



1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Colossians

Theme: Enough!

Overview: Colossians may be the most Christ-centered epistle in the New Testament. In this unit, students will learn that Jesus is enough: maturity is found in becoming like him, he has freed us from sin, he makes believers one despite their differences, and he calls us to be devoted to prayer for one another and for the advance of the gospel.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

INTRODUCTION

Author

The apostle Paul wrote this letter, with Timothy joining him in the greeting (Colossians 1:1). It is one of Paul's four prison epistles, and he closed it in his own hand: "Remember my chains" (4:18).

Audience

Paul wrote to "God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ" (Colossians 1:2). Paul had not planted the church himself; it was likely started by Epaphras (1:7; 4:12, 13). Colossae was a small city in the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor, near Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Date

Paul likely wrote Colossians around AD 60–62, during his imprisonment in Rome. Tychicus and Onesimus carried this letter to Colossae (Colossians 4:7-9), along with the letters of Ephesians and Philemon.

Setting

A heresy had crept into the church in Colossae. It mixed Jewish practices with Greek philosophy and mysticism, promoting "hollow and deceptive philosophy" (Colossians 2:8), rules about food and festivals, the worship of angels, and visions (2:16-23). Paul answered it with a full picture of who Christ is.

Theme

Enough! Christ is all we need, "for in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness" (Colossians 2:9, 10).

Nothing needs to be added to Jesus. Instead, believers are called to grow up in him, put sin to death, live in love and unity, and devote themselves to prayer.

Why Study Colossians?

Colossians reminds believers that Christ is enough. This study calls Christians to keep growing to become more like Christ, to praise the Lord for freeing them from sin, to let love and unity overcome their differences, and to encourage and help one another by being devoted to prayer, for "Christ is all, and is in all" (Colossians 3:11).

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1: Colossians 1:24–2:5

WEEK 2: Colossians 2:9-15, 20-23

WEEK 3: Colossians 3:11–4:1

WEEK 4: Colossians 4:2-13

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Keep on growing and progressing with wisdom from God to become more and more like Christ.**

STUDY: Colossians

THEME: Enough!

LESSON TEXT: Colossians 1:24–2:5

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: James 1:5; 2 Peter 1:16-21

MATURE ENOUGH?

BY MARK SCOTT

Some believers simply grow old in Jesus instead of growing up in Jesus. The epistles are intended to help us grow up in Christ. They function as the biblical and practical theology of the Gospels. The lessons of the recent past have come from two of the four prison epistles (Ephesians and Philippians). The next four lessons focus on Colossians, perhaps the most Christ-centered epistle of the New Testament.

Reading Colossians reminds me of a statement that has been attributed to Winston Churchill: “A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.” Something was terribly amiss in Colossae. One scholar traced 26 different nuances to the alleged heresy in the church. Whether or not we can tease out all of the particulars of the heresy, we know this. The answer lies in a full understanding of Jesus. The real test of maturity is Christlikeness.

Fill Up

Colossians 1:24-26

Following the opening greeting (1:1, 2) and the typical giving of thanks and prayer (vv. 3-13), Paul wrote two of the most profound paragraphs in the New Testament about the person and work of Christ (vv. 15-23). Because Jesus is supreme and his atoning work so glorious, Paul was willing to “take his licks” for the gospel. He even counted it as joy (see James 1:2) to suffer in his *flesh* (here it means “physical body”) for Christ (Colossians 1:24). His use of words here may sound strange: *I fill up . . . what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions*. Did Jesus not suffer sufficiently on the cross (Romans 3:21-26; Hebrews 10:10-14)? Indeed he did. But Paul knew that part of maturing in Christ was suffering for him (Galatians 6:17; 2 Corinthians 6:4, 5; 11:23-28; 2 Timothy 3:11, 12).

Paul was filled to the full with sufferings for the gospel so that he could be a better *servant* (deacon) of the church. God had given Paul a *commission* (stewardship), and it was to get the word of God that dealt with the mystery of God to the people of God. Fullness was found in Christ (Colossians 2:9), not in some esoteric experience pushed by false teachers in Colossae. The *mystery* (three times in this passage and meaning “revealed secret”) that had been kept hidden was now fully *disclosed* (made manifest) in Jesus. In Colossians the mystery of God is mostly Jesus, just as in Ephesians the mystery of God is mostly the unity between Jews and Gentiles in the church.

Grow Up

Colossians 1:27-29

People have different ideas about what maturity in Christ looks like. Growing up in Christ often gets defined by personal and cultural applications. Many times, believers are guilty of asking people to be conformed to the church as opposed to being transformed by the Spirit. Paul reminded the church that the real mystery of God and the key to maturity is *Christ in you*, which is the hope of *glory* (seeing his weighty presence and his shining brilliance).

