

## Week 5: The People

One of the most popular kinds of books or articles in our day is the kind that offer a diagnostic checklist to tell you if you fit into certain categories. You can check a few boxes and find out, for example, if you're in good health, or if you're financially stable or teetering on the brink of disaster, or if you're being a good parent. It seems there are checklists for everything in the world, including a book called *How to Know If You're a Redneck!*

In case you've been wondering about that, I'll give you a few indicators to help clarify that for you.

1. If, when your front porch collapses, it kills more than three dogs, you might be a redneck.
2. If you own a home that is mobile and five cars that are not, you might be a redneck.
3. If you've ever been fired from a construction job due to your appearance, you might be a redneck.
4. If you've ever hollered, "Rock the house, Bubba!" during a piano recital, you might be a redneck.
5. If you stare at a can of frozen orange juice because it says, "Concentrate ..."
6. If you have to *think* about that last one ... !

Today we're going to look at a Bible passage and then take a ten-point diagnostic of ourselves. So get out your paper and pen, and get ready.

These past few weeks we have been doing an intensive study and application to discover that God is truly closer than we think.

- We've talked about *his* desire to be close to us—to be *with* us.

- We covered how being with him is our *choice*.
- The third week we learned how the Spirit of God is *present within* us as Christ-followers.
- Last week we learned about listening to God's *voice* throughout each day.

Every one of these weeks builds on the other, and each reflects God's great desire for a relationship with you that is far more than a Sunday-morning experience—but is woven into the fabric of every single day.

One of the most overlooked places to experience God's presence is in the lives of the people around us, particularly, but not exclusively, those who are Christ-followers.

Here's the diagnostic question we're going to ask ourselves today: "How do you know if you are seeing God's presence in and through the people around you?"

Here's why this is important: when you and I grow in our awareness of God's presence in and through the people around us, we are growing in our love for people and our love for God—and growing even more aware of his presence. This is critical to our maturing in our faith as Christians.

If you have a Bible with you, please turn to Colossians 4:7–18, Paul's final words to the church in the city of Colosse. Here is what he says to this congregation:

*"Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here."*

*“My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) –*

*“Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me.*

*“Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.*

*“After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.*

*“Tell Archippus: ‘See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.’*

*“I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.”*

People who are in community together typically do two very common things. They tell stories and they dream dreams. The longer they’ve been in community, the deeper the stories and the richer the dreams.

Do you realize that when you’re part of a small circle of individuals, there’s a story and a dream attached to every person? That’s part of doing life in community.

That’s what lies behind Paul’s words here. Unfortunately, this is the sort of Bible text a lot of people tend to skip right over. But it is so rich. I want to extract everything we can from it.

Paul most likely wrote Colossians as a prisoner at Rome, probably not far from the end of his life. In this very poignant conclusion of his letter he sends greetings from a small circle of people—a little community that faced prison or exile—back to some of their dear friends in

Colosse, knowing that some of them would probably never be reunited. In a sense, he pulls back the curtain and reveals his little circle of traveling companions and special people to whom he's writing. A handful of names are mentioned, and there's a story behind every one of them.

What I want to do is to walk with you around this circle, look at their stories, and ask you to reflect. From the lives of these individuals and Paul's words *about* them or *to* them, we are going to see various indicators which help us recognize God's presence in and through the people around us.

***The first indicator is this:***

- 1. If you can describe how a person's character traits reflect God, you might be seeing God through the people around you.*

Paul starts in verse 7 by saying, "Tychicus will tell you all the news about me." We first met Tychicus in Acts 20:4, where we're told he's from a Roman province of Asia. Paul here gives him a beautiful commendation. Look at the three phrases that describe him.

He's a "dear brother." We're in relational intimacy, Paul says. He's a "faithful minister." Tychicus had some task to work at. We don't know what it was, but he was diligent in his work for the community. He's a "fellow servant." He served.

I want to give you a key word, a phrase for each one of the names around this little circle. If you're taking notes, you can just write down a little note next to each one of these names. The one here for Tychicus is this word "encourage" in verse 8. "I've sent him to you for this very purpose," Paul says, "so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts."

Most New Testament scholars think that Tychicus was the representative of the church in the province of Asia who brought money to the poor in the Jerusalem church. Imagine the

encouragement that brought to the believers in Jerusalem. Tychicus apparently was the guy who signed up for that assignment.

