

***Nympha: Homes can be Houses of Worship***  
Summer Sermon Series “God Uses People Like Me”  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Pastor David Palmer  
June 11, 2017

**TEXT: Colossians 4:7-18**

It is a beautiful morning, a great day to be in the Lord's house and to be gathered together in worship. This Sunday we continue with our summer series, *God Uses People Like Me*. When you think of yourself, your gifts, most of us are not extraordinary, super, outlier type of people.



Most of us are normal people, and the Scripture is filled with names of ordinary men, women, and children of God who were used by Him to accomplish extraordinary things. This summer series is highlighting for us the very nature of practical ministry that is accessible to most of us. We are looking at some minor characters of the New Testament. I challenged everyone last Sunday when I asked if they would raise their hands if they

had ever heard a sermon on a woman named Nympha. There was no one in the first service, no one in the second service. I said: “Enjoy this Sunday because it's the last one where you can say that.” Today is the day when we are going to focus on this woman named Nympha, who occurs near the end of our text. We will arrive there together later in the message, but I want us to draw attention, as Paul does often in his letters, to a set of greetings, personal greetings, named individuals with whom he is partnering in the gospel. The names of these people are significant in Scripture and they highlight for us how the Kingdom of God advances through ordinary people. Sometimes we imagine that our normal, daily activities can't be used by God to accomplish tremendous things. This is not true. This series, in many ways, is a great complement to the series that we finished this spring on Hebrews, which was very, very lofty—an exalted picture of Christ, and many of us struggled to keep pace with the writer as he set before us, week after week, this towering portrait of our Savior. So, this is a great complement because we see that each of us becomes great not in ourselves, but we become great when we are in the service of the great One. Our lives become meaningful when they are spent in service to the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to focus our attention on the ending of this letter, Paul's letter to the Colossians, beginning in Colossians 4:7. Keep your Bibles open. Again we welcome the children. Moms and dads, help your children to follow along in God's Word. This passage seems like it wouldn't be that great, if you could even dare to say such a thing. It seems like a list of names, like details, but I hope that at the end of this message, you'll see that this passage is actually very compelling. It is very compelling because it gives us real portraits of ministry, of ordinary people in the service of an extraordinary God. We want to walk through this and arrive together with

the figure of Nympha towards the end. Let's take it in the sequence that we are given in God's Word. This is a set of individuals with varying ministries, and most of us this morning will find our place in one of these.

The first person we meet in Colossians 4:7 is a certain man named Tychicus. Tychicus is a pagan name. The goddess *Tyche* is the goddess of good fortune, and so this man's name means *Mr. Fortunate*. Can you imagine that? Maybe he was born on an auspicious day. Some might translate this as *Mr. Good Luck*. No one in Israel was ever named this. This is very much a Greek-Roman, pagan kind of name. Yet, we discover that Paul describes this pagan man as a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord in Colossians 4:7:

*"Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord."*

So, the first thing you do know is that God converts people from all kinds of backgrounds and draws them in. Your ancestors can be idol worshipers and you can receive Jesus Christ and be called a beloved brother, faithful servant of the Lord Jesus Christ! It doesn't matter what your past is. All that really matters is if you trusted in Jesus Christ, and Tychicus does, and he is described in these remarkable ways. We know a little bit more about Tychicus from the book of Acts. He is a man who joined Paul on his missionary activities and was converted. He was originally from the province of Asia. This is not the big Asia of China but the small Asia, the Roman province of Asia around the area of Ephesus. Tychicus was converted and joined Paul's ministry and was one of eight people that Paul took with him to Jerusalem to bring an offering of the nations to God there in the city. Tychicus is also entrusted with the delivery of a letter to the Ephesians.