The key to growing up in Jesus is Jesus. That is why Paul *proclaimed* (to declare plainly or openly) Jesus. Paul knew that if he *admonished* (counseled) and taught the church with all wisdom about Jesus he would be able to *present* (cause to stand) everyone fully mature in Christ. Christian maturity did not mean perfection. (The Greeks did not even have a word that meant “flawless.”) The word *mature* means complete or something reaching its goal and end. Paul so wanted to have the church grow up, that similar to taking his licks for Christ, he poured himself into that task with reckless abandon. In fact, Paul used four different Greek words (translated by five different words in English) to describe his efforts (work hard, agony, energy, power, and energy again) at maturing believers.

Stand Up

Colossians 2:1-5

This is one of those unfortunate chapter divisions. Paul was willing to stand up against the false teaching taking place in Colossae. He “contended” (the word *agony* again) for the whole valley (Laodicea is seeable and within easy walking distance to Colossae). He encouraged the believers to be *united* (knit or brought together) in love with the goal of having complete understanding of God's mystery, which was Jesus. As a side note, God's treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found uniquely in Christ—not in some additional or subtracted view of Jesus.

Paul was a church planter and a pastor. He did not want anyone to *deceive* (reasoning falsely) the church with *fine-sounding arguments* (plausible or persuasive arguments—only used here in the New Testament). Paul desired that his epistle would function as a stand-in apostle (absent in body but present in spirit—2:5). Christian maturity is Jesus, Jesus, and Jesus—nothing more and nothing less.

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A RIPE OLD AGE

BY DAVID FAUST

It takes the same letters to spell “I’m mature” and “Immature,” but there’s a big difference between the two outcomes.

Cheese matures. So do savings bonds and life insurance policies. But what does it mean to be a mature person? Is *mature* merely a nice-sounding euphemism for *old* and *outdated*? The Greek term for maturity, *teleios*, is sometimes translated “perfect” in the New Testament, but *teleios* also conveys the idea of completing a journey—going through the necessary stages to reach a goal or accomplish a purpose. That’s the word Paul used in Colossians 1:28 when he expressed his intention to “present everyone fully mature in Christ.” One way to explain *teleios* is to think of a pirate’s telescope that extends and unfolds one stage at a time until it functions at full strength. In that sense, maturity is finally reaching the goal and arriving at your God-given destination after a long journey.

The Latin *maturus* meant “ripe,” like a piece of fruit at the peak of its flavor and nutritional value. That’s an appealing illustration. As I grow older, I would rather be compared to a juicy peach than a moldy piece of cheese. The psalmist had a positive view of aging. He declared that God’s faithful people “will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green” (Psalm 92:14).

Bearing Fruit for the Lord

What does a ripe old age look like for a Christian? Fruitfulness! Remember the mature individuals we read about in the opening pages of the Gospel of Luke? The elderly couple Zechariah and Elizabeth were privileged to serve God as the parents of John the Baptist. The seasoned believer Simeon “was righteous and devout,” full of the Holy Spirit and waiting with faithful anticipation to see the Messiah before he died (Luke 2:25, 26). The aging widow Anna “never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying” (Luke

2:37). These senior adults bore fruit for God in their later years. Other biblical passages about fruitfulness shed additional light on what it means to be mature.

A ripe old age means delighting in, meditating on, and obeying God’s Word. “That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season” (Psalm 1:3).

A ripe old age means staying connected to Jesus Christ, who said, “If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit” (John 15:5).

A ripe old age means producing the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22, 23). By contrast, immaturity yields the exact opposite as we age: selfishness, grumpiness, impatience, rudeness, ingratitude, and the like.

A ripe old age means worshiping God and offering him “a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name” (Hebrews 13:15).

A ripe old age means growing wiser, for “the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (James 3:17).

A ripe old age means persevering in faith, hope, and love until we dwell with God in the heavenly city where the tree of life yields its sweet healing fruit (Revelation 22:2). That’s the glory awaiting us when life’s long journey is finally complete.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson.

- What does it mean to be "mature" or "grown up"?
- What are the similarities and differences of being clever and being wise?

Read Colossians 1:24-27

1. In prison, Paul's suffering and affliction were key components to his knowing Christ more completely and presenting the Word of God in its fullness to the church. Discuss how hardship and pain give us greater understanding of Jesus and help us mature in our faith. Share examples from your life when God has grown you the most through suffering and difficulties.
2. The word *mystery* is used twice in this section and three times in our reading. Through the text, discover and discuss together what was kept secret for ages and generations and what it means. Is the promise of discovering God's plan only for a select group of privileged people, or do you think it's more inclusive than that?
3. We hope for lots of things, don't we? Talk about the places you put your hope. The word *glory* (*doxa* in Greek) in verse 27 is about the eternal future promised to Christ's followers at the Savior's second coming. For you, is Heaven a hope or a certainty?

