

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

“... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything”(Colossians 1:18).

Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians

The Christian’s Experience – Putting On: Sanctified Fellowship (4:7-18)

Sanctified Fellowship (4:10-11) – Aristarchus

10 Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also Barnabas's cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him); 11 and also Jesus who is called Justus; these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision, and they have proved to be an encouragement to me.

1. **Tychicus** (7-8)

The **faithful** man

2. Onesimus (9)

The **fugitive** man

3. **Aristarchus** (10a)

The **fearless** man

4. **Mark** (10b)

The **forgiven** man

5. **Justus** (4:11)

The **friendly** man

6. **Epaphras** (4:12-13))

The **fervent** man

7. **Luke** (4:14a)

The **famous** man

8. **Demas** (4:14b)

The **floundering** or **faithless** man

9. **Nymphas** (4:15-16)

The **fruitful** man

10. **Archippus** (4:17)

The **faltering** man

11. **Paul** (4:18)

The **fettered** man

It is appropriate to end a year and begin a new one with a bit of reflection; a looking back on the successes and the failures; the triumphs and the trials of the past with a view to learning the lessons that will enable us to do better, press forward and, most importantly, bring even greater glory to our God.

In light of such things, it is not uncommon for people to make all sorts of plans and resolutions. But, as I recently heard on the radio, most resolutions come in one “year” and out the other. I do think it is important to make plans and prayerfully offer them to the Lord for again it has been said that if you aim at nothing, you are sure to hit it every time.

But the question for us this morning really is this, what are you aiming for? What targets do you have in your sights; what is the prey for which you are hunting? And, are you adequately prepared to accomplish the tasks set before you? If you want to lose weight, you will need a plan of attack. If you desire better organization at home or in the office, you will need the appropriate tools; and if you want to be a better student, or learn more, you will need to make the time to succeed.

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Now then, in the grand scheme of things, while losing some weight, betting better organized, learning more and the like are worthy goals, the pale in comparison with the greatest pursuit for the Christian, a pursuit that not is not only personally necessary for one’s own spiritual and emotional well being, but also corporately imperative in order to honor and exalt Jesus Christ, who is the head of the body, the church. And just what is this pursuit? You know it as the pursuit of Christlikeness; of seeing your life become a clearer reflection of the character and conversation of Jesus Christ; a pursuit we call “sanctification” – the process of becoming more and more like Jesus in both word and deed.

I do not know if such a pursuit sounds heavy and dry to you. Another message on being like Jesus; another message that might point out how I am too focused on myself rather than on Christ; too concerned for my own personal affections than for the affections of Christ. May I remind you that the fundamental problem that plagues people, believers and unbelievers alike, is the seeking of peace, contentment and happiness in places, people and things other than God? It all started in the garden when Adam and Eve believed the lie of Satan and thought that by partaking of the forbidden fruit, they would obtain a level of happiness apart from God. And we all have been affected by this lie ever since. Yet as C. S. Lewis so aptly has said,

“God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.”

And until we believe that things like happiness and peace can only be found in Him, we will continue to grope our way in the twilight of darkness, seeking for pleasures that never satisfy. So again, I ask you, what are you aiming for? Are you desirous of being more like Christ and experiencing the satisfaction of peace and contentment promised by Him? Is this not the very promise of the Lord Jesus when He said in John 15:9-11?

9 Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. 11 These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

So then, the challenge that is ever before us is being found “in Christ” for it is in our relationship to Christ, in our waking up with His songs on our hearts, going about our day with His words on our lips; meditating on His ways and living out His actions that we find this joy, this peace and this contentment. This is sanctification; this is Christlikeness; and this has been the theme of the book of Colossians since the beginning of chapter 3.

