



## Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

# Complete the work

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### **Colossians 4:17-18**

"Tell Archippus: 'See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.' 18 I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you."

On our special Mission Anniversary, this year we focus on the work of Wesley Dalmar. We are still very much in the Easter season. The eggs may now be half-price and the rabbits have been put away for another year, but this is a time when we think about just who Jesus Christ is—and the mission to which we have been called.

Both these thoughts are in my mind as I come to these closing moments of our Anniversary Service. We remind ourselves of this Colossian epistle, where the theme is the completeness of the salvation that God has brought in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Colossae may well have been ignored in history had it not been for the New Testament correspondence. Paul had to counter distorted and inadequate views about Jesus Christ.

Earlier in this epistle, Paul had written about 'the Complete Christ', but now he builds upon those thoughts in relation to our mission in the world. Emil Brunner's words are still relevant today: 'The Church exists for mission, as fire exists for burning.'

Text: Colossians 4:17:

'See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.'

Paul writes these words to a particular context, but we put them to good use by letting them roll down the centuries to us today. We understand these words in terms of gathering all the thoughts and challenges of our witness. God is calling for 'finishers'! We seek to complete the work to which God has called us in the light of three factors.

### **We must complete the work despite hostility**

I want to point you to Paul's hand-written postscript: 'Remember my chains.' (4:18). Here, he is not calling for sympathy; it is a statement of his concern to be true to the gospel commission. The chains represent his obedience to God and a willingness to pay the price.

This has to be:

- as we reach out to people in need
- as we retain values which don't easily fit for people
- as we refuse to just be experientially-based about our religion
- and stand for biblical truth as we choose the way of discipleship, in which 'Take up the cross' is our watchword.

Conflicting thoughts and religious practice were found in this cosmopolitan city of Colossae. It was a meeting point of East and West. Today, we are called to make an unequivocal stand for Jesus Christ—and this can be costly. We live by the grace of God and, because we do, the ‘difference between a good person and a bad person to God is insignificant,’ as Reinhold Niebuhr put it. Those words need to be heard against the background of a community which widely recognised that there is an enormous difference between good and bad, but it conveys a recognition that we too easily engage in games of religious pretence. Our spiritual conceit needs to be broken by the price of the love of God and, in doing so, we may face hostility.

The vital combination of the cross and resurrection in our message is essential. It is significant that in areas of Asia, Ukraine and many others where pressure has been great upon Christians, they have held together an understanding of God in Christ who is both Crucified and Risen!

We in the western world are frequently less engaged in our Christian life. Our achievements are too often bound up with restoring buildings and setting up programs. For the Two Thirds World, the challenge of the Christian faith is enormously demanding:

Resources are strictly limited, but that does not stop a meaningful witness. Ideologies and thought forms are in direct conflict with the gospel; there is no ‘popular Christianity’ Corruption and the breakdown of community life is all around. It is not lost on us at Wesley Mission when we are located so close to the ICAC hearings. However, Christian communities under pressure are often wonderful witnesses to the integrity of the gospel.

In the classroom setting of one Peanuts comic strip, on the first day of the new school year, the students were told to write an essay about returning to class. In her essay, Lucy wrote, ‘Vacations are nice, but it’s good to get back to school. There is nothing more satisfying or challenging than education, and I look forward to a year of expanding knowledge.’

Needless to say, the teacher was pleased with Lucy and complimented her fine essay. In the final frame, Lucy leans over and whispers to Charlie Brown, ‘After a while, you learn what sells.’

The temptation to say ‘what sells’ (what others want to hear whether it is true or not), is always with us. To teach and preach what folks want to hear, to lessen its demand and to miss our providential way!

Some of the most significant milestones in our history at Wesley Mission have been when we have stood for Jesus Christ and for those for whom we care. This may often be against the preferred direction of those who prefer insularity and a narrow message.

To be true to the good news is a costly business and we need to remind ourselves that to ‘complete the work’ God has given is not the task of Christians using religion as a hobby or source of weekly entertainment, but as a committed lifestyle which may be opposed by some.

Our union with Christ is in his death, resurrection and exaltation and this is the foundation upon which our lives are built. There may be hostility, but we take hold of the gift and promise of God’s completion in Christ, to complete the life to which God has called us.

## **We must complete the work and be determined to do so.**

This area is an important one. The discipleship pattern in the New Testament involves our commitment and not just the receiving of God's love. This is not 'works' but the appropriate consequence of following:

Grace —'undeserved'—the unmerited favour of God is the summation of the gospel. This is what tells us that no young life is ever worthless. We cannot deny such a calling. It inspires our work with children and families.

Service is the powerful response of disciples to Jesus Christ as Risen Lord. Dedicated service is the heart of our life together. It was Helen Keller who observed, 'Life is an exciting business, and it is most exciting when it is lived for others.'

The moment God touches us, he lays an imperative upon us: to live by the kingdom of God. One of the 'problem pages' of a magazine contained a letter: 'Dear Ann, I've got to decide between a new car and getting engaged. I love the girl. But every night I go to sleep and I dream about the car!'

There is an obvious determination about faith which we cannot ignore. The need of it is there in Jesus himself. 'He sets his face ...' 'For the joy set before him he endured the cross ...' (Hebrews 12:2).