Paul also wrote about Tychicus to the church at Ephesus. Take a look at what he says: “Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing.” (Ephesians 6:21)

When Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he was chained to a Roman guard. There are certain things you don’t write about when there’s a Roman guard looking over your shoulder—such as prison conditions or how you feel about Caesar! So he says Tychicus is going to come so they can know for sure how things really are.

Tychicus would go to the people and reassure them: “Paul’s okay, he’s in God’s hands. Not just that, the gospel is spreading, and the kingdom is growing!” And the people would be encouraged, because when one human being authentically shares his or her experience of God’s faithfulness, people get changed.

John Ortberg gives a powerful example of this truth. His wife Nancy received a note while on staff at Willow Creek. The letter was written by Steve Bond and John tracked him down for permission to read it. Here’s what it said:

“I’m writing this note to you knowing that you’ll share with appropriate people at Willow. On Thursday night, last month, you baptized my father and mother. They are in their seventies, James and Margaret Bond.”

Then, as John tells it, he digresses to point out, “James Bond got baptized here last month. My wife baptized Bond, James Bond! In fact, when I called Steve to get permission, the last three digits in the telephone number were 007!”

Back to Steve's letter. "In the audience was our thirteen-year-old son. Apparently, the service had quite an impact on my son. He told us Friday that Grandma and Grandpa looked so happy on the stage that he knew he had some thinking and praying to do. Thursday night he accepted Christ as his personal Savior."

Then he writes, "My wife and I are ecstatic. My parents are walking on air." But it's because a couple of people at one end of the life spectrum declared God's faithfulness to them—declared it was their sins that nailed Jesus to the cross—that the heart of a thirteen-year-old was encouraged and the gospel was spread. Encouragers do that.

When you look into the life of another person and are able to declare the character traits you see that resemble God—you are reminded of God's close presence to you through them. Their faithfulness is reflective of God's faithfulness. Their trustworthiness is God's trustworthiness. The encouragement you see in them is God's encouragement.

***The second indicator is:***

- 2. If you see people not for their earthly status but for their stature in Christ, you might be seeing God through the people around you.*

A writer named Denis Waitley writes about an exercise that he sometimes includes in his public speaking. He asks eight volunteers from the audience to come upfront, and then he puts a cardboard sign around each of their necks. On the sign is written a title to indicate their status in life: baby, mother, astronaut, janitor, rock star, NBA basketball player, doctor, lawyer. Then they are told to position themselves in order of their importance.

Now let me add that these volunteers are kids ages seven to eleven. What starts out as a harmless exercise turns into Star Wars and Virginia Woolf. After the pushing and shoving stops, they settle down to serious status seeking about who should be at the front of the line.

The astronaut heads to the front—"I am first because I am going places the rest of you can't go. Besides, I am going to try to find us another place to live because the earth is too crowded." Applause.

The rock star walks up and pushes the astronaut to second place, to a round of cheers from the spectators. The rock star says, "I'm already in outer space. I make the most money, and I could buy you as a pilot for my private jet."

Next comes the NBA player. "I think that I should go first. I make as much money as the rock star and play to a big crowd every night all season doing something physical, which is better for you." More cheers.

The doctor walks up to make his case. "I should go first because I fix all of you when you are injured or sick, and I make good money." Light applause.

The lawyer takes a try. "I'm the best because I can put you in jail or keep you out of jail, and you have to pay all of your money to me." Big cheers.

Up walks the mother. "I really am first because I brought all of you into the world." Again, just light applause.

The baby comes next. "Shouldn't I really be first in line? All of us were babies before we were mothers or anything else." Nods and cheers.

Do you know who never tries to make it to the front of the line? The janitor. Those who play the janitor role don't even try for first because they know they will be laughed at if they do, though it's just a game.

That's the way the game of life goes in this world. There is pushing and shoving to see who is going to win, who is number one, who is most important, who is most powerful or most

successful. People go through their lives being miserable because there always seems to be someone ahead of them, and it eats away at them.

If you are a person who can see people not for their earthly status, but for their stature in Christ, you are more likely to see the nearness of God through the people around you. Take a look at Colossians 4:9 where Paul writes about another name in his circle.

Paul says that Tychicus is coming with Onesimus, “our faithful and dear brother who is one of you.” Turn to the letter of Philemon, just a few books further back in your Bible.

Onesimus was a runaway slave whom Paul had urged to return willingly to his owner, Philemon, as a sign of his obedience to Christ. We’re about to see in a tangible way here that what makes the new community of faith so unique is that the old divisions, boundaries, and hostilities are just obliterated in Christ.