Read Colossians 1:28, 29

4. Great books, revolutionary diets or workouts, our children's successes, and even life-changing purchases are some of the things we might proclaim daily through social media. Talk about what it means to proclaim Christ and to admonish and teach others with all wisdom for eternal purposes. What are practical ways we can do this in our everyday lives?
5. Maybe the last question threw you for a loop. How do we proclaim, admonish, and teach people about Christ with all wisdom? Read James 1:5 and discuss.

Read Colossians 2:1-5

6. What was Paul's ultimate goal for the Colossian believers according to verses 2 and 3? Discuss what encouraging, unified love has to do with understanding the full riches of Jesus Christ.
7. How should Christians deal with false doctrine? Read 2 Peter 1:16-21. Have you ever heard or been influenced by someone's false notions and fine-sounding arguments regarding the character of God or the gospel of Christ? Discuss how we can identify and dispel false teaching among the body of believers.

Conclude your group time with prayer, using the following as a guide. Lord, grow us up in the fullness and truth of the gospel of Christ. Where we lack wisdom, Holy Spirit, prompt us to seek God. Let us so fully know you, Jesus, in our suffering that we one day will celebrate with you in our resurrection. Amen.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Praise the Lord because Jesus has freed us from our sin-slavery and given us new life.**

STUDY: Colossians

THEME: Enough!

LESSON TEXT: Colossians 2:9-15, 20-23

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Romans 7:21-8:9; Colossians 3:1-10

ENOUGH OF SIN!

BY MARK SCOTT

What parent has not said, “Enough already!”? This exclamation is usually given when the parent has one frazzled nerve left, and the children are standing on it. Some childish behaviors just need to stop. That is true of spiritual childishness, too.

Paul told the Colossians what they needed to believe about Jesus but also how they needed to behave in Jesus. The Colossians needed to stop sinning (John 5:14; 8:11; 1 Corinthians 15:34). They also needed to stop turning activities that were not sins into sins. The mysticism in the Colossian heresy showed up practically as legalism and asceticism. Seth Wilson used to say, “All of our efforts to control people show our failure to convert them.”

Of the Fullness of Christ There Is No Limit

Colossians 2:9-15

If *fullness* (a special term in the Greek mystery religions) in life is found uniquely in Christ, then it is not found in religious systems, legal codes, earthly philosophies, human commandments, or self-imposed worship. By being rooted, built up, and established in Jesus (Colossians 2:6, 7) Christians keep from being duped by worldly philosophies (v. 8). Unfortunately for the Colossian believers, these had crept into the church through the heresy. Paul took them back to the fundamentals of their faith.

There is no limit to the fullness of Christ since the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form in him. Jesus needed nothing added to his person, and nothing can be subtracted from his work. When believers experience conversion they receive that fullness in Christ since Jesus is head over everything (1:18). From Christ's fullness the believers received at least two things. First, they received a new and spiritual circumcision. This sign of the covenant in the Old Testament was done by human hands. But the sign of the new spiritual covenant was realized in immersion, wherein the believer experienced a death and resurrection similar to that of Christ.

Second, and certainly resulting from our active faith demonstrated in our baptism, forgiveness of all sins was assured. The word *forgave* is the verb “graced.” God graced us in Christ when Jesus died on the cross. At that moment our sins were *canceled* (smeared or rubbed out). Our sins had created God's *legal indebtedness* (a handwritten legal notice) against us. Our sins were taken away (taken up) when Jesus was nailed to the cross.

How complete was this spiritual circumcision and forgiveness of sins? It was totally complete. In fact, what happened on Calvary's cross was much larger than things done to us personally. In the cross, Jesus *disarmed* (stripped off) the demonic powers and authorities in the heavenly realms. In an ironic phrase Paul affirmed that Jesus made a *public spectacle* of our sins *triumphing* over them by the cross. The Romans used crucifixion as a means of publicly humiliating their captors. But Paul turned the phrase around by saying that Jesus actually “exposed” our sins on the cross by winning the victory over Satan (see 2 Corinthians 2:14). This phrase is rich in what it affirms about Jesus' atoning death. There is no limit to the fullness of who Christ is and what he did.

Of the Making of Rules There Is No End

Colossians 2:20-23

People often want to add to Jesus. They want to “help him out.” But the Christian experience is not about rules but about the Ruler. We discern some of the main tenets of the Colossian heresy by reading the paragraph in between the verses of our printed text (16-19). Evidently the heresy promoted a strange mixture of Jewish backgrounds and Greek religions. Food, drink, festivals, ascetic practices, worship of angels, and visions were all part of the “rules” of the heresy.