In Ephesians 6, Paul describes that we are to stand firm in the armor of God and describes the Christian life as needing to be fully clothed with armor. But, Tychicus is also called there in Ephesians 6:2 *"a beloved brother, faithful minister."* Tychicus' ministry in Colossians 4:8 is that he is sent not only to carry the letter, but he is there to encourage the hearts of the believers in Colosse and to inform them of Paul's ministry. This is what I call 'positive gossip.' I love that. It's an atmosphere we seek to cultivate at Kenwood Baptist Church. What is positive gossip? Positive gossip is when you spread the news of what you've seen God do. It has a catalyzing effect on other people's hearts. Gossip is usually spoken from the side, and when gossip comes out of our flesh, it discourages people and maligns people, but when gossip comes from the Holy Spirit, you can still speak out of the side, but you can say something like: "Can I just tell you how I saw God use my friend Joseph?" I love spreading that. Tychicus' ministry spreads good news and a report about the ministry of the gospel that Paul is doing in Rome. That's his mission or ministry here. It seems very ordinary, but it can be applied today in something as simple as sending an email to someone else about how you saw God use someone. It fans the flame of a mindset that we are looking to see how God is at work. Tychicus is used by God to communicate directly and fan the flames of ministry. Not only is Tychicus a bearer of good news about ministry, but notice in Colossians 4:9 that he is also traveling with Onesimus. In Greek, Onesimus means *useful*. You might think that is a very inspired name. Who would call their child *Useful*? Maybe someone might, but actually the name *Useful* is a name that was

commonly given to slaves or servant workers in the first century. We will talk more about Onesimus in July, but Onesimus is a prominent character in Paul's short letter to Philemon. Onesimus, who was a fugitive, would come to know Jesus Christ while he was running from his owner, then returned. Notice that Paul describes Onesimus as a faithful and beloved brother. A beautiful story that we will tell you more about later. But, let me point out that Tychicus has not only the ministry of positive gossip, but he has a ministry of spreading news of what God is doing. Notice that Tychicus is not traveling alone, he is bringing Onesimus with him and that part of his ministry is to raise up and mentor other people. This is a beautiful picture of growing ministry. One of my mentors told me: "You should train people to do ministry all the time. That's part of what you should be doing—training people to do ministry." We see Onesimus here as part of this approach to ministry.

In Colossians 4:10, we have greetings from Aristarchus. Aristarchus is identified as a fellow prisoner. He is there together with Mark, cousin of Barnabas, and Jesus, called Justice. Aristarchus as well is a pagan name, *the noble ruler*. Aristarchus is someone who was converted in Paul's second missionary journey when he visited the city of Thessaloniki in northern Greece. Aristarchus believed and joined Paul's missionary team. We don't know the full story, but at some point along the way, Aristarchus is imprisoned with Paul. So he is not just a fellow worker, he is also in custody with Paul. There may be a clue to this in Acts 19 when in the city of Ephesus there was a great riot against Paul's ministry because the idolatrous business was suffering. Can you imagine? What an indicator of successful ministry: "Idolatrous temple business is down." It's down so badly that the people who are making the idol statues of Artemis cause a riot! When the Kingdom of God advances, the dignity of humanity elevates and the power of idolatry is broken and all businesses that exploit, deface, and defame human beings begin to suffer. Do you want to see that in our city? I do. I'd love to see idolatrous-based businesses that exploit people suffer because of Vacation Bible School, because of summer community groups, because of people taking seriously spiritual responsibility for their neighborhood. Can you pray with me for that? That would be so Acts-like. But there's a note in Acts 19 that when the people rushed into the theater of Ephesus shouting out "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians," the city was filled with confusion. They rushed together and they dragged Gaius and Aristarchus, together with Paul, into the city. That may be the basis for Aristarchus' being imprisoned, we don't know for sure. What we do know is that Aristarchus is imprisoned, and he sends greetings too. We know that Aristarchus is traveling with Paul, according to Acts 27:2:

*"And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica."*

Mark is also one who sends greetings.

