples and encouragement to the Colossians, and my intention this morning is to highlight the message of beloved brothers, faithful servants and fellow-bondslaves through the lives of his co-workers.

Beloved Brothers

We are beloved because of Christ. It was the love of God that captured us and brought us into this love relationship in the first place. *'He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son'*. Colossians 1:13 Because the Father loves the Son, and that love is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit – we are beloved by God – and beloved by all those who share this love. Paul uses this term when writing to the saints at least 30 times – and it indicates not only his depth of feeling for them, but also carries with it a sort of stamp of approval – as when the Father speaks from heaven about His Son saying: *'This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased'*.

Faithful servants

The outstanding characteristic of Christ-followers is **faithfulness**. Just as we are beloved because Christ is the beloved Son, **we are faithful because God is the faithful God**. *Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments*. Deuteronomy 7:9 At the end of our lives, when we stand before the Judge, our commendation or reward will not be based on how much we served in the church, the quantity of stuff that we accomplished or the number of souls won to Christ on account of our work. **What will matter is how faithful we've been with what God has given us to do.**

In Matthew we read the familiar account of the three servants and the talents, and what is remarkable is that the commendation for the guy with the five talents and the guy with the 2 talents is exactly the same: *His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. Faithfulness in the service of the King is the most important quality we can possess*. In other words, the important thing was not how much they made on their investment, how successful they were – **but how faithful they were to invest what they had**. Because the last guy – the one talent servant – had the same opportunities the others had but was faithless to invest what he had.

Mark Hatfield tells of touring Calcutta with Mother Teresa and visiting the so-called “House of Dying,” where sick children are cared for in their last days, and the dispensary, where the poor line up by the hundreds to receive medical attention. Watching Mother Teresa minister to these people, feeding and nursing those left by others to die, Hatfield was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the suffering she and her co-workers face daily. *“How can you bear the load without being crushed by it?”* he asked. Mother Teresa replied, *“My dear Senator, I am not called to be successful, I am called to be faithful.”*

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: *Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy* [faithful]. 1 Corinthians 4:2 Tychicus was found faithful. Onesimus was found faithful: *and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you*. Colossians 4:9 You go down the list and find that most of these guys spent a lot of time with Paul and one of the essential characteristics he prized, because he knew that the Lord prized it, was faithfulness. There is one glaring exception and that is a man called Demas. Paul mentions Demas here and in Philemon as a fellow laborer with Paul, but in 2 Timothy 4 Paul told Timothy: *Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica*. 2 Timothy 4:10 At the end of Paul's life, while he was in prison and expecting to die a martyr's death, when Paul probably needed him most, Demas skipped town.

Someone who is a faithful servant is one who lives his life not for himself but for others. I don't know what happened to Demas. All we are told is that the love of the world somehow seduced him away from being a faithful companion of Paul and a faithful minister of the gospel. I get the sense that Demas perhaps felt like he needed a little 'me' time, because when someone is described as loving this present world, they are usually looking to satisfy themselves and not others. Besides, ministry with Paul was probably no picnic. In and out of prison – beaten, stoned, shipwrecked. Hanging out with Gentiles and other sinners. In any case, Paul said that Demas deserted him.

Contrast Demas' story with Aristarchus in verse 10: *Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you.* Aristarchus was with Paul in Ephesus where they very nearly lost their lives and he was one of the men that accompanied Paul to Rome in Acts chapter 27. They did life and ministry together – and now they were doing prison together. Now whether Aristarchus was actually a prisoner with Paul there or simply meant that he voluntarily chose to remain with Paul in prison we're not sure. What we are sure of is that Aristarchus didn't desert Paul when the going got rough. Faithfulness is not proven when times are good – it is in the valley of despair and the shadow of death that faithfulness is proven. Faithful servants don't desert when the going gets rough.