Beginning in verse 8, Paul writes to Philemon, “Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do”—in other words, Paul is saying, I could command you to be reconciled and receive Onesimus back—“yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.”

Look at the skill and the heart and the care with which Paul works toward reconciliation: “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.” A little note here: the name Onesimus meant “useful.” So Paul is making a sort of play on words. In fact, the name was very rare name among freed people and given almost exclusively to slaves.

*“I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I*



*did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.”*

Even though he could, Paul is not going to use pressure or authority. “Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.”

Those were radical words in those days, friends—“He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.” That is, he would now be a brother, not a slave, both in their earthly relationship and in the church.

“So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.” Then look at what Paul says. When Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” you’re seeing one in action here.

*“If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.”*

Onesimus could have been tracked down and killed, but Paul couldn’t bear to think of disunity or enmity in the body. In Paul’s letter to the church at Colosse, he wrote, “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” (Colossians 3:11)

Imagine how Onesimus, a runaway slave, felt knowing he had come back to his master, Philemon, but that Philemon and the congregation at Colosse would hear these words from the apostle Paul: “This is my faithful and dear brother.”

I'll share a postscript with you. Several decades later, a church father named Ignatius referred in his writings to a bishop of Ephesus named Onesimus. Now, we don't know for sure, but because this was a name pretty much restricted to slaves, it may well be that this same Onesimus, a nothing, a slave in the eyes of the world, went on to become one of the great leaders of the church.

Learn to look beyond the status or the role and see the stature of the person in their relationship with Christ.

Then there's Aristarchus. Paul writes just one phrase about him here in Colossians—"My fellow prisoner"—but, along with a couple of other New Testament passages, it's sufficient to provide us with *our third indicator*:

3. *If you observe Christ-followers who stick close to those who are in trouble, you might be seeing God through the people around you.*

In Acts 19:29 Paul is at Ephesus and there's a riot, and we're told that Aristarchus is one of those with Paul, a loyal traveling companion who shared his trouble there.

Later, in Acts 27:1, it says, "When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment." And then we find out in verse 2 that they were accompanied by Aristarchus. It may well be, some scholars think, that Aristarchus attached himself to Paul as Paul's slave so that the Roman soldiers would allow him to stay close by.

Often we do well when people are in a short-term crisis. For a week or two we'll offer support. But what about when people have long-term needs, ongoing financial or career problems, or an extended illness? How loyal are you within your circle in such situations?

There's a saying in Proverbs, a piece of wisdom that goes: "A friend was born for times of adversity." Does that describe you? That's Aristarchus. Paul says, "He's my fellow prisoner." He was in prison with Paul, almost certainly voluntarily.

Aristarchus reflects Jesus' promise that he will be with us "always, to the very end of the age." When you see people who stay close in times of trouble, you are seeing God's presence through them.

Then there's Mark. Paul says, "Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you've received instructions." This is interesting—"If he comes to you, welcome him."

***In Mark's life we find the fourth indicator:***

*4. If you see someone who has failed and is being restored, you might be seeing God through the people around you.*

Some of you know the story of Mark, also known as John Mark. In Acts 13:6, we're told that he set out along with Paul and Barnabas on a missionary journey. But in verse 13, Mark quit. He deserted them.

Then in Acts 15:36–40, we read this:

*"Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.'*

*"Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company."*

As we find out, Barnabas reclaims Mark, and over the ensuing years Mark doesn't give up. He returns to God and to the ministry, and proves himself faithful. In fact, Paul makes this

comment about him in 2 Timothy 4:11: “Get Mark and bring him ... because he is helpful to me in my ministry.” What a turnaround!

Eventually, Mark is called by God to be one of the writers of Scripture and the gospel of Mark bears his name. Mark’s second chance is a picture to everyone around him of God’s restoring grace. It certainly was powerfully evident in his life.

Maybe you’re here today and your story includes failure. You’ve tried ministry and involvement, but it didn’t work out. Or you had a relationship or even a marriage failure, or you lapsed in sin of one sort or another, and you’ve been feeling guilty. You’ve responded by withdrawing from people and withdrawing from ministry.

Maybe you need some time for further healing, but if you’ve had enough time, get back in the game. It’s been done before. Determine you will not spend the rest of your life on the sidelines. And, if you know of somebody who’s failed, don’t give up on them either. Remember the story of Mark. Because, through people like Mark, God’s presence is seen and experienced by those around them.