I love the story of Mark. It's one of the most beautiful subplots in the New Testament. This is John Mark, whom we meet in the Gospels as a young man. He is the young man at the ending of Mark's gospel who when Jesus was arrested, panicked and fled. That's his cameo appearance. Some of us are old enough to remember Alfred Hitchcock and how Alfred

Hitchcock used to make a cameo appearance in his films. The gospel writers, centuries before, all make a cameo in their gospel, and Mark's cameo in his gospel is of a terrified young man fleeing when Jesus was arrested. Mark, however, ends up, after Jesus has been raised from the



dead—that will breathe courage into you—joining Paul's first missionary journey. They travel to Cyprus and the Roman governor is converted on their first stop. Paul and Barnabas continue, and they sail north from Cyprus until they land on the southern coast of modern-day Turkey. This is one of the most gripping photographs I've ever seen to illuminate the dynamics of the New Testament. This is the scene of when they reach the coast. They had sailed north from Cyprus, and they've landed on the coast. Those small buildings in the foreground, near modern-day Italia, are apartment

high-rise buildings. They reach the shore, and they are confronted by the Taurus Mountains, 11,000 feet high. The beach is less than a half mile, and there is no way over those mountains except walking over them. When they reach the shore, Paul looks at those mountains and he says: “There are people on the other side of those mountains that have never heard of a God that created the universe and made them and sent His one and only Son into the world to bear their sins and that He has died for them and has been raised for them and calls them into eternal life. The people on the other side of those mountains have never heard any of that, so we are going to walk over those.” Barnabas said, “I will go with you.” John Mark said, “Guys, I think it's time to see my mom. I want to tell my mom about everything that happened on Cyprus,” and he left and went home. I don't know what you would think seeing those mountains, but I feel a little sympathy with Mark. Haven't there been moments in ministry when Jesus invited you to do something big and you chickened out? There have been moments when Jesus says, “I'd like you to do this or that,” and we have to grow in faith to say, “Yes, Lord.” The great subplot is that Paul and Barnabas had an argument about this. Later, on missionary journey number two, Barnabas said, “Let's go on another journey and let's bring Mark.” Paul said, “I don't want Mark on this trip because he bailed out.” So Paul took Silas, and Barnabas and Mark went together. The good news is that they worked this out eventually, and the parenthetical line of Colossians 4:10 says:

*“. . . , and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him)”*

There will be times in ministry when you might have a conflict with someone, and I love the subplot that they work this out. In one of Paul's last letters to Timothy, he talks about Mark and says, “He's very useful to me.”

The next person is Jesus. This is not the Lord Jesus, but this is attestation for us that the name Joshua, *Yeshua*, was very common, and we see that this is Jesus or Joshua who also took the Roman name *Justus*, like many first-century Israelites. They would have a Hebrew name and then a Latin name or a Greek name that had the same sound, and so *Yeshua* or *Joshua*. Jesus is also called *Justus*. We know nothing else about this man other than that he had these two

names, and maybe that will be some of our story. At some point, you may read or look at a directory of Kenwood and there may be names you won't know, but the Lord Jesus knows this man. All of these together, Paul describes in Colossians 4:11 as:

*“These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.”*

It is interesting to me about this verse that these men are not described as merely Paul's kinsman. It is not just that they are ethnic Israelites; it is not just that they share the same ethnic heritage as Paul; but the way he introduces them as *men of the circumcision*. It's that group that took a heart stance on the necessity or role of circumcision. That was a major point of contention in the early church: is this required of those from a Gentile background? In Acts 15, the early church had to make its first big all-church decision about this. It is instructive for us to see that it's okay to work with people even if you have a range of views on a secondary topic. Don't separate from someone if you share with them the core convictions of the gospel, and you may have a different view on a secondary matter. That should never, ever divide the church. Paul says that “these have been a great comfort to me, a source of encouragement, consolation.”

