

We're all in this together

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[0 : 0 0] Let's ask God for his help. Let's pray. Father, as we come before you today, please open our hearts and minds that we may understand your word.

! And as we are exposed to your truth, take those truths and plant it deep down in us so that we might be changed and keep maturing in Christ.

Please grow us as one body by your spirit. In your name we pray. Amen. Now, it's been a hot couple of weeks, hasn't it? But it probably still isn't anything compared to the heat wave that hit Chicago in 1995.

We're talking temperatures that went as high as 48 degrees Celsius, and unlike us, they didn't have air conditioning in every corner. And sadly, though not surprisingly, hundreds of people died due to heat exhaustion.

And what was especially tragic was that quite a big number of them died without anybody knowing. Their bodies only being discovered in their apartments weeks later.

[1 : 1 0] So, to prepare for future heat waves, researchers tried to identify who was most vulnerable. But as they did so, one of them stumbled across something surprising.

He noticed that three of the ten neighbourhoods with the fewest heat-related deaths seem, on the surface, to be just like the neighbourhoods with the most deaths.

Both were poor. Both had high crime rates. Both were predominantly African-American. So, why did so many survive in one neighbourhood, whereas so many died in the other?

The big difference, it turned out, was connection. In the neighbourhoods that weathered the heat wave best, people just knew each other.

They knew who was by themselves, who was old, who was ill, who was struggling. And they made sure to do wellness checks, knocking on doors, checking in on people, helping them to stick it out.

[2 : 2 9] And not simply because it was so hot, but because that was actually their regular routine. By contrast, the neighbourhoods which had the most deaths were disconnected.

Many of them died alone because, quite simply, they lived alone. And basically, their isolation meant a dangerous situation became a deadly one.

And this brings us to today's passage. This morning, we've reached the end of Colossians. And at first glance, this section seems insignificant. It's just a bunch of names greeting one another.

And so we're tempted to skip this bit. But if all scripture is God-brief and profitable for us, and if this section makes up 12% of the book, so that's quite a bit, it's reasonable to assume God isn't just trying to make up the word count.

So, why is Colossians 4, verse 7 to 18 in our Bibles? Well, I believe it's because Paul is showing us the importance of connection in the Christian life.

[3 : 5 0] He's showing us how a group of Christians performing wellness checks on one another makes a difference. You see, all throughout Colossians, we've been saying Christ is all sufficient.

His gospel is all we need to live the Christian life, and so we should never drift from it. Otherwise, we'll die. But right at the end, Paul wants to make sure we don't misunderstand.

Sticking with the gospel, it turns out, isn't a one-man job. It's a team effort. It requires that we check up on each other and accept help from one another.

If you want to stick with the gospel, it is wise to stick with other Christians. But wait a minute, you might ask, how can people who are all different from one another help each other spiritually?

Now, here at KEC, we're quite a diverse bunch, aren't we? We've got the old and the young, the overseas educated and the locally educated, those whose families have been Christians for generations, and those who haven't.

[5 : 19] And I know it can be so easy to look at one another and wonder if we can really connect at all. The old will look at the young and say, wow, there's so many of them.

And so often they're speaking in a language I can't understand. They're so confident around their tech gadgets. Their working lives are so unlike mine.

They live in a completely different world. Meanwhile, the young in our congregation are looking at the old and saying, wow, there's so many of them.

And they're always making these jokes I don't get. They talk about topics I find it hard to engage with. They live in a completely different world.

So how can people who are all different from one another help each other spiritually? Is it possible?

[6 : 24] Well, have a look at all the Christians in today's passage. You'll quickly see that they also are all quite diverse. For instance, in verses 10 to 11, Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus, also called Justice, are all Jews.

These were people who grew up in synagogues, observing the Sabbath and the food laws, and were very aware of their minority status under the Roman Empire.

Then in verses 12 to 14, we have Epaphras, Luke, and Demas, who are all Gentiles. They likely grew up immersed in polytheistic religions with different customs, myths, and political viewpoints.

And even the Jews I just mentioned are not all the same. Aristarchus and Mark, for instance, are most likely Hellenistic Jews, given their names, whereas Justice was most likely a Hebraic Jew.

So, linguistically, they were the equivalent of a Chinese-educated and an English-educated Malaysian Chinese. And I think we all know that just because both are Chinese doesn't mean they are exactly the same.