Next Paul talks about Jesus, who was also called Justus. Justus, along with Aristarchus and Mark, were called by Paul “the only Jews among my fellow workers.” But because they lived among and ministered to the Gentiles it meant that they faced ostracism and being expelled from the synagogue. Paul’s comment on Justus and the others is this: “They have proved a comfort for me.” It’s a real tender word.

***The fifth indicator to consider is:***

- 5. If you see people who are bringing comfort to those who are hurting, you might be seeing God through the people around you.*

Paul likewise shared the fate of being ostracized, of being expelled from synagogue after synagogue. We sometimes think of Paul as this real tough, calloused character, but he was not. He needed to be comforted, and Justus, along with others, saw that. They brought comfort to Paul.

Is there anybody in your small group or Sunday school class who you know needs comfort? Is there anybody around you going through a loss of one sort or another who needs a phone call or a note or a meal or just an embrace? Maybe there's somebody here today who just needs to be touched by you.

What a wonderful thing to have said about you what Paul says about Justus—"He's a comfort to me. I was wounded and hurt and lonely, and he brought healing to me." It could be part of what you bring to your little circle.

The sixth indicator is a powerful one that affects you and those around you, but is a gateway to seeing God's presence in and through the people around you:

*6. If you pray bold prayers on behalf of the Christians you know, you might be seeing God through the people around you.*

Take a look at Colossians 4:12: "Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured." The word Paul uses for "wrestling" is used one other time in Colossians to describe his own struggles on behalf of the church.

It's the Greek verb *agonizomai*. We get our word "agony" from it. The biblical picture of wrestling you might best remember is the Old Testament story of Jacob in Genesis 32. Visited by the spirit of God, the angel of the Lord, Jacob wrestles with him and says, "I will not let you go

until I have your blessing.” Transfer that particular mental image to Epaphras and you get the idea.

Paul goes on to say of Epaphras in verse 13, “He is working hard for you,” but what’s most interesting is, he brings that work ethic to prayer. He prays bold prayers.

When you pray bold prayers on behalf of the Christ-followers you know, God opens your eyes to seeing them as he does. You see needs, strengths, and his hand working in ways that you would otherwise be unable to recognize. You see God’s presence in their lives as you experience prayers you prayed answered on their behalf.

Are you praying boldly for the faces and names around your circle? That’s what Epaphras does. Though separated from the Christians in Colosse by so many miles, he struggles and wrestles and agonizes for them in prayer.

The next character Paul talks about is Luke with just the phrase, “Luke, the beloved physician.” Some of you may know about Luke being a physician. It’s the only time that he’s called this in the New Testament. In our day, with all the feelings about HMOs and so on, it’s not often that somebody gets called the “beloved physician”!

In Paul’s day, medicine was just emerging as its own discipline. Here’s apparently what happened—Luke gave up a medical career to travel with Paul. Apparently, he felt God’s call to leave the marketplace and enter ministry. Not everybody does, not everybody should, but Luke did.

I’ll tell you an interesting theory. Paul talks in another letter about his “thorn in the flesh.” He never specifies what that thorn is, but it may well have been a physical affliction. And it’s very possible that the reason Luke has such a place in Paul’s affection is that Luke decided to travel with Paul to give him medical attention.

Luke makes an incredible sacrifice for the cause of Christ and for Paul. Paul says this is Luke, the beloved physician, who gave up his whole career. Of course, God had another career in mind for Luke beyond missionary—that of an author. Luke went on to write the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

The seventh indicator on how well we recognize the presence of God in the people around us is:

*7. When you observe people who are willing to sacrifice for the cause of Christ, you might be seeing God through the people around you.*

It could be that sacrifice comes in the form of caring for someone who is homebound. Or nurturing the youngsters in the nursery at church. Or serving Jesus in another country. Or living on less so that they can give more. When you see sacrifice, you are seeing the character of God through the people around you. Because God's character is to give until it hurts—to the very point of sacrificing his very own Son for you.

This year God is going to call some of you to sacrifice. Maybe it's a big one. Maybe it is a job change. Maybe you know that, and your heart's kind of thumping right now. How are you going to respond?

Maybe it's a smaller sacrifice. Maybe it involves time devoted to ministry. Maybe it involves money. Maybe it involves a difficult confrontation with somebody around your circle. Will you do it? Will you say, "I will be like Luke and make a sacrifice. I will endure some pain for the cause of Christ"?

