

Colossians 4:17

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[0 : 0 0] A friend in Peru sent me some photos last week of his newly built house, and behind the fresh paint and the smiling faces, that house represents years of sweat and tears. It's the product of countless days of hard work and toil, days many that began before dawn and ended well past a sunset.

That house, perhaps modest by the standards of many, is the fruit not only of hard work, but of dreaming a dream, and clinging on to that dream when all perhaps seem to contrive against it.

I wonder how my friend Jorge is his name, I wonder how he felt when the final door was placed on its hinges, when the final tile was laid, when water first gushed from the kitchen tap, when he first flicked the light switch and the room was filled with light. I'm sure we can, in a measure, imagine the feelings that those occasions or that occasion would have evoked. And we can only imagine. But I think, in the measure that I at least try and imagine, I think beyond even the happiness of completing that construction, beyond even the legitimate pride in having achieved this very significant challenge, I imagine that the most powerful emotion was a deep sense of satisfaction, of a job done. And we can even say that Jorge, my friend, as one made in the image and likeness of God, no doubt he was able to survey the work of his hands, not only of his hands, but of his hard-earned cash, as other hands were no doubt involved in the construction. But he could survey what was before him and could conclude that it was very good. And there's something of the divine image in that sense of satisfaction in a job well done. As believers, as disciples of Jesus, as Christians, we are to complete the work that we have been given. Now, that work perhaps doesn't involve one project.

Across our life, there will be many tasks that God gives us to do, but that which God gives us to do, we are to complete. We're not called to throw in the towel halfway through a task, but to persevere to the end. If a job is worth doing, it's worth doing well. It's not a verse from the Bible, but it certainly reflects biblical truth as regards the work that we have to do as Christians. And I want us to spend a little time this evening thinking about this matter of completing the work that God has given us with the aid of a little-known character in the New Testament called Archippus. And if you turn with me to Colossians chapter 4, in that final section of the letter, in the final greetings, many names are mentioned, and among them there is this one character, Archippus. And to him are directed particular words of exhortation by Paul. There, in verse 17, we read, tell Archippus. So, really,

Paul is asking the believers there in Colossae to pass on this exhortation. We can only presume that Archippus would also have read the letter or heard the letter read, but here Paul involves others that perhaps there would be greater force to it. I don't know. But the words themselves are these, see to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord. See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord. So, let's think a little bit about who this man is in the measure that we know something about him, and we'll do that very briefly, and then move on and spend a time with one another. Even if it is, sadly, sometimes with one another. All Christians are soldiers, but one other thing I want to say about Archippus, but that is true of all of us, and that is that as Christians we are fellow soldiers. That's the particular turn of phrase that Paul uses, my or our fellow soldier. Of course, that speaks of the hierarchy, if you wish, that there is in the Lord's army, and it's a very simple one. You have one captain and a multitude of foot soldiers, not very complex. Paul, the great apostle, speaking of Archippus, seemingly a young man, perhaps very young in the faith, inexperienced in the faith, and yet he speaks of him as our fellow soldier. Paul isn't a general or a major or a sergeant. He is a fellow soldier of Archippus, one captain, Jesus Christ, and, as I say, a multitude of fellow soldiers.

[6 : 01] And though it is the case that Archippus, as is clear from the exhortation that he receives from Paul is in need of direction, he is in need of the help of a vastly more experienced and gifted Paul, he also is able to stand shoulder to shoulder with Paul as a fellow soldier. And that is what we are. We are all here today. If we're Christians, we are fellow soldiers. But let's move on and spend a little bit more time considering the words of exhortation there in Colossians. Tell Archippus, see to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord. And in these few words, we can say a number of things concerning the exhortation and what it implies and what it teaches.

The first thing I want us to notice is that it takes as a given that Archippus had a work to do. See to it that you complete the work. Evidently, there was a work to be done. There was a work that Archippus had to do. That's a very simple observation and maybe a very obvious one, but I think nonetheless an important one. The actual word that is translated there in verse 17 work is the Greek word diakonia. And I think we recognize that word diakonia. There's the related word diakonos that's translated deacon. And what it means, well, diakonos means deacon or servant or minister.

And diakonia, the word here in verse 17, means service or ministry, to use a slightly more religious word. Certainly in English, we think of it as a slightly more religious word, though it's also used beyond the realms of the church. So, what Archippus had was a work to do, a service to perform a ministry to a complete, a ministry that he was to engage in, in the service of God and of others. Now, we don't know what that was. We're not told what the work was, what the ministry he was commended to do was. That is information we are not given. And in a sense, maybe that's more helpful because it allows us to apply it perhaps more easily to ourselves.