The next person identified is Epaphras, another great pagan name. He is named after the Greek goddess *Aphrodite* or *Venus*, by a Roman name, the goddess of love. I'm not sure what kind of a man ends of being named after the goddess of love, but I'll let you think on that for little bit because we're going to talk more about Epaphras next week. But, notice that Epaphras is a person who is mighty in prayer. We read in Colossians 4:13:

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

He is someone who works hard. He is a church planter, we discover, for in the letter to the Colossians we discover that Epaphras is a man who came to know Christ through Paul's preaching ministry in Ephesus and then took the knowledge of the Lord further out and planted churches in Colossae and probably also in Laodicea and Hierapolis. There are many new churches being planted even in our city in recent months. Church planting pastors count church planting almost like in dog years. It is hard work to get a church where there is none and bring it to a sustainable place. So it is no small statement to say that Epaphras worked hard. Notice that he worked hard “for you,” he says, but also for these neighboring communities, the neighboring communities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. We know Laodicea was one of the churches in Asia Minor that receives a letter from Jesus in the book of Revelation. Laodicea is about 11 miles west of Colossae. It's like the difference between a church in Kenwood and a church in Mason. Mason is just a little bit farther. I know the distance from Kenwood to Mason very well because I ran it once, and it almost killed me. But it is 12 miles to Mason from here, so this is a little closer, just 11 miles. Laodicea, this city just 11 miles west, was also home to a flourishing, growing Christian community, just 6 miles away is the city of Hierapolis, or the holy city. This place in antiquity was famous. Hierapolis was right close by to Laodicea and famous in antiquity for its Hot Springs. The area around Hierapolis is one of the most unusual and spectacular locations on planet earth. In modern-day Turkey, this area is called *Pammukale* because of

these Hot Springs that come out from the earth. The waters are so rich in minerals that as they bubble up from the earth they spill over and create these spectacular mineral formations. They may look cold, but that's not ice, it's mineral formations. The waters inside those pools are great for your health and for bathing. This area, as I said, is called *Pammukale* in Turkey today,



and *Pammukale* in Turkish means the *Cotton Castle*. It is just a spectacular place. No place on the earth looks like this, and what's amazing is, it looked like this when Paul wrote the letter to Colossians, and people would come from all over the place to bathe in these Hot Springs of Hierapolis. At Colossae nearby, the waters were known for their fresh, clean, cool water from springs. Just as a side note, this is the background to the statement in the Book of Revelation when Jesus says to the church at

Laodicea, which is in between these great hot springs and these cold, fresh, springs, Jesus says: *"I wish that you were either hot or cold."* That's the background, but that's not what we're talking about this morning. This area of Hierapolis is also famous in our day, because in 2011, the tomb of Philip the Apostle, one of the 12, was discovered in Hierapolis. Philip, who was present at the feeding of the multitudes in the wilderness, ended up with a ministry all the way out to this area, and he died there a martyr's death. His tomb was discovered just six years ago.

Let's continue with this list of names. We move at last, and I know you've been waiting patiently to hear more of Nympha. Let's look at Colossians 4:15:

*"Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha."*

Paul shifts from sending greetings to giving greetings in this verse, and he gives greetings to the brothers and sisters in the church at Laodicea. Paul wishes the church at Colossae to greet also the church in the next town. This is important. There are 2500 churches in Cincinnati, and we need to be careful that we never think of the church as just one small thing. The body of Christ is not just Kenwood Baptist Church. As great as our church is, the body of Christ is big, it's large, and it's important to see even in the New Testament that churches are working together, that churches are greeting one another. They are partnering in mission together, and so the church at Colossae, even though Paul didn't plant it, someone else did, and he's writing to it. Even though Paul has never visited Laodicea, he says, "Greet those in Laodicea, and especially greet this woman named Nympha." I love this. She is mentioned only here in the New Testament. We don't really know a lot about her. We do know that she has a very, very pagan name. Nympha comes from the Greek and Latin mythology of a nymph. A nymph is usually depicted as a beautiful young maiden who loves to dance and sing. The nymphs are divine spirits in pagan mythology that animate nature, and they are usually by rivers or by lakes or streams. Nymphs feature prominently in all of the Greco-Roman pagan mythology in literature. The cave of the nymphs, for example in the *Odyssey* Book 13, is a famous scene, and to name your child after one of these pagan, mythological creatures is a signal of her background. No Israelite ever names their son or daughter *Nympha*. It can be a female name; there is a masculine version of