We too are determined to complete the work to which he has called us:

- Embrace the same kingdom values
- Count the cost of what it means to be 'moving on'
- Recognise this is the way to enter into God's fullness.

Runner's World told the story of Beth Anne DeCiantis' attempt to qualify for the 1992 Olympic Trials marathon. A female runner must complete (in 'old money') the 26-mile, 385-yard race in less than two hours, forty-five minutes to compete at the Olympic Trials.

Beth started strong, but began having trouble around mile 23. With just two minutes left to qualify and two hundred yards from the finish, she stumbled and fell. Dazed, she stayed down for twenty seconds. The crowd yelled, 'Get up!'. The clock was ticking—2.44, less than a minute to go.

Beth staggered to her feet and began walking. Five metres short of the finish, with ten seconds to go, she fell again. She began to crawl, the crowd cheering her on, and she crossed the finish line on her hands and knees. Her time was 2 hours, 44 minutes, 57 seconds.

Hebrews 12:1 reminds us to run our race with perseverance and never give up. There are times when we feel like giving up. Disappointment may be our experience; we can be disillusioned about God or ourselves, but the need to run the race is essential.

Today we honour the lives of young people who have persevered, who have not given up when that would have been the easiest option. They are the real heroes.

To complete the work to which God has called us is to be faithful to the way of Jesus Christ ... because God completes his work and expects the same from us.

The transformation that God has made in our lives, relationships and condition is overwhelming and it is the same radical change which will equip us with an inner-

determination. To use a familiar Pauline image, we have to 'put off the old and put on the new'.

### **We must always be directed by Christ**

If we are to be active in the completion of the work God has given us, it will be because we have the clear and conscious understanding that it is Jesus' work and his calling.

If we are called to follow him, it is not just an initial stepping out in faith; it amounts to a continual following, day-by-day taking up the cross. This has implications in the care of others.

Being directed by Christ will mean letting his values, objectives and goals become ours; not just admiring from a distance, but taking them on as our own.

The Risen Lord is with us not just on the Emmaus Road—but, on every road of life, he is alongside us. On one trip to Israel/Palestine, I recall the coach being stoned as we drove to Emmaus late one Sunday afternoon.

Not just in our church and prayers, but in the daily challenges of life. Caring is costly! Discipleship is demanding!

At Wesley Mission, the direction of God will remain a priority. Paul's last words in this letter are directed to the leadership of a small community of faith. Had they become discouraged? Had they been taken in by those who were negative about the work of God's people? Ministry and witness is not something we do for God; it is something that God does in and through us.

To 'complete the work' is to 'fulfil'—which carries with it the concept that God has definite purposes for his people to accomplish. The fullness of Christ flows in us as we are 'filled' by God himself. That fullness becomes the basis of our completing the work to which God has called us.

It is interesting that Demas is mentioned. These words were written prior to the defection and desertion of Demas recorded in 2 Timothy 4:10. Not everyone who sets out on the road of Christian discipleship completes it. But we must, if we are to continue not just for 120 years, or 202 years, but in the longer story of Australian life.

Now, as we come to the closing moments of this anniversary celebration, we face the challenge of 'completing the work'. Are you ready to move on?

- Move on in personal faith
- Move on in living witness
- Move on in developing discipleship and service.

In First Things First, Roger Merrill tells of a business consultant who decided to landscape his grounds. He hired an extremely knowledgeable woman with a doctorate in horticulture.

Because the business consultant was very busy and travelled a lot, he kept emphasising to her the need to create his garden in a way that would require little or no maintenance on his part. He insisted on automatic sprinklers and other labour-saving devices.

Finally she stopped and said, 'There's one thing you need to deal with before we go any further. If there's no gardener, there's no garden.'

There are no labour-saving devices for growing a garden of spiritual virtue. Becoming a person of spiritual fruitfulness requires time, attention and care. Caring for children is a costly business; developing family life takes time, but the fruit is amazing. So many of our present day 'caring families' know this to be the case.

We have become a society that collects tokens, checks out special offers and travels the world with air miles if possible. It is a way of seeking to obtain something for less money and often less commitment.

Commitment will always be costly and, during the past few years, I've seen the challenge this brings:

- Standing firm, when you know something is wrong
- Holding out in dedication, and not taking the easy option
- Moving forward to the goal of Christ.

Another example from the field of the athlete is not out of place in relation to this theme. In the momentous Millennium Olympic Games held here in Sydney, one of the scenes recorded on film which will live for all time was of the young woman who came into the stadium after a challenging long run and, as she passed a certain point, she celebrated. An official had to rush alongside her to say 'You've got X metres to go yet!'

God wants people who will complete the work!

Charles Wesley wrote a wonderful hymn on Christian holiness that has two outstanding lines:

'But when the work is done,  
The work is but begun.'

I read about a Minnesota town that has a volunteer fire department with this slogan— 'We'll know where we're going when we get there.'

The words are not as mindless and distorted as they might first appear. God has called us on a journey which we must complete and it always stretches beyond each one of us.

On this day, we not only celebrate the past, but also commit ourselves to an exciting and demanding future.