[7 : 50] And such diversity wasn't just ethnic. We'll think a little bit more about Onesimus later. But one thing I can tell you about him now is that he is a lowly slave.

So, that's pretty different from someone like, say, Luke, who's a doctor. He's certainly different from Nympha, in verse 15, who appears to have some serious real estate.

So, there was social-economic diversity, too. But here is the thing. These people might be all different.

But the one thing you can't miss in this passage is how connected they all are to each other. They clearly share a deep, genuine concern for one another.

Just notice what they're all doing. There is encouraging. There's welcoming. There's comforting. There's wrestling in prayer.

[9 : 02] There is vouching for the other guy. They are essentially performing wellness checks on one another. Because in Paul's mind, they are one team.

Look, for instance, at the one way he describes Tychicus, verse 7. Notice, he says he is not just a servant, brother, fellow servant.

In other words, he believes they are partners in serving the Lord. They're all in this together. I like how one commentator puts it.

He says, the idea expressed in 4 verse 7 is that Tychicus is every bit as committed to submitting to the Lordship of Christ as Paul.

there is hardly a higher commendation someone could receive from Paul than this. But that brings us back to our question.

[10 : 11] How is it possible that all these different people are able to support each other spiritually with such sincerity? Well, this morning, I want to suggest two key factors.

Though we are different, we can still be deeply connected and even grow in love when, number one, we recognize we've been changed by gospel grace, and number two, when we're willing to commit to one another's gospel growth.

So let's look at both in turn. Number one, when we recognize we've been changed by gospel grace.

Let's come back to Tychicus. Although he's mentioned here and there in the New Testament, we know little about him. So when Paul mentions him here, it's striking to notice what Paul doesn't say.

He doesn't tell us about his family background. Oh, he is so-and-so son. He doesn't tell us about his educational qualifications or his job specifications.

[11 : 29] He went to the University of Ephesus. He's working as a professional writer. That's what we often say when we try to describe someone.

Don't we? We focus on those things. But Paul doesn't do that. Instead, he focuses on what connects them. Verse 7. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord.

In other words, Paul is saying, in essence, this is a guy just like me. Like me.

Tychicus is a sinner, alienated from God, spiritually dead, in desperate need of God's rescue. But like me, because he has trusted in the cross of Christ, he has received his grace, been made spiritually alive, and has now been adopted into God's family.

And that's why we are now brothers. We are part of the same family. We are fellow servants. We are now allies and comrades in arms.

[12 : 50] as those who have died with their old selves and been given new selves, our desire is it's the same, to be faithful to Jesus.

That's the common bond we share, Paul says. He and I have both been changed by gospel grace. And that is why down in verses 9 and 15, Onesimus and the Laodicean Christians are also called dear brothers and sisters too.

That's why Epaphras in verse 12 is also called a servant, just like Tychicus. Because deep down, however it might look like on the outside, they all share the same spiritual DNA.

They all owe their lives to Jesus. And you know what? That is why we here at KEC, despite our differences, can also call each other brother and sister.

Because we share the same spiritual biography. We've all been changed by God's grace. And as such, we have become connected in the most meaningful way possible.

[14 : 22] Let's not be too quick to brush over that fact. It's amazing, isn't it, that that's what the gospel does. It takes people who have very little in common.

in fact, perhaps even people who are hostile to one another, and makes them not just acquaintances, but brothers and sisters.

In fact, let's dwell on how powerful gospel grace is, just a little longer, by considering the other person Paul calls dear brother.

brother. And that is Onesimus down in verse 9. Who is this guy? Did you know there is an entire book devoted to his story?

It's actually just a few pages of the Colossians, in a little book called Philemon. It's a fantastic little letter filled with lessons about love and grace, forgiveness, and restoration, and one day we'll try to explore it in more detail.

[15 : 32] But basically, Onesimus was a slave who had wronged his Christian master, Philemon, perhaps by stealing from or cheating him.

So he ran away. While on the run, he met Paul and became a follower of Jesus. And eventually, he decided to return home to face the music.

That's what the gospel compelled him to do. And Paul writes to Philemon, his master, urging him to welcome Onesimus back, not just as a slave, but as a dear brother.

Because, Paul says, that is just the logic of the gospel. Both Onesimus and Philemon have been changed by the same grace.