Desert is the word Paul used when describing another faithless servant, John Mark, in the book of Acts. On Paul's first ministry tour with Barnabas, they took John Mark with them but the Scriptures record that along the way John Mark deserted them and went back to Jerusalem. We don't know the reasons he left, but we do know that his leaving left a big impression on Paul, because when another trip was proposed and John Mark was nominated to go along, Paul had a big issue. *Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.* Acts 15:37-38

But thankfully the story did not end there. Barnabas took John Mark under his wing and by the time Paul is writing to the Colossians, Mark is back and Paul is mentioning him: *Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions if he comes to you, welcome him),* Colossians 4:10 Evidently something happened in John Mark's life to put him back on track. Peter mentions him in his first letter and by the time Paul writes to Timothy at the end of his life he has this to say: *Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.* 2 Timothy 4:11 **From deserter to faithful servant.** I think this serves to tell us that it's not over till it's over. I don't know what eventually happened with Demas – he may have come back to the Lord, and he may have remained faithless – the Bible doesn't say. But although there may be side roads we wander down – there may be wrong turns we take – God is faithful to bring His children all the way through.

That is good reason in itself to pray faithfully for one another – to be devoted to prayer. That was the ministry of Epaphras: *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. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.* Colossians 4:12-13 Evidently this guy was characterized by a faithfulness in prayer. **Faithful servants are devoted to prayer.** We met Epaphras in chapter one of Colossians, when Paul was relating how the Colossians had come to the knowledge of the grace of God: *'...just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow slave. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.'* Colossians 1:7-8 And once again, here are all those terms: beloved, faithful servant, fellow slave. Paul says that not only did Epaphras teach the Colossians about the grace of God, but he always struggled in prayer for them – literally 'agonized' in prayer that they would stand complete, full-grown, whole, perfect - fully confident of the whole will of God. The idea here is that prayer is integral for the will of God to be accomplished in our lives, and sometimes it takes a while for the answers to come – so we agonize in prayer.

I think of the story Bill Hybels tells of a powerful experience after a baptism service in their church. He writes: **“I bumped into a woman in the stairwell who was crying. I thought this was a little odd, since the service was so joyful. I asked her if she was all right. She said, ‘No, I’m struggling.’ She said, ‘My mom was baptized today. I prayed for her every day for almost 20 years. The reason I’m crying is because I came this close to giving up on her. At the 5-year mark I said, “Who needs this? God isn’t listening.” At the 10-year mark I said, “Why am I wasting my breath?” At the 15-year mark I said, “This is absurd.” At the 19-year mark I said, “I’m just a fool.” But I just kept trying, kept praying. Even with weak faith I kept praying. Then she gave her life to Christ, and she was baptized today. I will never doubt the power of faithful prayer again.” Faithful servants**

Fellow-bondslaves

The last term Paul uses to describe these men is fellow-bondslaves, or fellow slaves. This is our description because this was the way in which Christ came. *'Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men.'* Philippians 2:5-7 Some translations use the term 'servant' instead of bond-slave, and that isn't a bad word. But I think Paul was emphasizing their relationship to Christ and when we talk about how we are related to Christ, 'bond slave' paints a more accurate picture. **The difference between a slave and servant is the difference between merely working for someone, and being owned by someone.** I have heard a lot of people talk about working for the Lord, but not too many talk about being owned by Him. Imagine how that would change your perspective on just about everything if your realization is that God owns you, lock, stock and barrel. Slaves have no life of their own. Their short range goals and long range goals and everything in between are dictated by their master. They depend on him for everything – even life itself. They have no freedom to contemplate any action not given them by their master. **Slaves do not live for themselves but for the pleasure of their master.**

Here Paul invokes that relationship but at an even deeper level – a bond slave. And to understand what he understood about bond slaves we have to turn back to Deuteronomy 15 as the Lord was giving instructions to His people on how to deal with slaves – and specifically, what to do when you set one free. *'And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your wine press. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today.'* But if he says to you, I will not go out from you, because he loves you and your household, since he is well-off with you, then you shall take an awl, and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. Deuteronomy 15:13-17 A bond-slave was one that became a slave voluntarily – out of love for his master.