He had a work to do, and we have a work to do. You have a work to do. And what I want you to do, and we'd encourage you to do as we proceed this evening, is to think in your own mind, well, what is the work that I have to do? What is the work that I've been given? It may be that there's something very particular that you're concerned about. Maybe a task that you have been given that is very difficult and that you're struggling to complete, and that is on your mind. Well, perhaps that is something you could focus your mind on as we continue on through. Of course, depending on our circumstances, maybe there's a number of different tasks that God has given us to perform. But maybe if you would just try and imagine one particular thing and have it in mind as we continue drawing some lessons from this exhortation. It's certainly true that if you are a Christian, then you have a work to do. If you're not able to imagine or to identify what it is, well, that's a problem. And it would be very important for you to seek God's help to discover what it is, because there's certainly something that God would have you do. So, imagine or not imagine, seek, try and identify what that is. And as I say, have it in mind as we continue. It doesn't need to be necessarily something within the life of the church. It could be maybe a Sunday school teacher or an office bidder, or maybe you're involved with the teenagers, or you're involved in some other aspect of the life of the church. But of course, ministry and service to God and for God and to others extends beyond what we might immediately identify with church activities. Maybe for you, it's the taking care of an elderly relative. And maybe it's something of that nature, and you're very conscious that this is what God has given you at this time in your life. Maybe it's a very difficult and a challenging task, or maybe it's something else. But imagine or not imagine, identify, think about what it is that God has given you to do. And as I say, as we continue, there will be, I hope, helpful instruction for you, for us all. So, Archibus had a work to do. That's the first thing that we noticed. The second thing that I want to specifically identify, in a sense it's been implied in some of what we've already said, is that this work that he had was a received work.

Because there we read, see to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord. We can think of it in this way, that the work he had to do was a gift from God. We receive gifts. Well, this was a gift from God. God had given him a work to do. This was something that was an expression of God's generosity in giving him a work to do for God. And it's important for us to always bear that in mind.

[11 : 30] The work that God gives us is not a burden. It's not something that we should be seeking to avoid. Our task in life isn't to do as little as possible, or to try and ensure that the difficult jobs other people do, but rather to see the work that God gives us as a gift. If we think of it for a moment, we serve a God who is all-powerful, a God who does all things well, a God who, when he had concluded his work of creation, was able to observe it and see that it was very good. And yet, he chooses to involve the likes of us in building his church. It might seem a very strange strategy. Surely, God could do it so much better by himself. But God is pleased to use us. And so, it's a demonstration of his grace that he gives us a work to do. Archippus had a work that he had received in the Lord. God looked down in Archippus in the midst of his multiple duties, sustaining the universe and the cosmos and all its enormity, sustaining the movement, even of the atoms. And yet, he looked down on Archippus and he says, Archippus, I've got something for you to do. This is your work. This is what I want you to do.

In my universal and eternal purposes, you have an important part to play. This is your job, and you have to do it well. So, far from being a burden, it's something thrilling that God would give to me, would give to you a work to do for him. The work that Archippus had was a received work.

God it is who determines what it is we are to do. Now, how does he let us know? Maybe for some of you, this is a problem. You're saying, well, yes, okay, that's right, but I'm not altogether sure what my work is. Well, how does he let us know? I think seldom is there a voice from heaven that would tell us, but God uses other means. He sometimes uses as a means those things that we enjoy doing, and maybe those gifts that we recognize that we have, or perhaps others have recognized in us, natural capacities that we have. There are opportunities that perhaps from our perspective circumstantially appear, an opportunity to serve. We're in the right place at the right time, or maybe we think we've been in the wrong place at the right time, but there are opportunities, and we have the possibility of grasping that opportunity. There are needs in the life of the church. There's a gap in a certain work, maybe in Sunday school or in some other aspect, and somebody's needed. Maybe it's urgent, and we need somebody, and there's a need that you can meet, and so that is the way in which God shows you what it is that he would have you do.

The church itself can sometimes very specifically call you by means of the minister or somebody else in the church, and they say, why don't you help out in this? And that is the way in which God will call you. Now, of course, at that point, it's not as if you are not able to consider for yourself whether this is something that you are indeed gifted for, and maybe you conclude that that isn't what you should do because there's something else. But the point is that in a multiplicity of ways, God speaks to us and directs us as to what the work is he would have us do.

The phrase here of exhortation speaks of the work that Archibus had received in the Lord, and this addition of these words, in the Lord, it may be a reference to what we're stressing, that the work was something that the Lord had given him to do. It may also be in the sense that he is to fulfill the task for the Lord and out of faithfulness to the Lord, for this is a work that he had received in the Lord. Well, certainly that is true of us also. We receive our work from the Lord, and we seek to perform what we have to do in the Lord, for the Lord, to God's glory and out of loyalty to him. So, Archibus had a work to do. It was a received work. Also, we can notice that he had begun his work. The exhortation is, see to it that you complete the work. The implication is very clear.