So now, they're not just master and servant, but brothers in Christ. And here in Colossians, notice, Paul is practicing exactly what he asked Philemon to do.

[16 : 48] By calling this runaway slave, Onesimus, the same thing he called Tychicus, a dear and faithful brother.

And by giving him a ministry role, alongside Tychicus, Paul is powerfully applying the gospel.

Do you remember what Paul said back in Colossians 3, verse 11? It should appear on the screen. Here, there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, sitian, slave of three, but Christ is all and is in all.

And now, Paul is showing us that what he wrote isn't just theory. It's a bit like Frodo and Sam in The Lord of the Rings.

Frodo is given the task of destroying the evil ring of power, and Sam, his loyal servant, goes with him. And at the start, Sam, as his servant, calls him Mr.

[17 : 59] Frodo. But by the end, Frodo calls Sam, my dearest hobbit, friend of friends, what has changed?

They had come to see that they were on the same side, sharing a common calling, identity, and destiny. That's what happens when we recognize that it is the same gospel grace at work in us all.

God. And in my experience, the gospel connects people like nothing else. Just this week, someone whom I've never met got in touch with me through a mutual friend.

He was in Kuching for just a couple of days, and we agreed to go and have breakfast. And as I got to know this person and hear his story of how he became a Christian at university, and how he's considering full-time gospel ministry, I felt a deep connection.

In a way, I think it's only possible because Jesus has joined us together in the gospel. I know that I am having a meal with someone who has the same desires and the same goals as I do.

[19 : 20] It's what I have felt in the past with Christians I know from places as different as Japan and Northden Island. It's what so many people at the KVBC NextGen Conference that I oversee tell me that they experience.

Indeed, gospel grace is so powerful it can even mend broken connections between brothers and sisters. Just look at Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, down in verse 10.

This is the same guy who wrote the gospel of Mark in your Bibles and traveled with Paul on his first missionary journey. However, Luke tells us that he seriously disappointed Paul by abandoning them halfway and causing a subsequent fallout between Paul and Barnabas.

But ten or so years later, when Colossians was written, Paul and Mark have clearly reconciled.

in fact, Paul urges the Colossians to welcome him. And in verse 11, he even says, Mark has proved to be a comfort to him.

[20 : 35] A sentiment Paul echoes later into Timothy. And that is an encouragement, isn't it? Our mistakes, especially in relating to other Christians, doesn't have to be the end of the story.

They don't have to permanently disconnect relationships between Christians. No, when we allow gospel grace to change us, it can reconnect people. If someone has hurt you, the gospel's power means that same person could still, one day, be the very one who steps up to help, support, or comfort you.

And if you are the one who did the hurting, the gospel's power is such that God can still use you to bring help to the very person you once harmed.

Now, how amazing is that? And so here is our first big takeaway this morning. Yes, we might be quite different from one another, but if we truly know God's grace, and we've been changed by it, we can connect with one another because we share what is most important to us.

And if Jesus is the main thing we're passionate about, then we will naturally want to help each other keep Jesus the main thing.

[22 : 14] we will be sincere in helping each other stick with the gospel. But here is an important disclaimer.

This can only work if you truly know God's grace. For if you truly know God's grace, you will be changed by it. You will want to connect with others.

And if there is zero change in you, perhaps you haven't truly experienced God's grace after all. So maybe it is a good time for self-reflection.

You may have been in church for a while, but do you actually know the grace of God? If not, then can I invite you not to delay, but to figure out as a matter of urgency what God's grace is all about.

Come to the KBBC watch party we've been advertising. It's in our bulletin. Now that would be a great way to find out more. So we have seen how gospel grace transforms us and binds us together regardless of our differences.

[23 : 27] But that is just the foundation for what else is necessary for us to truly care for one another. That is where factor number two comes in.

When we are willing to commit to one another's gospel growth. When we are willing to commit to one another's gospel growth. Check out Epaphras in verse 12.

If you have forgotten, he's the guy who brought the gospel to the Colossians back in chapter one. And now here in chapter four, we get another glimpse into his heart.

what does he want most? Look at the end of verse 12. He wants to make sure his brothers and sisters are standing firm in the will of God, mature and fully assured.

If that sounds familiar, it should. Because come back with me to Colossians 1 verse 28 on the screen. Now, what is Paul's passion?

[24 : 38] To present everyone fully mature in Christ. So, clearly, Epaphras and Paul are of the same mind.