Paul reminded the Colossians (and us) that when they converted to Christ they died to the *elementary spiritual forces of this world*. This phrase translates from one very important Greek word. It has to do with rudimentary things like the ABC's. Here it refers to the basic things of the universe like earth, water, air, and fire (see 2 Peter 3:10, 12). Sometimes it refers to former Jewish religious practices (Galatians 4:3) or first principles of believers (Hebrews 5:12).

Relationship with Christ takes us to places where rules can never take us. The rules are always temporary, they are humanly contrived, and they look spiritual. In reality though they never get us home. In fact, as good as they look, they can be little more than *false modesty* (which is really pride), and they do not really restrain sinful behavior. The way to a sin-free life is not more rules but an embrace of the fullness of the Ruler.

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TO BE SPECIFIC

BY DAVID FAUST

The ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras recommended, “Do not say a little in many words, but a great deal in a few.” That’s good advice for writers and public speakers. Here’s another helpful rule: Don’t speak in generalities; be specific. Don’t say “a few people” if you mean five astronauts. Don’t say “a long time ago” if you mean December 24, 1865. Don’t say “in the near future” if you mean 10:30 next Wednesday morning. If your prescription from the pharmacy vaguely recommends, “Take this medicine with a great deal of water,” should you drink a cup or a gallon?

Are your prayers filled with vague generalities or specific confessions, thanksgivings, and requests? It’s good to pray, “God, bless the missionaries,” but if you ask for ideas, your missionary friends will list specific suggestions about how to pray for their families and their ministries.

In response to a general question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus told a story about two specific individuals: the traveler beaten up by thieves and the Good Samaritan who came to his aid. According to Jesus, the general rule, “You shall not commit adultery,” implies a specific warning about the hazards of a lustful gaze. The general principle, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), shows that sin is widespread and damaging; but it also applies specifically to the selfish thoughts you entertained in your heart last night and the harsh words you spoke to a coworker this morning.

The congregation nods in agreement when the preacher says, “Your body is the temple of God,” but would they say “Amen” if he gets more specific? What if he declares, “Gluttony damages God’s temple, so we shouldn’t treat overeating as if it’s a joke”? Or take the gentle-sounding phrase, “Love one another.” That sounds good as a general rule, but when it’s time to apply the principle specifically, love makes

uncomfortable demands: “Quit gossiping. Stop demanding your own way. Be kind to people you find annoying.” In general, Christians know we should be generous; but specifically, when is the last time you and I gave up something we enjoy in order to assist someone who barely has enough to survive?

The Breadth of God’s Forgiveness

By viewing sin in general terms, we avoid confronting our specific faults. The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable prayed in general, prideful terms—mainly reviewing his own record of good deeds and reaffirming his moral superiority over others. The tax collector, however, was painfully and specifically aware of his shortcomings, so he cried out, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13).

Here’s the good news: “God made you alive in Christ. He forgave us all our sins” (Colossians 2:13). Did you catch that? “All our sins.” Big and little ones. Public and private ones. Past and present ones. General and specific ones. Repulsive and socially acceptable ones.

It’s great to know the Lord forgives sin in general, but when we come to him in repentant faith, his grace covers the everyday specific sins that trip, trap, and tangle us up. He forgives sin—both general and specific —“nailing it to the cross” (v. 14).

God doesn’t just love the world in general. Individually and intimately, thoroughly and graciously, specifically and with great detail, God loves you.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson.

- Have you or someone you know ever been given a negative label that you couldn't shake?
- What are difficulties, freedoms, or costs related to scrapping a project and starting from scratch?

Read Colossians 2:9-15

1. Look closely at verses 9 and 10 and discuss what they mean. In verse 12, what part do baptism and faith have in bringing us into the equation with God?
2. Discuss what it means in v. 13 to be "dead in your sins" and made "alive with Christ," and when this happens. Is this a one-time deal or does it happen repeatedly in the life of a believer?
3. Jesus was the fullness of God in human form. Each of us are filled to capacity with the Holy Spirit when he takes up residence inside of us; this is how we are made alive in Christ. Discuss what it means to have the power of God inside of you to make decisions, resist temptation, and live a holy life.