But at current we find ourselves in the midst of some names, names that very few of us have rightly considered and yet, Paul, who did not write anything in his inspired letters that was unprofitable, makes mention of these folks who ministered, stood by, and otherwise encouraged him. And as we work our way through this list of names and examine what was said of these persons, let us see that one of the things being accomplished for us is a picturing not only of sanctification, of persons striving to be like Christ, but also then of the church. Yes, the church! For as we look at the characteristics described by Paul of these people, we see that each of them offers us a picture of the community of faith, of a number of people committed to one

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another, using their gifts and talents in such a way to present to Paul and to others, a picture of Christlikeness. For, as we will see even of the three men we examine this morning, that while each of them are seeking to be faithful followers of Christ and minister to Paul, they each have a different forte, a different means by which to bring comfort and encouragement to a brother who is in prison and by ministering to him actually ministering to the church of Christ scattered throughout the Roman empire.

Our text this morning, as we have read, is Colossians 4:10-11. In these two verses are three names, the names of three Jewish men, of Paul’s kindred, of whom he gives this commendation from verse 11, that these **“have proved to be an encouragement to me.”** Whatever other descriptions Paul give to us of these men, these are said to have been an encouragement, a comfort. The word in the Greek signifies the making of an address in the town-square in order to calm the people. The ides here is much like President Bush’s addressing the nation after the 9/11 attacks to let the people know what had happened and what our response was to be in order to bring a sense of direction and calm. The word “encouragement” was also used to speak of a medicine used to soothe an irritation. So what aloe vera gel is to a sunburn; or calamine lotion to a rash; so were these men a comfort to Paul. And notice that these men “proved” – that is showed themselves, revealed themselves as being effective in this comfort. Putting gasoline on a sunburn would not prove to be effective. It is not that gasoline is not useful, but it would bring no comfort in the case of sunburn. Too often we Christians can pour ourselves out on others, expending ourselves, emptying ourselves and then wonder why others do not respond. Perhaps it is because we are not pouring out the right things out. Rather than Christlikeness, we are only pouring out portions of our own pride driven selves; gasoline on the sunburn.

Because I can become so easily engrossed and enamored with these characters I only intend to impress upon you the person of Aristarchus this morning. It is my intention to present to you from these three men in Colossians 4:10-11 how it is that Paul defines them as being a comfort or encouragement to him. I will do this in a two-fold way; first by looking at what we know of the person and then from that glean the principle which we too can strive to emulate and live out because they are examples of Christlikeness. And for our consideration this morning – I present to you Aristarchus

I. Aristarchus (10a)

Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings...

Apart from the brief description from our text that he is a **“fellow prisoner”**; that is, he is with Paul in prison, we might be hard pressed to glean anything about his person. But we are not limited to this text alone and what we do read of Aristarchus from other parts of the New Testament give us a picture of a “fearless” man who stood with Paul through some of his most difficult times. Let us look at these other passages and learn of the person of Aristarchus.

We first come to see Aristarchus in the book of Acts, so turn in your Bibles to Acts 19 and let me set the scene for you. As part of the third missionary journey and Paul was in the western coastal city of Ephesus of Asia Minor. God was working extraordinary miracles through Paul as people were giving up their sinful lifestyles and idolatry to follow Christ. But as people were coming to Christ, it meant a decline in the sale of idols, a lucrative business in Ephesus. This decline meant that several business men were hurting for profit and livelihood. So, in order to try

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to remedy the situation, a outgoing man by the name of Demetrius, a silversmith, stirred up his fellow craftsmen to make a protest against Paul. And Demetrius was successful for we read in Acts 19:28-29,

When they heard this [Demetrius’ protest] and were filled with rage, they began crying out, saying, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” 29 The city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed with one accord into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia.

Evidently they could not find Paul at this moment and so the mob took the next best thing, his companions. Aristarchus stood with Paul when he might have otherwise fled. I do not think this “dragging” was a pleasant experience, in fact, it was a drag! And all because he was a known associate of Paul. Now then, we might expect that in the next city, town or province, Aristarchus might lay low. He might have thought, “I did not sign up for this! I deserve better than this! Perhaps I would be better off just serving the larger church here in Rome or maybe even to the large church in Jerusalem.” But this is not the last time we see Aristarchus with Paul, for just over in the next chapter, Acts 20, we see that he continued to travel with Paul. And even when there was some kind of plot by the Jews to kill Paul (and safe to assume any other Jews traveling with Paul), we find again Aristarchus standing with him. We read verses 3-4,

3 And there he [Paul] spent three months, and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. 4 And he was accompanied by Sopater of Berea, the son of Pyrrhus, and by Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia.

