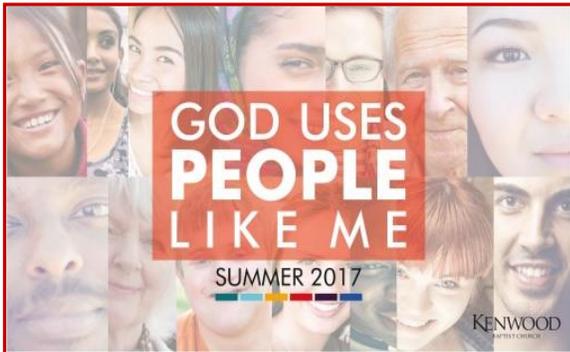


***Epaphras: A Prayerful and Hard-working Man***  
Summer Sermon Series “God Uses People Like Me”  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Pastor David Palmer  
June 18, 2017

**TEXT:** Colossians 1:1-10, 4:12-13

We continue this morning in our summer series: *God Uses People Like Me*, and we turn our attention to another of the minor characters in the New Testament. Many names in the New



Testament are very familiar to us, names like Peter, John, Mary, or Paul, but there are actually many more names in the New Testament that are given the space of just a verse or two, people like Susanna, Demetrius, Gaius, or, this morning, the man that we meet in Colossians named Epaphras. Epaphras is a minor character, and yet he made a major impact on the growth of the Kingdom of

God. We want to look at this character, this life, what we know of it, because it is instructive for all of us to see how God uses very ordinary people like you and me to advance His Kingdom in the world. When you see someone working effectively for the Kingdom of God, mentoring others, caring about discipleship, working hard in the Lord's vineyard, there is always a back story to that. No one comes out of the womb thinking and acting that way, and so it is with Epaphras. I want us to learn together the back story behind this prayerful and hard-working man that we meet in passing in Colossians. Turn with me to the Book of Acts 19 for the back story to that. Parents or grandparents, maybe you can point that out. This book is sometimes called *The Acts of the Apostles*, but we call it *The Acts of the Exalted Jesus* around here, because these are the things that Jesus continues to do in the world.

The back story for Epaphras begins in Acts 19:1. We read:

*“And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus.”*

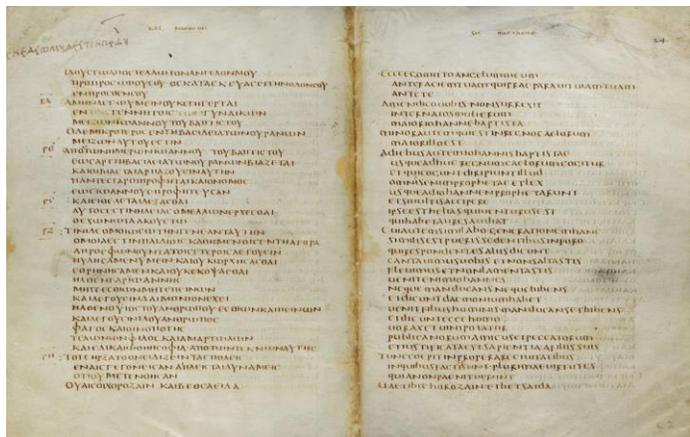
The city of Ephesus was the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire, a city of 250,000 people. It was a major stop for Paul, a huge, unreached area. In Acts 19:8. Paul, as was his custom:

*“And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.”*

The Kingdom had arrived in Christ. Yet, Paul faced opposition in the synagogue, as we continue

reading. Some spoke evil of the Way, that is the way of Jesus, and as when people turn away from your preaching or are hostile, Paul withdraws from them and takes those who were following him, the disciples, with him, and he ends up reasoning or teaching daily in the Hall of Tyrannus. This is a very important scene shift where the Apostle Paul, speaking in the synagogue—or we might think of as the churches of the day—is kicked out, and so he's wondering where he can go to preach and teach and share about Jesus. This man says, "Well, I have a school, and it's a lecture hall. You can use my lecture hall." Now, I love school, and I know many of you do as well, and sometimes teachers have nicknames behind their backs. We know this; teachers know this, but they often don't know what the nicknames are. But this teacher, this head of the school, has the nickname of *Mr. Tyrant*. Do you see that? Tyrannus, the same Tyrannus as in *tyrannus saurus rex*. So Tyrannus has a school, and he must have been supremely intimidating. No Roman has a given name of *Tyrant*, but this schoolmaster is called *Tyrannus*. The remarkable thing about this tyrant is that he says to the Apostle Paul, "You can use my school, and you can use it daily." Luke tells us that this continued for two years and that as a result of Paul's teaching daily in Mr. Tyrant's school, all the residents of Asia heard the Word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. This is Asia, the Roman province of Asia, not Asia in terms of China and India. This is the area all around Ephesus, but it is a staggering statement, isn't it? How is it that Paul's teaching daily had the effect that this entire province heard the Word? Just let your mind absorb this. It would be like saying that Pastor Scott was given the opportunity to teach about Jesus at Sycamore High School, and after doing that daily for two years, the entire state of Ohio heard the Word of Christ. That's what we're being told. You may wonder how that is possible. We get a clue as to how that was possible from a text variant of an early manuscript of the New Testament.