Read Colossians 2:8, 20-23

4. Paul states that religious traditions with no basis in Scripture are simply hollow rules, human commands and teachings, and are destined to perish. Name some religious traditions that have no basis in God's Word. Discuss the difference between having a religion and living a life of faith in Christ alone.
5. The heart, mind, and mouth are the source of all sin issues. Read Colossians 3:1-10 and discuss where we should place our focus. Talk about whose responsibility it is to kill what's in our earthly nature and discuss practical ways to go about doing it.
6. As you read through Colossians 3:1-10, you'll find two lists of traits we are to eliminate from our lives: one in vv. 5-7 and the other in vv. 8-11. Does one set seem easier to put to death than the other? Discuss how you see each reflected and manifested in the culture around you.
7. Have you ever repented and claimed forgiveness of past sin, yet still felt guilty? Does temptation still pull at you or the condemnation hang heavy over you? Examine Romans 7:21-8:9 line by line and soak in what Paul wrote about slavery and freedom. Can you receive the work of Christ and be set free right now?

Conclude your group time with prayer, using the following as a guide. Father, you sent your Son to give us abundant life. Set us free from our bondage to sin! Show us how to surrender all areas of our lives to your Holy Spirit so we can experience the peace of Christ.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Let your actions toward your brothers and sisters in Christ show love and unity within the church.**

STUDY: Colossians

THEME: Enough!

LESSON TEXT: Colossians 3:11–4:1

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: 1 John 3:1-4, 11-18; Galatians 3:26-29

ENOUGH OF DIFFERENCES!

BY MARK SCOTT

James S. Stewart, the great preacher from Scotland, asked the question about what could explain the strange union of the twelve disciples (e.g., Matthew going hand-in-hand with Simon the Zealot). His answer, “They had each found Jesus” (*The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ*). All kinds of differences disappear when *Christ is all, and is in all*. These differences can be national or ethnic (*Gentile or Jew*), religious (*circumcised or uncircumcised*), cultural (*barbarian*—anyone not a cultured Greek or Scythian—wild or savage nomad), or economic (*slave or free*). Jesus both celebrates diversity and makes people one (Ephesians 2:14, 15).

In the more practical section of Colossians, Paul called the believers to set their minds on things above (3:1-4), to give no life to earthly desires (vv. 5-9), and to put on their new selves (v. 10). When Christians follow these admonitions, differences are swallowed up in the redefined family of God.

Differences Lost in Love*Colossians 3:11-17*

Embracing virtues and obeying imperatives help believers put aside their differences. The greatest virtue is love, and its greatest work is perfect unity. God’s elect people embrace seven Christian virtues. They embrace *holiness* (set apart for God’s purposes). They embrace brotherliness (*beloved* means an esteem for others by the direction of the will). They embrace *compassion* (pity or mercy). They embrace *kindness* (usefulness). They embrace *humility* (lowliness of mind that demonstrates a correct estimate of self). They embrace *gentleness* (meekness or the grace of the soul). They embrace *patience* (longsuffering or forbearance).

These virtues are employed by obeying seven imperatives (putting on love, mentioned earlier, is one of them). Paul called the church to *clothe* themselves with the above virtues. This is very much putting something on as one would a garment. Paul called the church to *bear with* each other. This means to hold back or restrain from hurting others. Paul called the church to *forgive* one another. This means to show favor or extend grace to someone. This only makes sense in light of Christ’s forgiveness of the believer. Paul called the church to *let the peace of Christ rule* everything. This means to allow God’s peace to be the umpire in all relationships. Paul called the church to *let the message (word) of Christ dwell* in the church richly. When the peace of Christ and the word of God have their way, the body will be edified through teaching, admonishment, and singing. The

seventh imperative is the capstone. Whatever one does in word or deed, must be done in the name of the Lord Jesus. All of these imperatives take place in the context of gratitude (a concept mentioned three times in this text).

Differences Harmonized at Home*Colossians 3:18-4:1*

Since the Christian family is one’s first church, differences (just like in the church) are not a hindrance to unity but actually enhance unity. This household section contains vocatives and verbs that make home a happy place. Wives are called to *submit* to their husbands. This means that they are to yield in orderly fashion. Jill Briscoe called it, “Hilarious *hupotasso*” (*Preaching Today*). Jesus showed us the way to this (Philippians 2:5-11). This is said to be *fitting* (pleasing) to the Lord. Husbands are called to *love* their wives. This is benevolent good will toward one’s wife that goes beyond the show of mere emotion. When this is obeyed there will be no *harshness* (embitteredness or anger) toward her.

Children are called to *obey* their parents in everything. This means to hear or heed one’s parents. It is as deeply rooted in the faith as the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5). Slaves are also called to obey their masters. Paul spends more time on this vocative and verb. Does this mean that there were many slaves in the church at Colossae? Slaves (and it might be stretching things to say “employees,” but the principle probably applies) are to have the integrity to work when the boss is watching and when the boss is not. Their motives are to be pure as they give evidence of their fear of the Lord.