It is a curious paradox that the same Bible that says *'It was for freedom that Christ set you free, stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery'* Galatians 5:1 also says *'...use your freedom as bond slaves of God.'* 1 Peter 2:16 Which is it – free or slave? And the answer is – both. It is freedom from slavery – the slavery to sin, slavery to the law, slavery to things that capture our hearts and affections apart from God Himself. And it is a freedom to slavery – that is choosing to be a bond slave of Christ out of love for Him. I think this is one reason God told Moses to *'...remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt,...'*

'Remember', He seems to say, 'your cruel slavery under Pharaoh, where you were not your own and jumped through his hoops and were beaten for your pains and your slavery ended in poverty, destitution and death.' 'And remember too, that now you have a new Master – one who is compassionate and kind beyond all measure and who loves you eternally and wants you to take pleasure in Him because He is the source of all joy.'

This simply illustrates the biblical truth that we will be slaves of someone. Jesus said, *'You cannot serve two masters'* which in itself indicates that we will have a master. Or in the immortal words of that Greenwich Village philosopher, Bob Dylan, 'Ya gotta serve someone'. **Will you serve sin and receive its wages – death? Or serve the law and reap condemnation? Or serve the suicidal wages of stuff and the expectations of others and waste your life? Or will you be made free to be a bond slave?** You see before a slave could be a bond slave – he had to be freed from slavery in the first place. That is exactly what Christ has done for us – set us free from sin and death, by His death on the cross, forgiving our rebellion and hostility, and in gratitude and love we bow our hearts and stand at the door and let Him mark us for life. Bond slaves. Oswald Chambers wrote: *The passion of Christianity is that I deliberately sign away my own rights and become a bond-slave of Jesus Christ.* Oswald Chambers

Hilary told me about a girl she met at a recent conference in Thailand who told her about her family and their journey of faith. And she told her about a life-changing dream her father had one night that forever altered the way he did things, and as a consequence, the way their family did things. It seems he found himself standing before the throne of God. It was as if his whole life was on display at that point and the overwhelming sense he had was that not much of what he had done really counted for God. In fact all around where he was standing he found covered in ashes – and the ashes were all the things that he did or was doing for God – and it was just so much burned up stuff. He was fairly despondent, and even the fact that here and there in the ashes were a few, small jewels, a few bits of gold and silver, that had made it through the fire, didn't serve to overpower the fact that most of what he thought was Christian works were simply fuel for the fire.

And it came to him that he had been doing his own thing thinking that he was doing for God. But he didn't have the attitude of a bond-slave. He was working his own agenda – not God's – and what he built and labored on burned up in the end. I don't know about you, but I don't want to be standing in a heap of ashes at the end of it all.

So what does all this mean for us? First of all, are you one of the beloved? Have you surrendered to Christ? Has His love filled your heart and transferred you out of the kingdom of darkness into the sunshine of His love? Until that happens – you can't go any further. You cannot know the freedom and joy it is to be Christ's bondslave. I want to invite you this morning into the freedom of a beloved brother and sister, a faithful servant, a fellow bondslave.

But if that has happened, then you need to take seriously to heart the encouragement to faithful servants and fellow-bondslaves. Are you faithful? Do you expect to hear **"Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord!"** ? Have you willingly said to the Lord, 'I love you and I will not leave you – I am your bondslave – my life and dreams, ambitions and aspirations are Yours – I am living for Your pleasure and not my own'? Paul's overwhelming joy was that God took him – 'a red-handed rebel' – as Oswald Chambers calls him, set him free from the slavery to sin and the law and the world, to be a willing bondslave, faithful servant, beloved brother.

Our gracious God and loving Father,

You call us away from the suicidal desires of sin and selfish pleasures to be Yours and Yours alone and yet we are not able to break these strong bonds unless You destroy them. . We want to love You supremely, and yet there is no pure love in our souls, no spark of affection that would turn us to You. We cannot love till You turn our slavery into freedom – the freedom of beloved sons. Our hearts are stone – melt them with Your love. Our souls are locked – let Your love be the master key to open them to the grace that saves us. Lord Jesus, Master, Redeemer, Savior, come and take entire possession of Your creation now. We are Yours by right of purchase. In Your arms of love, enfold and subdue our willful spirits. Take, sanctify and use our every faculty for Your purpose. Cause our hearts to revel in the joy of the freedom of true bondslaves and captives of Your love. And make our hearts eternally glad in You so that we will live to make others glad in You we pray in the precious name of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***