it as well. But, what is striking in this passage is not just that Nympha is greeted, because many from a pagan background come to know Christ. What is remarkable, and why she is highlighted in this text, is that Nympha is greeted because she holds the church in her house. “Greet Nympha especially,” Paul says, “and the church in her house.” The early church did not have dedicated buildings in which to assemble. Most often, private homes were used. We see this in the Book of Acts. In Acts 2, at the very beginning of the Christian community, after the preaching of Peter's Pentecost sermon, we read that the Christians devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers. They gathered together regularly. In Acts 2:46, we read:

*“And day by day, attending the temple together **and breaking bread in their homes**. . .”*

This could be a fancy way of talking about fellowship, but it could also mean specifically of the breaking of bread that is around the communion table. In Acts 5:42, when the early Christian leaders depart from interrogation before the Sanhedrin, we read:

*“**And every day, in the temple and from house to house**, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.”*

We see that homes are places of fellowship; homes are places of instruction about the Lord Jesus, what we might call small group ministry. We see that homes are places of prayer. In Acts 12, when Peter was imprisoned and he was suddenly released, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose other name was Mark—that's the Mark we just talked about—where many were gathered together and were praying. Do you believe that your house, whether it's a fancy house, or whether it's a dorm room, or whether it's a shared apartment, or whether it's a modest dwelling, do you believe that your house, the place in which you live, is supposed to be a place of prayer? Do you believe it is supposed to be a place where small group meetings can take place and instruction about Christ can be given, where fellowship can take place, and even the entire church could gather? Most of us look around the room and think we don't have a house big enough for 700 people, so if you invite all of Kenwood, I'm sorry. Well, most of the early Christian churches were smaller, and yet we see that homes were made available for church ministry, and we see this pattern repeated throughout the New Testament. For example, in Corinth, Paul writes in Romans 16:23:

*“Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you.”*

We see this as well in the letter to Philemon about the church in Colossae. Paul writes to Philemon and he says in Philemon 1:1-2:

*“To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister [perhaps his wife] and Archippus our fellow soldier, **and the church in your house**.”*

We see this as well in Laodicea with the figure of Nympha. We see this pattern repeatedly.

The challenge for us this morning, and it is a great challenge, is to embrace, as a matter of kingdom lifestyle, that the place in which you live is a kingdom resource. That's the challenge of Nympha in Colossians 4:15. I don't watch very many movies; I recommend even fewer, but we saw a film this weekend that was very powerful, and I want to recommend it this morning. It

was called the *Queen of Katwe*. It is a beautiful story based on a true story in Uganda and set in Uganda. It was about children living in extreme poverty, and the story was about a missionary, a Christian worker, who went into these very poor neighborhoods and gathered children together and taught them to play chess. They had chess clubs, and these kids would leave this place of great poverty, and he taught them to play chess. He prayed with them, and these kids, some of them, ended up being extremely gifted in chess. Three of the children from these very poor slum neighborhoods ended up being the team that won the national chess championship for Uganda. The prominent main character of the film, Fiona, has even become a Grand Master. It is a remarkable story, and at the end of the movie, the actors who played key roles in the movie stood, and the real characters came up and stood next to them. Then he gave a little bio of what they were doing now. These events are very recent, just in the last few years. It was striking to see how many of the kids lived in the house of the missionary family for a season, and what a key part of the story that was. I'm an American. I live in this culture where I am bombarded with the vision of how to live my life, whether I seek it or not. This culture will communicate to us relentlessly that your home is your castle; that your home, if any investment needs to be made in your home, it needs to be in a security system; that you need for your house maybe to spend a little bit more on landscaping, so that you will be the envy of your neighbors; that your home is a fortress that you come into—you know the password. You can even monitor it increasingly; you can control the lights; you can look through cameras to see what your children are doing while you're working. Your home is a fortress, a place of refuge; it's an island of safety and security for you. That's the vision, and if it doesn't give you enough rest and relaxation, then by all means borrow more money and get a bigger one. Nympha stands almost in silence, not quite silent, because she is named in protest. The challenge of her life is to say: "No, my house, whatever it looks like—whether it's a dorm, an apartment, a duplex, a modest home, or God has blessed you with a larger home—that home is an outpost of the Kingdom of God. That's a challenge.