Paul took an excursus at this point. Before addressing masters, he made a blanket statement about our work in the context of the ancient household. Our work is to be done with all our *heart* (soul). Ultimately, our work, as a slave does in a house, is to be done for the Lord. He who gives rewards punishes justly. He plays no favorites. Finally, Paul called masters to *provide* (hold out for) for their slaves. The sanity check for this command is remembering that earthly masters have a supreme Master. Differences disappear when love reigns and everyone is treated like family.

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MEMBERS OF ONE BODY

BY DAVID FAUST

The Restoration Movement didn't begin in the 19th century. It didn't even begin in the first century. It began in the Garden of Eden when God set out to find and restore his people who had sinned. It continued when Jesus came to seek and save the lost. It continued when 3,000 new disciples were baptized on the Day of Pentecost and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. It continued in the 1800s when bold believers like Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone stepped out of their denominational boxes and said, "We want to be Christians only."

Today, the ideals of our movement remain as valid as ever. We still need to lift up Christ crucified and risen again, speak where the Bible speaks, and pursue unity with other Christians, serving together in faith, hope, and love. As "members of one body" we have been "called to peace" (Colossians 3:15).

Christ Can Bring Us Together

Unity seems elusive. How did Matthew the tax collector ever get together with John the Son of Thunder? How did Peter the impetuous fisherman get together with Paul the former persecutor? How could Jews and Gentiles both be called Christians in Antioch? They came together in Christ.

A denomination can't unite us, but Christ can. A talented preacher or a fancy building can't unite us, but Christ can. We're pieces of scrap iron, but Christ is the magnet that pulls us together. He's the focal point of our unity, the foundation of our church, the focus of our faith.

Too often, even when our position is right, our disposition is wrong. Instead of being humble, gentle, and patient with each other, we battle over our differences, which weakens our witness to those

outside the church. Marvin Phillips said, "Satan's greatest weapon has been to keep the people of God arguing about lesser things." When Christians quarrel instead of fulfilling the Great Commission, we're like two lifeguards who get into a fistfight on the beach while swimmers drown in the water.

Here are three practical steps we can take.

1. Put unity on our prayer list. It was on Jesus' prayer list. He prayed that his followers would be "brought to complete unity" (John 17:23). Unity was on Paul's prayer list. He said, "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Ephesians 3:17, 18). Whatever becomes a priority in our prayers tends to become a priority in our lives. When we come together in prayer and repentance, our disagreements will fade.

2. Ask God to change our own hearts. Are we personally making every effort to "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3)?

3. Make peace one friend at a time. We can bring comfort and hope to a world full of suffering. We can preach the gospel, baptize new disciples, send missionaries to other lands, plant churches, feed the hungry, nurture families, bring hope to the poor, save marriages, teach children, care for the elderly, and change our cities. But we can't do it alone. We're members of one body. Let's do it together.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson.

- How do you handle people who are from different backgrounds or cultures than you? Do you welcome outsiders and strangers into your circle of friends?
- What does unity mean to you? Consider synonyms like harmony, balance, symphony, and proportion, and antonyms like confusion, disorganization, tension, and incompatibility. What do you think unity should look like in the church?

Read Colossians 3:11-14

1. Since its founding, Christianity has been incredibly diverse, with believers coming from vastly differing backgrounds, cultures, and influences. Compare Galatians 3:26-29 with Colossians 3:11. Discuss the differences Paul lists among believers (religious bloodlines, social genealogies, employment/social status, education, and gender) and how our unity in Christ influences the way we ought to work with and treat other believers.
2. Examine the virtues we are to have as God's chosen people. What role does love play in creating perfect unity?
3. Read 1 John 2:1-4. In other translations, John writes "My little children" (or *teknia*, translated "my darlings" or "infants" in the Greek) perhaps to show how immature believers can be with regard to forgiving the sins of one another, but also to show the tenderness of his love. Discuss how this passage ties in with Colossians 3:13.

Read Colossians 3:15-17

4. How are love, forgiveness, and gratitude connected to the peace of Christ that rules in our hearts?
5. Consider how Bible reading and teaching, biblical and godly admonishment, and corporate fellowship and worship create unity within the body of believers.

Read Colossians 3:18-4:1

6. With God, it's always about our relationships. Paul first addresses our ties with people inside our own families and from there to our outside work relationships. How do these relationships reflect on our character as Christians?
7. Compare Paul's standards for mutual respect with what you see in the world around you. Discuss how this can be positively or negatively reflected within the church. How can Christians maintain balance and harmony within the church if we're not maintaining it with the people who surround us daily?
8. Do we live in the darkness of hate? Are we blind to how we treat one another? Read 1 John 2:11-18. Make a list of practical ways you can demonstrate your love for God in your personal relationships this week.