[15 : 54] This was a work that he had begun, and it's important to begin. Beginning can sometimes be the most difficult thing. Maybe for somebody here, there is in your mind, well, yes, there is something. I've always felt that I should do, or I could do, or I'd like to, but I've never actually grasped it. I've never actually begun. Well, Archibus has a bit of a head start on you, because he had begun. The exhortation isn't to begin, but to complete the work. He'd begun the work, but he needs that extra help or prod to continue. It's important to begin. But having begun, it's important to persevere and to finish the task that you've begun. What about you? Maybe you haven't yet begun something that you are sure you ought to be involved in, or maybe you're thinking about giving up because it's become so difficult.

Well, here the words directed to Archibus are directed to you. See to it that you complete the work. You have received in the Lord. Which brings us on to the next thing I want to just briefly notice, and that is that it was possible for Archibus to complete his work. The exhortation is to complete the work, and we can be sure that God would not have, through Paul, required this of Archibus, prodded or exhorted Archibus in this way, had it not been possible. Whatever it was, however difficult it was, and it may have been very difficult, it was doable. God knows us. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He will never ask us to do or require us to do that which we cannot do.

Serving the Lord as a soldier, to pick up on the language that Paul uses of Archibus, is, of course, likely to be very difficult. We've already read the words directed to Timothy, endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Jesus Christ. But though the work and your work may be very tough and very hard, it is a work that you can complete if it is one that the Lord has given you. So take heart, take encouragement. It is possible with God's help to do what He's given you to do. Just a couple of more things to say, to draw things to a close. The penultimate thing I want to say about this exhortation and what it implies is that Archibus needed help to complete his work. God had given her work to do. He was able to complete it. It was doable, but he did need help. Very particularly, the help that he needed was this encouragement or exhortation from a Paul. Paul, gently or perhaps firmly, it's difficult to gauge the tenor of what Paul is saying, but be it gentle or be it firm, Paul exhorts Archibus to persevere, to complete the work that he'd been given. And in this matter of exhortation, there are two sides to the coin. There is the need for courage to exhort, and there's also the need for humility to receive exhortation. And often we require both of these things. We can fall short in both of these things. We can fall short often in lacking the courage to exhort others. We may be noticed that amongst us there are those who, perhaps in the past, were very much engaged in the life and work of the church, and that's no longer the case. And maybe we are genuinely concerned, but maybe we think it's just too difficult to actually speak to them and to encourage and to exhort them. Think, oh, I couldn't do that because, well, what would they feel like? Or, well, I'm not that great myself. And we simply don't do it. And yet this is such an important task in a Christian community, that we would exhort one another. And we need courage to do that. We need wisdom, we need sensitivity, but perhaps most of all we need courage to be willing to do that with one another. But also the humility to receive a word of exhortation, not to be quickly on the defensive, not to be easily offended when somebody out of a genuine concern for us expresses concern or exhorts us in a task that we're doing or maybe that we're failing to do as we ought.

Archippus needed help. He needed the help that is implied in these words of exhortation. It was a very public exhortation in this public letter that all the Christians in Colossae, and from what we've read, not only in Colossae, but even the Christians in Laodicea were going to hear about Archippus and how he was perhaps just not persevering as he ought. No doubt quite uncomfortable for Archippus to have been, I wouldn't say exposed, but to have been mentioned in such a public way. And yet it was necessary, it was important. Of course, for us, seldom will that be the manner in which we exhort.

But that was the case for Archippus. But I'm sure Archippus was grateful. However difficult it was at the time, he was grateful that Paul cared enough to exhort him. Finally, we can say this, and that is that the work that Archippus had to do, it was a matter of urgency, that he complete the work.

[21 : 27] The words begin, the words of exhortation begin in this way, see to it that you complete the work. And these words, see to it, imply that it was a matter that Archippus was to take seriously.

And of course, our service for the Lord is a serious matter. We should do what we do to the very best of our ability, with care and responsibility. And these words, see to it, are also a call, or we could certainly use them as a call to examination, to self-examination.

And so, the Lord tonight to us says, see to it, see to it that you complete the work that you have received in the Lord. As we have already mentioned in the course of what we said this evening, to work for the Lord is a huge privilege. Again, as has already been pondered on, it's beyond perhaps our understanding why God should choose to build His church through the likes of us. But so He has chosen, and so He has a word for each of us as Christians this evening. And what are they? Well, they're the very words that were directed to Archippus. See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.

And I finish with this, in the measure that you do complete maybe that particular task that God has given you, however difficult it might be. In the measure that you do, you will enjoy the deep satisfaction of a job well done, of a job faithfully completed, however difficult or painful it may have been to complete it. Well, may God help us so to do. Let's pray.