Here we learn that Aristarchus is from the Macedonian town of Thessalonica, but we might also conclude that whenever Paul is in trouble, Aristarchus is there standing beside him in the midst of it. Let us see if this be true by looking at the last reference to him in the book of Acts, Acts 27, please turn there. What is happening in Acts 27? Paul is being sent from Israel to Rome as a prisoner because he had appealed his case to Caesar. Let us read in Acts 27:1-2

1 When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius. 2 And embarking in an Adramyttian ship, which was about to sail to the regions along the coast of Asia, we put out to sea accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica.

So there he is again, as Paul is about to make the dangerous sea journey to Rome, who is the first mentioned name on that ship? Aristarchus. And remember that this journey would include a shipwreck.

The next time we read of Aristarchus is in our text of Colossians 4:10, the “fellow prisoner” and where he is described as a “fellow worker” in Philemon 24. There is no evidence of Aristarchus’ arrest and so it is said that he, like Tychicus freely chose to minister with Paul during his imprisonment. To say this another way, Aristarchus chose to make Paul’s lifestyle his own

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and therefore gave up his own freedom to minister to Paul’s needs. Do not forget that to associate with Paul was to associate with a criminal, a criminal who was deemed a threat to the Roman Empire. This was not only dangerous, but it also was considered shameful to associate with a prisoner. For the people of this time, particularly among the Jews, the ideas of honor and shame drove the culture. And so the willingness of Aristarchus to accept the stigma of prison would indicate the highest degree of personal commitment to Paul. Aristarchus was so committed to Paul that he would be designated as his “fellow prisoner”. Aristarchus put his personal interests aside.

This is the person of Aristarchus, but what of the principle of his life? What did this fearless man exemplify in his life as an example of Christlikeness that we can discern and practice in our own lives? Let me give you the principle that I wish to explore for a moment, namely; *the fearless Christian brings comfort and encouragement to other believers by standing firm with others through difficulties; even at the loss of one’s own personal comfort or freedom.* We see this principle expressed in many places of Scripture. In Philippians 2:3-4 we read

3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

And in a glorious call to stand firm and always strive forward in ministry we read the exhortation of Paul to the congregation at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 15:58 -

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

Notice that there is not only the call to minister to others in the most profound and extreme of ways, that is without selfishness, without empty conceit, with the utmost of humility; with steadfast and immovable tenacity, but also a promise to those who do such, that any such attitude toward ministry can be known to be accepted and effect for the work of the Lord. But there is one more passage I would draw your attention to, one that consolidates for us the principle found in the person of Aristarchus; that being Romans 12:10 where we read,

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor...

To devote one’s self to another takes time and the giving up of personal comforts and interests for the sake of the other. But the idea to ***“give preference to one another in honor”*** – to put other’s first in our thoughts and as a result to conform our actions to such thoughts. That is a challenge is it not? It is a constant battle to regard others first and to put their cares and needs above our own - and yet it is the call of every believer not only to show preference to one another, but to do so with the intent to honor others. This is at the heart of what we see in the life of Aristarchus. He was not about himself, but about ministering to Paul.

And yet how often do we desire to be recognized, to be applauded, to have some kind of acknowledgment? How easily do we find our feelings hurt because we think we should be noticed or served? And yet the truth is, we should be going out of our way to acknowledge, encourage

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and honor others. This is the very thrust behind the phrase **“give preference”** – it is a word that carries the idea of rushing forward to do something for another. Even the marginal reading of the NASB reads, *“outdo one another in showing honor.”* If you have ever rushed to a door in order to open it for someone you have exercised giving preference. When you allow someone to go before you in a line, you are exercising preference. And when you daily consider how to put the cares and needs of your brothers and sisters in Christ in front of your own, you are giving preference. Of course this means you know of the cares and needs of those around you. It implies that you are willing to stand firm with other brothers and sisters in Christ even when the times get trying or difficult; when doing so will cost you time for yourself, time with your family, even at times, time away from work.

