

“Connections”
Colossians 4:7-18
December 11, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

Passages such as this one are often quickly passed over when people are reading through the Bible. It’s an easy mistake to make, because it seems to be nothing more than a series of names of people we don’t know and greetings of those unknown people. What possible relevance could this have to us? I would contend that it has great relevance to the modern reader because it is a living example of the way the grace of God through Christ connects us to other people. Paul names ten different people in this passage. In a similar series of greetings at the end of Romans, he names sixteen different people. What makes this even more remarkable is that Paul had never been to either Rome or Colossae at the time of writing these letters. The gospel connects us to other people, and such connections are a universal human desire.

We all fear and avoid disconnection from others. Is there anything worse for the middle school student than going to a new school and sitting all alone at lunchtime in the cafeteria? Can’t we all identify with Cinderella’s pain when her sisters excitedly prepare for the king’s ball while Cinderella is ignored and stays home? Have you ever experienced the pain of feeling yourself invisible when you’re in the middle of a crowd of people who all seem to know one another while no one bothers to talk to you? Relational disconnection is part of the curse upon the earth due to the sin of the human race. Relational connection is part of the restoration of all things by the power of the gospel. Let’s notice the ingredients that connect people to one another that are evident in this passage.

I. A Culture of Honoring People

Paul’s greetings of others are a way of honoring people. What exactly is a greeting? It’s one of those things that you think you know what it is until you start thinking about it. It seems to me that a greeting sends at least three messages. The first message is, “I see you; you are not invisible.” For them to have this great apostle remember their name and greet them is to be honored by him. I don’t think we get a pass on this by saying, “I’m not very good at remembering names.” Unless you have some mental problem due to age or disability, you can improve your ability to recall people’s names. We will all forget names from time to time, but part of loving others is to continue to make the effort. I think one of the things that helped Paul remember the names of people was his practice of praying for them. If you have been remembering

someone's name before God in prayer, it becomes much easier to remember their name when you see them face to face.

The second message of a greeting is, "I welcome you." This has rich theological roots in the gospel. The gospel is the extraordinarily good news that God welcomes us into his presence. It is the reversal of the angel posted to stand guard at the entrance to the Garden of Eden. That angel was put there to prevent sinful humankind from returning to the Garden and to the tree of life found there. The drawn sword of the angel sent a very loud message: "You are not welcome." The same message of unwelcome was sent by the curtain in the temple, located just outside the holy of holies where the Ark of the Covenant was placed as the very presence of God. Jesus sends a different message, one of welcome. At his death, the curtain of unwelcome was ripped in two, from top to bottom. The way to paradise and the tree of life is once again opened because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Just as God's welcome of us was costly to him, our welcome of others is often costly as well. Paul's greetings were costly to him. He sent a loyal and helpful companion, Tychicus, with the greetings and the letter we have been studying. Paul gave him up that others might receive the benefit. When we welcome others into our homes, they will sometimes break things. A greeting of someone at church may mean that you have to turn your attention away from friends in order to welcome the stranger. But we honor others by welcoming them, especially the stranger who may be especially needy of a welcome. We do so while being mindful of God's gracious welcome of us through Christ.

The third message of a greeting is "I value you and want to be with you." To greet someone is to bring your presence before another even when absent from that person. It is an act of being present with someone, the opposite of being invisible. If Paul greeted people in order to experience some measure of presence with them even when bodily absent, we should at least work on being present with people when bodily present. I think our use of the smartphone needs to be examined in light of this. How often do we turn our attention away from the person we are with to attend to someone calling us or texting us usually with a message that is not at all urgent? That is an act of non-greeting and non-welcome. It says, "Even though I don't know what this call is about, I find it more compelling than being fully present with you." How different is God's behavior! The psalms speak of him as being **"a very present help in trouble"** (46:1). Another psalm says, **"The Lord is your keeper, the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night"** (121:5-6). The only way God can provide such shade is by being a large presence near us. We follow God's lead as we honor others by being present with them.

In addition to these greetings, another way I see Paul honoring others is through his words about Tychicus. He calls him **"a faithful minister and**

fellow servant in the Lord” (v. 7). Tychicus appears several other times in the New Testament. He accompanied Paul back to Jerusalem and stuck with him through all Paul’s trials and imprisonments. Now he is being sent as a courier with the letter to the Colossians. He is not noted as a great thinker or a mighty church planter or evangelist. He is simply faithful to the Lord and loyal to Paul. Paul honors him by calling him a “fellow servant.” Paul did not hold himself above Tychicus, even though it would seem to us that Paul’s was the more important role. But in the church, the one who sets up the chairs is just as important as the one who stands in front to lead. We honor one another when we recognize this and value people as God values them.

II. A Culture of Intentionality Instead of Isolation

Paul was in prison as he wrote these words. It would have been an easy thing for him to retreat into isolation. Paradoxically, isolation is our natural tendency whether things are going well for us or poorly. When we encounter trying times, such as Paul was experiencing here, our tendency is to isolate out of self-pity or just to recover. If you’re not doing well, you often just want to be alone. But isolation can also plague us when things are going well. That is what we see happening in American culture. With the affluence of our economy, we don’t need one another so much. So we selfishly isolate ourselves, spending our time at home in pursuits that keep us alone.

In his book *Disappearing Church*, Mark Sayers tells about the 1995 film *SAFE*. Let me quote from his excellent summary.