I mentioned last summer that the New Testament is the best attested document in the ancient world. There is no document like the New Testament documents. There are 5,000 Greek manuscripts and 10,000 Latin manuscripts. We have a very vivid idea of the New Testament text, and sometimes those manuscripts have very small variations. There is a very small variation in this manuscript. I know you are straining your eyes to read this right now, but let me clarify. This is an important early manuscript of the New Testament. It is called *Codex Bezae* because it was named after its owner, Théodore Bèze, who donated it to the University of Cambridge in 1581. Bèze was discipled by John Calvin at the time of the Reformation, and he had this early manuscript. It was



produced in the third century A.D., and it was probably produced in Lebanon. What is interesting about this manuscript is that on one side it has the Greek text; on the other side it has the Latin text. I know some of you are thinking, “How does this apply to my life?” Let me tell you how it applies to your life. In Acts 19:9, in precisely this passage, this manuscript often includes very small pieces of historical detail that go with the narrative, and this one manuscript includes the time of Paul's lectures. It says that Paul lectured in the School of Tyrannus every day from the fifth hour to the tenth hour. Some of you are thinking school started at 5 AM, but the way that you count time in the Bible is that it starts from sunrise. That means that Paul taught from 11 AM to 4 PM, five hours a day, for two years. I can assure you that he didn't give just a simple gospel presentation. That means he was teaching about Jesus for 3,000 hours over two years, and that's how the Word of the Lord spread and you could say that all of Asia heard about Christ.

In Acts 19:20, Luke summarizes and says:

*“So the Word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”*

It spread throughout the area, and this is the back story for the person of Epaphras, because he was one of the people in the crowd in Ephesus who heard Paul's daily lectures—heard and believed. In fact, hundreds and thousands had heard and believed, and they went out with the knowledge of Christ as Lord and Savior. They went on and worked for the Kingdom of God in ways that probably would have astounded Paul, if he had known that. When you see anyone working hard for the Kingdom, know that others have invested in them prior to that. So, we fast forward now to Paul's letter to Colossians. I have a real insider view to Colossians this morning, because I had the great privilege of playing the role of Paul last week at Vacation Bible School. All last week, I got to play the role of Paul in prison writing these very letters.

Colossians was one of those letters he wrote, and the letter to Colossae begins like many of Paul's letters. If you look at it, he sends greetings from “Paul and Timothy.” Notice that more than half of Paul's 13 letters are sent by Paul and someone else. He never worked alone. He wrote in Colossians 1:2:

*“To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”*

In Colossians 1:3, he says:

*“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,”*

These are standard types of greetings. In Colossians 1:4-5, Paul says we are praying for you because:

*“We heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints,*

*because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel.”*

Paul had heard of the love that they have for God's people, that they understand the hope that is laid up for them in heaven, and that they had heard about these things beforehand because they had heard them in the Word of truth, that is the gospel. The gospel teaches us about faith in Christ, about walking and living in love, and about living in light of the glorious hope that we have in Jesus Christ. We learn these things from the gospel. What's remarkable about this greeting is that Paul says that “we heard about you,” which is unusual. This becomes clear in the next verse. He said they have received the gospel. How did they receive the gospel? The gospel had reached their shores; it had come to their city. We discover as we read Colossians 1:6:

*“[The gospel] which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.”*

The words that Paul chooses here in the Greek text are literally the same words for *be fruitful and multiply*. Those who know the Bible well will recognize this illusion immediately. Paul is saying to us that the gospel, as it goes out, actually fulfills the creation mandate of humanity in Genesis 1. It is amazing that Genesis 1 says that human beings made in the image and likeness of God are supposed to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with the knowledge of God. It is not just about having children, but it is about filling the earth with image-bearers who reflect the knowledge of God and worship and praise Him. God's glory fills the earth as those He has made know Him and delight in Him. Paul is saying that this is happening through the gospel in the whole world, and it is happening among you, and it has been happening since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth. We still don't know how the Colossians received the gospel. We finally find out in Colossians 1:7 when he says:

*“. . . just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant.”*

I love this. The city of Colossae is 100 miles from Ephesus. That is like walking from Cincinnati to Columbus, receiving good news, and then walking on to tell others. We have no indication that Paul ever visited the city of Colossae, but it didn't matter because Epaphras received the Word of the Lord in Paul's robust 3000-hour teaching ministry in Ephesus. I'd like to take that class. Would you join me in signing up? It's unlimited enrollment, a 3000-hour seminar with the Apostle Paul. And, by the way, that's why he tells the Ephesian leaders later in Acts 20: “I didn't hold back.” Can you imagine? He taught for 3000 hours! Remember Eutychus? At one point he was so gripped, and then he just couldn't hang in there any longer. He fell down, dead. Paul says: “It's okay, I'll just pray and he'll be raised from the dead.” That is serious teaching. That is teaching stamina. But this man, Epaphras, took the gospel that he had received, and he went

100 miles away to share it. So, Paul says they learned the gospel from Epaphras and calls him *“our beloved fellow servant, faithful minister on your behalf,”* and says that Epaphras has told them about their love in the Spirit.

So, there they are. Epaphras has left the city. He has visited Paul and has told Paul all about the Christian church in Colossae. He also told Paul about the church in Laodicea and Hierapolis, and so together they are in earnest prayer. What do you do about hearing about converts like this? You start praying for them. What do you do and how do you react when you hear that 27 children came forward to ask Jesus into their lives during Vacation Bible School? What do you do? Do you just say, “Praise God. What are you going to do this afternoon”? No, you start praying for them, because that's the beginning of new life, and Paul says in Colossians 1:9-10:

*“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;”*

Being *filled up with the knowledge of God's will* is acquired over time. Notice these words again: *“. . . bearing fruit and increasing in the knowledge of God.”* His prayer was that new believers would grow in the knowledge of God's will, that they would walk worthy of the Lord and then do their part in filling the earth. Oh, I long to see the earth filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. Some of those children this week will probably exceed the Kingdom contribution of many of us. I believe that, and we need to pray for them.

We go then to the end of Colossians and we learn more of Epaphras. In Colossians 4:12, Paul tells us a little bit more about this prayerful, hard-working man. He says:

*“Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.”*

The name Epaphras comes from the Greek goddess of love, *Aphrodite*. It's a very pagan name. No Israelite ever names their son or daughter *Aphrodite* or the Roman equivalent *Venus*. But this man, the masculine form of Aphrodite, a very pagan name, we learn was a former pagan. We also learn that he is from Colossae. Paul says: “He's one of you.” But much more important than his former pagan background, much more important than his city of origin, is that he has become a servant of Christ Jesus. He is following in exactly the path of his mentor. Paul was prayerful in exactly these same ways. Epaphras, we learn, is mighty in praying for others. He is struggling. Paul uses a word that he is agonizing, which means he is in earnest prayer. Some of you know the difference between saying “Oh, I'll pray for you” and then forgetting to do it; some of you know about saying “Oh, I'll pray for you and I'd better do that right now so I don't

forget”; and others of you know about the hidden, private, labor-intensive prayer that moves mountains. That is what Epaphras was like. He was laboring in earnest in his prayers for those of his city. What was he praying for them? Was he praying that they’d all get new cars? No, because no one had cars. Was he praying that they’d all get new chariots? No. Was he praying that they’d all get new jobs? Was he praying that they would have a pain-free existence? Was he praying that they would find the woman or man of their dreams? No! What was he praying in earnest for them? He was praying in earnest that they would stand, that they would stand perfect or mature, that they would reach a place of maturity in following Christ, and that they would be fully assured, or fully informed, in all the will of God. Can you see in this the imprint of Paul's investment in Epaphras' life? How do you pray for someone to be mature and fully informed of God's will? You pray that for people if you have experienced that, and Epaphras had experienced that. How did he experience that? We don't know how many of the 3,000 hours of lectures he went to, but I'm guessing it was a considerable number. He was brought from a pagan background to a place of maturity, prevailing prayer, and a heaping, generous portion of teaching and discipling others. Paul says of Epaphras that not only is he a servant of Christ, mighty in prayer, a discipler of others, but he tells us two more things about him in Colossians 4:13:

*“For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.”*

Paul solemnly testified this about Epaphras. I love what he said. I love hard work. For some, this is a lost art. Many people growing up today think that success happens almost by accident, that you stumble upon an invention, patent it, sell it, and you never have to work again, and that your work life is some kind of an accidental happening. Sometimes people look at entertainers or great athletes and think it was just genetics and wish they had been born like that. But God honors diligent, hard work. When we talk with people who are really successful, when we talk with people who have been used of God to do mighty things, we will often find inside that story a commitment to very hard work, diligent preparation. The grace of God does not take away hard work. The grace of God removes hard work from us in terms of earning our salvation, as we contribute nothing. There's a great passage in 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul waxes eloquent about the grace of God. He says in 1 Corinthians 15:10:

*“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”*

Oftentimes we put a period after that first phrase and say: “Great, by the grace of God I am what I am.” That’s not the end of the sentence. Paul goes on and says: “. . . and His grace towards me was not in vain.” God's grace had an effect on his life. What was the effect? He says: “The effect was that *I worked harder than anyone, though it was not I, but the grace of*

*God in me.*" When you receive the grace of God in your life, it doesn't make you carefree and just mindful of heaven and disengaged in the earth. When you receive the grace of God, it actually empowers and motivates and sustains diligent, hard work for the Kingdom, and that work is motivated and inspired by the Holy Spirit. I love seeing our church filled with kids. It was really, really great, and it was also wonderful to see so many people working hard, praying hard, and I believe that God honors that kingdom-investment. Not only is Epaphras a hard worker, we discover that he is a church planter. Epaphras not only takes the gospel and brings it 100 miles to his hometown, but once the church is going in his hometown, he keeps moving, and he keeps walking another 6 miles, another 11 miles, to start churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis. This man who came to the Lord through Paul's ministry in Ephesus was a prayerful and hard-working man who was committed to seeing the Kingdom increase in the earth.

We need to refresh our commitment for such habits. We need this at Kenwood. It's exciting to have outreaches like Vacation Bible School or summer community groups where we're exercising hospitality. Who is not excited about the FC Cincinnati soccer camp? But, we need to work hard, and in so doing, to reach out to places and to people who haven't heard. We saw this at Vacation Bible School. Almost half of those kids who came were from the community, and that's what we want. We want half of your community group to be from your neighborhood, to be reaching out prayerfully, working hard, and seeking the increase of God's Kingdom in the earth.

I want to conclude this morning with the story of someone who has really challenged me to pursue this in similar ways. It's a story of missions. It's a story of reaching out. It's a story that's built on prayer and then sharing Christ with those who haven't heard. It's a story from the life of Gladys Aylward, who was a very ordinary person. She worked as a cleaning lady in England, and she was denied missionary service because she didn't have the credentials. She reapplied and was eventually accepted. She was supported by many churches, even churches in the US, including the church John and Lois Bascom once attended. This cleaning lady went to China, and she writes:

[Once] I was invited to take part in a conference of young people to speak to them about pioneer mission work. When I arrived at the conference, I was sick and I was weak. Why had God had allowed me to come here among strangers, all for nothing as I wasn't able to give my talks? One day I heard murmuring sounds from the next room. It sounded like people were praying.

I crept out of bed with my slippers and nightgown and peered into the open doorway. I saw about fifteen students gathered around a map. Then one of them went forward, placed his finger on the map, and said, "Does anyone know anything about this place?"

I stood entranced while one student after another prayed for this unknown village or town. Then another went forward, again jabbed blindly with his finger, and read another name.

At the end of the meeting, I questioned the students and learned that they had this part of the country laid on their hearts and were praying for different places every day. At another of these strange prayer meetings I said, "Is anyone going to go to these places you are praying for?" "No one is free. We are still engaged in our studies."

So I prayed and two days later I was convinced that God was asking me to go to this unknown territory with no Christian witness. A Chinese doctor offered to accompany me. His name was Dr. Huang.

We traveled to this remote area in western China, and on the tenth day we came to a mountainside. The next day, we hiked and walked all day but did not see a living soul or the slightest sign of human habitation. By midafternoon I was becoming perturbed. I started to look around and then burst out, "Dr. Huang, we are going to put down our bundles and pray." We threw our bundles on the ground and knelt down. I began, "Dear God, have mercy on us. You can see what a plight we are in. Give us food and shelter for the night."

My whole prayer was taken up and consumed by my own wants, my immediate needs. Then, very calmly, Dr. Huang began to pray. "Oh God, send us no one You want us to tell about Jesus. We have witnessed no one today, but you have sent us here for a special purpose. Show us the man. Show us where to find the man You intend us to bless."

I felt humbled and ashamed. While I had been so concerned with my own comfort, this man was concerned only with his Father's business.

After a few moments I said, "Shall we sing?" So we sat and sang, and our voices must have carried far in the clear mountain air. Suddenly, Dr. Huang jumped to his feet. "There is our man," he cried. Before I could stop him, he had dashed off.