Let me suggest to several quick, practical ways to use your house as an outpost of the Kingdom of God. These go from easy to hard, so if you are writing them down, it's fine if you want to stop writing early, I won't judge you.

Number one: You can ***make your house a place of prayer***. You can come into your house and just say: "My house is a place where I pray for the church, for the kingdom."

Number two: You can move up from there and you can ***invite a neighbor into your home on a temporary basis***. This is the second level. You can actually grill hot dogs, hamburgers, or vegan burgers, or grilled onions, or whatever you grill. If you don't grill, that's fine, but you can actually invite people to your home temporarily. Have them come once and leave. That's not too hard, and you can fold that underneath the banner of Lord, that "this is a kingdom outpost of hospitality in my neighborhood." I'd encourage you to pray first, and then invite people over.

Number three: Moving up a level, you can ***intentionally reach out to people who are not like you***. Most of us, when we invite our neighbors, will invite people who are like us. Go the next step and invite people who are not like you in some specific ways: If you're married, invite some single people into your house; if you are single, invite some married people in. I will never forget the impact as a young single man of being in the home of Christian families. They never

said to me: "Look, David, let us pull you aside and give you the basics on having a Christian marriage." But, I saw things in that home that stayed with me. So, go up a level and invite people who are not like you.

Number four: This is a little scarier as this involves maybe giving away a password or two. You can actually ***use your home to provide temporary housing***. You can provide temporary, transitional housing for people who really need it. Sometimes people are at a transition in their lives and they really need support. Maybe their home environment has collapsed and they don't really know where to go. Perhaps they are in an unhealthy place and you can have them stay with you for a month. How many lives have been turned by such hospitality? A variation on that fourth level is to offer temporary housing to an international student or someone here visiting the US for a season to learn English. Did you know there are more than 6,000 international students at the University of Cincinnati, and the overwhelming majority of them have never been inside an American home? They say that is one of the things they would like the most.

Number five: This is where it gets really scary, and you can all put your pens and pencils down and I won't think poorly of you. A fifth place to go with your house is actually to say: "I'm going to host a small group. I'm going to ***host a church gathering in my house***. I going to pray, and I'm going to reach out to people who are like me and unlike me. I may be willing to provide temporary housing, but then I really want to see my house used as an outpost of the Kingdom where the Kingdom of God advances, where real ministry happens, where people get prayed for, where a small group can meet, and Jesus can be taught about and be present and lives can be changed, the prayer of salvation can be uttered, and the kingdom of God can grow.

So, brothers and sisters, I want to plead with you from the example of Nympha, this pagan woman who became a believer and hosted the church in her house. I promise you that I won't invite the whole church to your house the first time you say, "I'm willing." But, can we offer to God in worship and service the resources that He's given to us and say "yes" to the Lord? Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank You for the examples that You give us in Your Word. Lord, You show us in this text people who are a lot like us. Lord, we thank You that You have given us of Your bounty, that, Lord, we do together share in Your hospitality in this world. We praise You, Lord, for the homes that You've given to us, the apartments You've given us to live in, the dorm spaces. We pray, Lord, that we would see those spaces, not as fortresses to retreat from the world, but as advanced places where the new creations are to be lived out, where prayer can be uttered, where ministry can happen, where the hospitality that we receive from You can be played out on a scale that can touch even the hardest of hearts. Lord, we love You and we thank You for including ordinary people by name in Your inspired Word, and that gives us hope this morning and a willingness to offer to You all that we are and all that we have.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.