SAFE tells the story of Carol, a Southern California housewife played by Julianne Moore who appears to have it all. She has a wealthy husband and a large, well-furnished house. She is attractive, is surrounded by friends, and spends her days working out at the gym, shopping for furniture, and being pampered at the beauty salon. However, after an allergic reaction, and a panic attack in her car while driving, Carol begins to develop a terrifying fear that she is facing a battle against a hidden enemy that seems to be attacking her well-being... At a children’s party in front of her friends, Carol again has a terrifying panic attack, which leads her to attend a seminar about toxins, chemicals, and stress. For Carol, the seminar is a conversion experience, in which she comes to believe that her assailant is the modern world. The facilitator of the seminar encourages the audience to find their ‘safe place,’ a refuge in their home, which is free from contemporary contaminants. This advice sends Carol on an obsessive quest to rid herself of toxins. Despite her doctor and a psychiatrist finding nothing wrong with her, she eventually makes the decision to relocate to a secluded community in the desert, which brands itself as a safe place free from contamination... Carol begins to feel safe. That is, until a nature walk, where Carol unintentionally happens upon a highway and is exposed to exhaust fumes. Carol demands a room farther from the road, but no room is available apart from a completely sealed, igloo-like structure built by one of the more obsessive residents of the commune. In the movie’s final scene, Carol bids

farewell to her husband and son and retreats into the sealed igloo. Now utterly sealed off from the outside world, she stands alone and, following the advice of one of the commune's leaders, she stands in the austerity of the igloo in front of the mirror and pathetically repeats to her reflection, 'I love... I really love... I love you.' She has finally found her safe place. Yet she is falling apart, cut off from human relationships. (pp. 53-54)

Paul's situation was just the opposite of Carol's. Though he was in a small place, a prison cell, his world was still large. Instead of withdrawing into isolation, he intentionally sought out others. Communication is an important part of this intentionality. Paul sent Tychicus **"for this very purpose, that you may know how we are"** (v. 8). He also mentions that he will be sending Onesimus and adds that the two of them **"will tell you of everything that has taken place here"** (v. 9). He took the time to communicate how he was doing, not for his own sake, but for the sake of others. He knew they would want to know, and he knew that such communication deepens people's connections.

This seems to me to be one of the biggest reasons for people's lack of connection today. Too many choose the path of isolation instead of the path of intentional connection. We were talking about this at our Men's Fraternity group this past Monday morning, and all of us agreed that in general we lack intentionality with our relationships. That invites an application question. Is there one step you could take this week into intentionality in your relationships and away from isolation?

III. A Culture of Grace

Several names mentioned by Paul in this passage reveal the grace of God at work. The Onesimus who is named in verse 9 is likely the runaway slave of Philemon, whom Paul writes in the letter bearing his name. In the letter to Philemon, Paul refers to Onesimus as "useless." Onesimus had been trouble to Philemon and had finally run away to Rome, probably hoping to get lost in the vast crowds present in that large city. But in the providence of God he had come into contact with Paul in Rome and God was pleased to convert him. Now Paul writes of him that he is a **"faithful and beloved brother"** (v. 9).

Paul also mentions **"Mark, the cousin of Barnabas"** (v. 10). This is the same Mark who abandoned Paul on an earlier missionary journey (Acts 13:13). Paul and Barnabas later would separate over a disagreement about whether Mark should be trusted to be taken again on another preaching circuit (Acts 15:36-41). But now Mark is back again with Paul, no longer leaving when things get difficult, but staying with Paul during the hardship of prison. Paul will write of him later, **"Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry"** (2 Timothy 4:11).

And then there's Demas. He is an example not of a past failure but a future one. Though Paul says nothing of Demas here other than to greet him, he does appear again in the New Testament. In writing Timothy later, Paul says, **“Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica”** (2 Timothy 4:9-10). Did Paul sense something of this future failure in the life of Demas? We don't know for sure, but it was likely that he saw some problems in Demas' life. Paul was not naïve. Yet there was a largeness of heart in him, formed by his grasp of God's grace, and that allowed him to be generous toward the spiritually weak.

Francis Schaeffer, founder of L'Abri in Switzerland, once wrote a letter to a woman named Jackie. He wrote about this aspect of God's grace at work in our lives.

Edith [Schaeffer's wife] has an illustration that I like very much. There was a girl who was supposed to make cakes in the Les Melezes kitchen, and she got all messed up until she had nothing but a mess of goo. It would have seemed as though there was nothing to do but throw the whole mess out. But as you know, we don't have a great deal of money, and so Edith has learned to be very economical in the kitchen. Thus she sat down and figured out what was in the gooey mess, and by adding an extra ingredient was able to make it into the most marvelous noodles you have tasted in your life. Jackie, we often do this with our lives, and then perhaps we can't be the cakes we could have been. But if we give ourselves into the hands of the Lord, He can very much reshape us to be something other than we would have been, but something with both usefulness and beauty. (Letter of Schaeffer, p. 108)

The world calls this believing in people. But I think that's the wrong way to describe it. It's really believing in the Lord and his grace at work in lives to take the messes we make of ourselves and turn them into something beautiful. Paul saw people in light of that.

CONCLUSION:

Paul concludes his letter with this note of grace and he pronounces this brief benediction, **“Grace be with you.”** It's the theme he has emphasized throughout his letter. He has been standing against the idea that growth in the Christian life comes through something other than trusting in the grace of Jesus. Do you want to make progress in the Christian life? Then you need to continue to trust in the grace of the Lord Jesus. We grow not by some heroic or remarkable acts of service, but simply by looking in simple faith to Jesus. Can you believe it?