Conclude your group time with prayer, using the following as a guide. Jesus, thank you that you are the standard for all our relationships. In every human interaction you had on earth, you reflected love and wanted the very best for others. Holy Spirit, help us to be unified as one in the body of believers. Amen.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Encourage and help one another by being devoted to prayer.**

STUDY: Colossians

THEME: Enough!

LESSON TEXT: Colossians 4:2-13

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: John 17:6-25

PRAY ENOUGH?

BY MARK SCOTT

The lesson title asks a question. The implied subject is “You.” Thus, “Do you pray enough?” Most of us would have to answer, “No.” But God is hurt by our distance and preoccupation with other things. This closing exhortation in Colossians calls us to go forward on our knees. We cannot stumble when we are on our knees. If prayer is the umbrella for the whole lesson text, then Paul developed it in two ways.

Pray for Advancing the Gospel*Colossians 4:2-6*

The New Testament uses six different Greek words for prayer. First Timothy 2:1 has four of those words in just one verse. But the main word for prayer is used in this passage four times (vv. 2, 3, 4, and 12). It simply refers to “respectful plain speech to God.” The lead imperative sets the stage for the rest of the text. *Devote yourselves to prayers.* *Devote* means to persist or continue in. *Watchfulness* (a word often associated with the return of Christ and meaning “alert against spiritual drowsiness”) and *thanksgiving* (the word where we get “Eucharist”) help us to stay diligent in prayer.

As a capital “A” apostle, Paul was not too proud to request prayer for himself and the other missionaries. But the request was really focused on advancing the gospel—not for Paul personally. He requested prayer for *open doors* (missionary opportunities as seen in 1 Corinthians 16:9 and 2 Corinthians 2:12), for the content of the *message* (word) and making known the *mystery of Christ* (which had caused him to be incarcerated), and for clarity in making that message known.

Praying for open doors causes us to be others-centered. This helps us act wisely toward *outsiders* (a clear reference to nonbelievers; see 1 Corinthians 5:12; 1 Thessalonians 4:12; 1 Timothy 3:7). Praying also helps us keep our spiritual antennae out to *make the most* (redeem or buy up) of every opportunity. Praying also ensures that our *conversation* (word) will be full of grace and *seasoned with salt* (pure and penetrating) so that just the right word will be spoken in times of witness (Matthew 10:19, 20; Proverbs 16:24; 25:11).

Pray for the Maturing of the Church*Colossians 4:7-13*

Paul often ended his epistles by giving closing commands, stating final warnings, and commending workers in the church. The accent in this final greeting

was on the latter. Seven people are mentioned in this closing section. All are mentioned in positive ways. If we went beyond the printed text (4:14-18) we would find three additional names.

Paul commended Tychicus and Onesimus in the first paragraph. Both men had the responsibility to inform the Colossians of Paul’s ministry. Paul’s desire was that this would encourage the Colossians’ hearts. Paul affirmed three things about Tychicus. He was a *dear* (loved) *brother*, *faithful minister* (deacon), and *fellow servant* (slave). Paul affirmed two things about Philemon’s runaway slave who was actually from Colossae. He was a *faithful and dear brother*.

Paul commended five additional names in the second paragraph. Aristarchus had been Paul’s fellow inmate and sent his greeting to the church. John Mark (writer of the second gospel and cousin—or maybe nephew—of Barnabas) sent his greetings as well. Note that the breach between Paul and Mark that occurred in Acts 13 and 15 had already been healed to the point that Paul now considered Mark helpful (2 Timothy 4:11). Jesus, identified as Justus to ensure that no one thought Paul was making a reference to the Lord, joined Aristarchus and Mark in sending greetings. Paul considered these Jewish coworkers valuable ministers of the kingdom of God and acknowledged they had been a *comfort* (similar to soothing medication) to him.

Epaphras was Paul’s coworker who tied this closing section back to the teaching on prayer earlier in the text. This man who was probably responsible for planting the church in Colossae in the first place (Colossians 1:7), *wrestled* (agonized) in prayer for the Colossians. He had prayed that they would *stand firm* (mature) in God’s will and be *fully assured* (persuaded) in their walk in the Lord. Paul *vouched* (bore witness) that Epaphras had worked hard for not only the Colossians but also for the neighboring churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis—cities within seeable distance from each other. Hierapolis has wonderful hot springs to this day. But by the time the water got to Laodicea via the aqueduct it had become lukewarm (Revelation 3:14-22). By heeding this admonition to devote ourselves to prayer our souls will be anything but lukewarm. Prayer makes believers red hot.

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10 WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR PRAYERS

BY DAVID FAUST

How can we win the battle with weak, wandering prayers? I have not yet graduated from the school of prayer, but here are 10 suggestions I have found helpful in my own conversations with God.