I would like to present to you a challenge. As we come to the beginning of 2011, will you dare to be an Aristarchus for Hope CBC? As the pastor of a small church here in NW Arkansas, I don't get to hang out much with the pastors of the larger churches. I have never had lunch or coffee with them, on any regular basis. But I have had the privilege of getting together with pastors from smaller churches. And in the course of conversations, as we share our war stories and pray for one another, there has been a reoccurring theme that pops up from time to time; a frustration that seems to plague the pastors and congregations of small churches, at least in the sample of which I am aware. And what is that frustration; that frustration and discouragement are members or attenders who leave the small congregation for larger congregations with the reason given, directly stated or implied, that the larger church offers more opportunity. The missions program is better; the music is more dynamic, the children's ministries; well they actually exist and the list goes on. It is also interesting to note that for most who leave the small congregations for the hope held out in the larger congregations, the leave has often been preceded by some difficulty; the church is not seeing visitors, it is not meeting budget; it is not growing; it isn't ministering to my needs. And so the mentality is that we deserve something better than this; for why should I bang my head against the wall. Believe me, I understand that; I have been there. But I am grateful that Aristarchus did not share that mentality after the first riot against Paul there in Ephesus, or after the assassination plot against Paul and other believing Jews in Macedonia and Achaia, or even when it came time to make a dangerous journey across the sea. Aristarchus stood firm with Paul when he could have left for safer, greener, more comforting pastures; but he gave up his freedom to minister to Paul's needs.

Now then, this is not meant to be any inappropriate judgment on large ministries. God uses both large and small churches and the point is not to criticize a particular ministry, but rather to get believers to examine their hearts. Are you being an Aristarchus? Are you ministering to the needs of others even when it might be at the loss of personal comfort and convenience? I would as you to consider this carefully. I believe so much of what we do as believers is not always motivated out of such noble and pure hearts. We can tend to do things for others because we have to, because it is expected, because we want others to think well of us for serving others. Examine your motives and ask yourself; am I striving to serve others because I am a fearless Christian, not caring what others think but only desiring to minister to the needs of others even at the potential loss of my own comforts and freedoms? Will I stand firm with my church, particularly its people and provoke them on to love and good deeds? Will I be the one who proves myself and encouragement to them, giving preference to them in honor?

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We know we don't have and can't offer what larger churches can; but maybe some day we can as we labor together in the now for well-being of one another in the future. Will you make sacrifices of time, energy and commitment now; knowing that if you offering such as a ministry to the Lord, none of your labors will be in vain? When you see a need or a deficiency here at Hope CBC, rather than think or say, “Well such and such a ministry does this better, I wish I were there” would you say, “Lord, thank You for revealing to me this area and I will prayerfully and purposely seek Your grace to see this area improved for Your glory, for by Your good providence You have brought me to this place and by Your good providence I believe You want me to prove to be an encouragement to these brothers and sisters in Christ.” If we were to personalize Colossians 4:10-11, could it be said of each of us,

[Your name] my fellow prisoner...[has] proved to be an encouragement to me.

And how can you be this soothing salve for others in a life filled with nasty irritations? Beloved, as you go about your week ask yourself who you might you do something extraordinary for? What ship do you need to board this week? What hotbed do you need to stand with a brother or sister in Christ through? Consider putting someone else first; be it in the work place, at school, at home and even at church. It might begin with a simple phone call or email, asking someone about their own week; but from there listen for opportunities to rush forward to do something special for that person. Let us not be slow in doing good to one another for the glory of God. Would you resolve to be like Aristarchus, or even more to the point to prove yourself and encouragement to others by being more like Christ?

Soli Deo Gloria

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