I sat alone, feeling very small. Finally, I saw too little specks on the mountainside. As Dr. Huang drew nearer, he kept shouting, "Come on up; I have found our man." Half carried and half pushed, I scrambled up and found, leaning against a rock, a Tibetan lama priest. I stared from him to Dr. Huang. I knew that lamas [who are holy men from Tibet] were supposed to have nothing to do with women.

"Did you tell him I was a woman?" I demanded. "Yes, but he has invited you to come and spend the night in the lamasery [which is the monastery]"

"Why should Tibetan priests invite *me* into their sacred buildings?"

Suddenly the priest spoke with a heavy accent, though I understood him well, and he said, "We have waited a long time for you to tell us about the God who loves."

A party of lamas greeted us as we entered reverently into the lamasery. We passed through a gate covered with flowering vines. We came inside, led through courtyard after courtyard until we finally entered a very large room. When we enter this room, there were 500 hassocks made of coconut leaves arranged in a semicircle, and on each one of the hassocks sat a Tibetan lama priest with his hands folded piously across. We were taken to empty hassocks at the center of the semicircle. "What on earth are we expected to do?" I wondered nervously.

Dr. Huang answered and said, "Now we will begin. You sing." So we began by singing a hymn, and a deathly silence followed. Then Dr. Huang began to speak. He told them about a Child who was born in a stable in Bethlehem; then he told them of the Savior who died on Calvary.

"Now sing again," he said. So I sang, and then I talked. Then we sang and he talked; I sang again, then I talked. The night wore long and I thought that I might pass out. Finally I went back to my room, and as soon as I was settled in my room, I heard a knock on the door, and two of the monks asked "Could you tell us a little bit more? Will you explain how and why He died? Will you explain to us how it is that He could love me?" I answered their questions, and we stayed for a week.

At last we resolved that we had to leave, and before we left I received a summons to appear before the head of the lamasery. I walked in alone and found a finely dressed man seated on a beautiful, ornate cushion with servants attending him. He spoke in impeccable Mandarin Chinese, and I understood him perfectly. We discussed many things, and then with great daring I asked him, "Why did you let me, a foreign woman, come into your lamasery? Why did you allow me to speak to your priests?"

He said, "It's a long story. Out on our mountainside there grows a licorice herb which my lama priests collect and sell in the cities. One year the men who had taken the herb harvest down on the mules were passing through a village when they saw a man waving a paper calling out, 'Who wants one? Salvation free and for nothing. He who believes get salvation and eternal life. If you want to learn more of this, come to the gospel hall.'"

The llamas were utterly astounded at such a doctrine, took the tract, and brought it back to the lamasery. He then reached down beneath him and pulled out an unfolded paper. It was worn and in pieces. It was an ordinary gospel tract with the words of John 3:16: "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*"

That was all, but from it they had learned that somewhere there was a 'God who loved.' Every one of the priests began to read and reread this paper. The next year, when the men took the herb down to the cities, we told them to find out where 'the God who loved' lived,

but for five years they could learn nothing more.

Then the man who had received the first paper vowed that he would not return until he had learned more about this 'God who loved.' They went on and on until they came to the city of Len Chow. There they saw a man on the street and asked their usual question, "Can you tell us where the God who loves lives?" "Oh, yes," he said. "Go down that street, and you will come to a large gate with three signs over it—Faith, Hope, Love. Go in there; they will tell you about the God who loves."

They approached this small missionary station and asked the same question of the Chinese evangelist: "Where is the God who loves?" He told them all he could, and then he gave them a copy of the Gospels. Eagerly they hurried back to the lamasery and we read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We believed all that it contained, though there was much we could not understand. But one verse seemed of special importance to us. Jesus Christ said, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel," and so obviously we knew that one day someone would come to tell us more about this wonderful God who loved us. All we had to do was wait. So we waited for three more years. Then suddenly two of our priests, out on a hillside gathering sticks, heard someone singing. "These are the messengers we are waiting for," they said. "Only people who know God sing." So we have prepared and listened attentively to all you have to say.

There is a back story for everyone you see, serving Christ. Can we be a prayerful, hard-working congregation so that the Word of Christ might bear fruit and increase in all the earth? Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we magnify You, great, mighty, saving God. Lord, You are the God who loves, and we pray this morning that You would make us a church who loves You in return, who does not hold back, but eagerly shares the Good News that has been entrusted to us. Lord Jesus, we pray that You would help us to invest in the lives around us, and may they do exceedingly more than we could ever ask or imagine. May they go to places, to people, to cities that we could never go. May they go through friendships that we do not have, and may the Word of Christ bear fruit and increase in all the earth.

In Jesus' Name we pray, Amen.