1. Be honest. Don't try to hide anything from God or sugarcoat your true thoughts and feelings. No issues you are dealing with, including your struggles in prayer, come as a surprise to the Lord.

2. Be quiet. In prayer, listening is as important as talking. God invites you to be at peace in his presence. He says, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

3. Write. You may find it helpful to keep a prayer journal on paper or on your computer. David wrote many prayers in the Psalms. It keeps your mind from wandering when you write down your thoughts.

4. "Pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer is more than a ritual; it's an ongoing conversation. Talk with the Lord throughout the day while you drive, work, rest, and play.

5. Partner with others. Meet weekly or bi-weekly with a small group of believers and pray with them.

6. Make a list. A simple list of prayer requests—with different topics assigned to each day—can organize your thoughts and keep you from feeling overwhelmed. Though I pray for her every day, on Monday I offer extra prayer for my wife Candy, and I've assigned a different day of the week to pray for each of my children and grandchildren. My prayer list, which I keep tucked inside the front cover of my Bible, also includes a few "mountain-moving" issues that are too complicated for me to resolve. Over time, I've seen God answer several of these impossible-looking prayers.

7. Trust. Prayer should be experienced even though it cannot always be explained. God is our Father, not a vending machine—a person, not a robot. He answers prayer according to his perfect will. Sometimes he says "yes," sometimes "no," sometimes "wait," and sometimes simply, "I'm here."

8. Start your day with prayer. The British preacher Charles Spurgeon suggested, "When you are at home, let no one see your face till God has seen it." You may want to read a few verses from the Psalms and the book of Proverbs as part of your morning routine.

9. Quit beating yourself up, and keep lifting your prayers up. Don't evaluate your prayers merely by your emotional responses, and don't be discouraged when prayer feels like hard work. Time with the Lord is well-spent even on ordinary days when you don't feel particularly inspired.

10. Don't view prayer as a religious performance. The goal isn't to impress anyone (including God), but to share a relationship with your heavenly Father. If God passed out merit points based on outward performance, the Pharisees would have earned the highest scores of all, but Jesus warned his disciples not to follow the example of those who "for a show make lengthy prayers" (Luke 20:47).

So as a fellow student in the school of prayer, let me encourage you. When life knocks you down—when your faith wavers, your voice stammers, and your words lack eloquence—keep lifting up your prayers. Open your heart to the heavenly Father. Max Lucado put it well: "It is hard to stumble when you are on your knees."

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson.

- If someone were to ask you, “Why do you pray and what do you pray for?” what would you tell them?
- Why is prayer important? Does it really matter?

Read Colossians 4:2-6

1. Do you watch for God to answer your prayers? Sometimes he says “yes!”; other times it’s “no”; and still there is another way he answers: “Not yet.” Talk about times when you received these answers. Were you thankful for them at the time? Now?
2. How often do we pray for our preachers and church leadership? Paul asked specifically for prayer to open doors for the gospel and to be able to preach the mystery of Christ clearly. Take a moment right now to pray the same thing for your church leaders.
3. Read John 17:6-19. Jesus prayed for his disciples who already understood the mystery of faith. Share what line of this prayer strikes you most profoundly or surprises you and why.
4. Discuss how personal and corporate prayer (Colossians 4:2, 3) relate to actions, conversations, and the words we use to talk to those outside of faith (Colossians 4:5, 6).

Read Colossians 4:7-13

5. Paul concluded this letter by letting the church know who was serving with him while he was in jail. These were real people with real lives, families, and ministries who were impacting the world serving Christ using whatever talents they had. He mentioned Epaphras, a Colossian—their prayer champion. Paul wrote, “He is always wrestling in prayer for you . . . he is working hard for you.” Talk about what you think these phrases mean and how it would look for someone today to do this.
6. Read John 17:20-26. In verse 20, Jesus said he prayed “for those who will believe in me *through their message*” (italics added). Does it surprise you that Jesus prayed for you personally at the Last Supper before you accepted him as Lord and Savior? Discuss how this impacts your personal evangelization efforts to share the gospel with others.
7. Jesus prayed for all future believers throughout the ages. Explore his main points in this prayer. Does it strengthen or confirm your faith to read this? If so, how?
8. How can you pray for and serve your city or surrounding area? Examine some practical ways you can serve as an “Epaphras” for those around you this week.

Conclude your group time with prayer, using the following as a guide. Jesus, thank you for praying at the Last Supper for me and all believers. Holy Spirit, inspire us and help us to pray and devote our lives to serve, to encourage one another, and to be watchful for opportunities to share the gospel. Amen.

For Next Week: This week’s lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional “1717: Your Word Is Truth” studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.