They are committed to the same goal, the spiritual growth of their fellow Christians. This common purpose fuels their deep care and explains why, verse 13, Epaphras is working so hard for them.

For as C.S. Lewis once said, deep friendships always revolve around something shared. And deep Christian friendships, like those described here, revolve around a shared commitment to each other's spiritual growth.

growth. But how does this commitment to each other's gospel growth show up in the day-to-day? What kind of spiritual wellness checks can we do for one another?

In this passage, we find a variety of ways. Firstly, we can wrestle in prayer for others. That's precisely what Epaphras is doing in verse 12, isn't he?

[25 : 57] He is praying for them. And he is not just ticking names off a prayer list once a month when he happens to remember. No, he is wrestling in prayer.

George Muller was a Christian in Bristol who was especially known for his work amongst orphans. And he was known to pray daily for eight specific friends.

Now, this daily prayer resulted in them coming to Christ one after another, all but one. But Muller never stopped praying for this one unsafe friend.

Indeed, he ended up praying for 63 years and eight months altogether for this one man. But Muller, for all his wrestling in prayer, never saw his friend come to Christ.

He died age 93 in 1898. But here is a twist. The friend whom he was praying for came to Muller's funeral and as the casket was being lowered into the grave, the man fell to his knees and cried out, Oh God, be merciful to a sinner like me.

[27 : 18] it was there at the grave side that this friend finally gave his heart to Christ. Now that is the kind of commitment Epaphras embodied, a commitment to that that never wavered until his final breath even though he never saw the results.

And so how can we begin taking a step in that direction? Well, last week our brother Yab Dong Giang mentioned a couple of prayer apps.

Let me just highlight one of them. Again, it's called Prayer Mate and that's what I use to try to remind me to wrestle in prayer for others. It helps organize my prayer items and gives me helpful reminders and things I could be praying for them.

So let me comment that to you. Come and find me later if you want me to help you find it on the App Store. Secondly, we can encourage others.

Now come back with me to Tychicus. Why is Tychicus being sent to the Colossians? End of verse 8. It's so that he may encourage your hearts.

[28 : 41] Once again, Tychicus is embodying the same heart as Paul. If you look back at 2 verse 2, you will see that's what Paul desires.

My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ.

notice this isn't just general encouragement, but more specifically, encouragement to keep pursuing Christ.

let me go back to that person I met for breakfast this week. As he shared with me how Jesus had been working in his life and changing his heart, I couldn't help but feel re-energised.

He made me want to keep sticking with Jesus. and he shared with me that actually I did the same for him. Before we met, he was feeling a little discouraged because he felt like there was a lack of sound teaching where he was.

[29 : 53] But as I shared with him stories of gospel ministry around Malaysia, he told me he became encouraged too. It gave him fresh motivation.

Or, take our teenagers here at KEC, whom I got to spend time with at their camp recently. At the end, they made me a nice thank you card.

And actually one of you personally came up to me last week and he also gave me a little slip of paper with a message on it as well. And teenagers, you might think that all you wrote was a simple sentence or two, but honestly they're all big encouragements.

They make me want to keep sticking with the gospel and to keep exercising gospel ministry. You are putting into practice the theology of this passage.

And can I encourage the whole congregation to be intentional in the same way? And that is how we motivate each other to keep growing in Christ.

[31 : 04] God's And we need encouragement because serving Jesus can be tough. We get a glimpse of that in verse 11.

Paul mentions these three co-workers of his and almost as an aside he says, these are the only Jews among my co-workers for the kingdom of God and they have proved a comfort to me.

You see Paul gets discouraged too. He is a Jew after all and he may have felt a little disheartened that the gospel had not made as much headway amongst his fellow Jews than amongst the Gentiles here.

But he took comfort in the faithfulness of these three co-workers of his. Same with us. Perhaps you don't realise it but your continued presence at the Bible study week after week is an encouragement to your Bible study leader to keep doing the hard work even when the group is small.

Your willingness to serve and volunteer so that the gospel can be advanced even when manpower is a little short sometimes is an encouragement to all those around you to keep sticking at it.

[32 : 32] And then thirdly we can share our lives. One of the things I was struck by in studying this passage was how three times in verses seven to nine Paul is eager to let people know what is going on in his life.

Look at verse seven Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. Verse eight he's coming so that you may know about our circumstances.

Verse nine they will tell you everything that is happening here. You see if someone is doing a wellness check on you for it to be more effective we must be willing to be honest and transparent to say how we are honestly doing.

Vulnerability is the doorway to true friendship. We only truly connect with those whom we are willing to share our lives and our thoughts. If we are not willing to do that then it becomes harder to stick with Jesus to continue in the gospel because no one really knows what's really going on in our lives.

And while it is unrealistic to expect to do this with everyone in church the important thing is that there must be at least a couple of people whom we can do this with.

[34 : 02] And that is what Paul did. He allowed people to see into his life and in fact by doing so he showed he needed them. But how do we find the courage to do that to open up our lives to others in real and honest ways?

I believe it comes when both people are convinced that the other is genuinely committed to their gospel growth because they've been changed by gospel grace.

You see, this is how the gospel works. On the one hand, Jesus is not afraid to expose our sin. He never excuses it.

But on the other hand, he also invites us to turn from it and towards him for grace. That is the beauty of the gospel.

As one writer says, the very core of our salvation is to be exposed and embraced at the same time.

[35 : 12] And genuine Christian connection follows that same pattern. we dare to share and expose the messier parts of our lives, trusting will still be embraced and loved.

That doesn't mean that the other person never ever speaks hard truths to us. But it does mean we can receive them when that happens because we are convinced they want to walk with us towards Jesus.

And I wonder if that is what is happening in the case of Archippus down in verse 17. Paul tells him, see to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord.

Now we have no idea of the exact context of this instruction but the phrase see to it which can also be translated as take heed seems to imply that Archippus had somehow neglected his task whatever it was.

And so Paul might be very gently rebuking him. At the same time however notice that Paul doesn't give this instruction to Archippus directly. He tells the Colossian church to do so.

[36 : 38] So he appears to be telling the Colossian church do a wellness check on him. See him as your responsibility too. Give him the hard truth that he's become lazy in some way and then get behind him to make sure he finishes well.

Then fourthly and briefly we can share resources. That seems to be what Nimpha is doing in verse 15. She's most likely a wealthy widow who has opened her house for the church to meet there.

Now just imagine all that she has to do. She probably has to help set up the chairs week after week and then keep them again at the end. She's got to wipe all those! coffee stains and clean up the crumbs from the refreshments.

But she does it anyway because she's willing to be committed to the gospel growth of other Christians. And it is great whenever we're given opportunities to do this.

Last year, one of the Christian fellowships at a school nearby, at the last minute, the event that they were planning for barred by the school. The school didn't allow them to use their school premises.

[37 : 56] And so they approached us at the last minute if we could open our church hall. And we were glad to do so. And you know, God has given us all different resources.

Some of you today, because you own a particular business or you serve on a particular committee outside church, can open doors and access resources that I, as a church leader, never could.

So ask and consider, is there anything God has given you that you can use to help facilitate the spiritual growth of other Christians?

For in the end, do you remember the big message of Colossians? Here it is from chapter 2 verses 6 and 7 on the screen. So then, just as you receive Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness continue to stick with Jesus.

That is the big message of Colossians. But here is what I hope you are seeing this morning. Sticking with Jesus is a team effort.

[39 : 27] It is not an independent but an interdependent effort. It requires a willingness on our part to be connected and committed to each other's spiritual growth.

and it is hard work but it is worth it. So as we go off today, remember we are all in this together.

God has given us the amazing gift of each other precisely so that we can help one another stick with Jesus no matter how different we might seem.

So let us embrace that divine design and commit to doing those spiritual wellness checks on one another because it truly makes a difference.

Let's pray for that now. I'll just give us a couple of seconds to digest what we just heard and then I'll lead us in a short prayer.

[40 : 43] Lord, we thank you for the gift of fellowship and the example of your faithful servants who labor together in your kingdom.

And Father, just as Paul relied on his companions, we too recognize that our walk with you is meant not to be solitary but a team effort. So help us to build one another up, to encourage and support each other, help us to do wellness checks on one another and to walk alongside each other in humility.

Remind us continually of your grace so that we in turn can keep showing the same grace to one another. Fill us with the same heart that mark the lives of people like Tychicus and Epaphras.

Keep us committed to each other's spiritual growth so that we will have the joy of being together on the final day. All this we ask in the name of Christ. Amen.