***Our eighth indicator to consider in this diagnostic of seeing God's presence in the people around us is:***

8. *If you observe someone whose first love is Jesus, you might be seeing God through the people around you.*

The next name is a very sad one. It's Demas. He is the antithesis of what we are diagnosing through this indicator. Take a look at verse 14 again, "Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings."

You'll notice Demas is the one name in this whole passage with no description surrounding it, but he has a story too.

There was a time when Demas was counted by Paul as a fellow worker. Here in Colosse, he's simply called Demas. The last mention of him is in 2 Timothy 4:10, where Paul writes about him, "For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica."

Once Demas stood shoulder to shoulder with Paul. But there was a pattern of drift in his life that went unchecked, and eventually he just drifted out of that little circle and drifted away. We never hear of him again.

Some of you today need to do a heart check. What's your first love? Honestly. Is it God? Is that first love fresh? Or is the truth right now that you are drifting, perhaps consumed by a career or financial issues or levels of achievement or comfort or security, and in the process being pulled away from God, becoming detached from your circle?

God was not seen in Demas's life. But God wants your life and mine to be marked by a growing and unmistakable presence of a love for him. When you see someone drifting, step into their life and call them back to their first love. If you ever see yourself drifting, run to God and tell him: "I don't want to drift. Help me to stop now."

In verse 15, Paul says, "Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house." Nympha probably was either widowed or unmarried. Otherwise, it



wouldn't be called her house, but the house that belonged to her husband. Her house was large enough, apparently, to host the church. *[Note: Some manuscripts translate this as the masculine, Nymphas, but it is more likely feminine.]*

Up until about the middle of the third century, the church did not have property, did not have buildings like we have today, so it was dependent on somebody with a substantial enough house for all the Christ-followers to meet in.

It's through Nympha that we get our ninth diagnostic:

9. *If you see men and women serving indiscriminately in the church, you might be seeing God through the people around you.*

Life in the church was different than life in the synagogue. You see, in Judaism, in order to have a quorum for a synagogue, you needed to have at least ten men. Without that number, you couldn't have a synagogue. Women didn't count. You could have a thousand women and nine men, and no synagogue. Only men mattered.

Not in the early church. In fact, the Christ-followers chose another word to describe their meetings. They didn't have to. "Synagogue" was a generic Greek word that meant "gathering place," but is it used only once in the New Testament to describe a Christian gathering—James 2:2.

The Christians felt they needed a new word to describe their gathering, so now there is the *ecclesia*, the assembly, the church. In this new community, the woman not only counts, but here in Colosse, she's the host. She's like a quorum all by herself for the church.

In fact, one New Testament scholar, James Dunright, says because Nympha was the householder and the only one named in the connection with the church in her home, she was probably the leader of the church there. In the new community, there's a new role for women.

Let me ask, are you part of a circle where men and women increasingly are relating as brothers and sisters; where there are ministry opportunities and encouragement based solely on giftedness, regardless of gender?

The tenth diagnostic is seen in the life of Archippus. Paul writes to him in verse 17: “Tell Archippus: ‘See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.’”

***The final diagnostic is:***

*10. If you see Christians who are faithful to finish what they begin, you might be seeing God through the people around you.*

We don’t know what Archippus’s task is, but apparently he was not following through with something, or it looked like he might not follow through. Paul is concerned about this, so he says, “See to it that you complete the work you have received.”

What a difference it makes in community when someone not only takes on a task, but follows it through to completion. Many of us have lived in families where things like procrastination or committing and not honoring the commitment were acceptable or commonplace.

To be the person that we want to be in our little circles, some of us here need to do a heart check on this issue and resolve, *Whatever ministry I’m involved in, whatever task I have undertaken, whatever commitments I have signed up for, I will see through to the finish. I’m not going to let barriers or discouragements or obstacles stop me. When I promise to the community to take on something, you can depend on me.*

Friends, communities are built on this. God himself is the God of the covenant, the God who promises and keeps his promise. Paul’s word to Archippus and to all of us is this: “See that you complete the task that you have received. Don’t lose enthusiasm. Don’t just let it slide.”

When you see faithfulness, you are seeing God's presence in that person. In a letter to the church in Philippi Paul wrote about God's faithfulness with these words: "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6)

In his final words in Colossians 4:18, Paul says, "I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand."

Most likely he dictated his letters, but here at the end he says, "This part I write with my own hand." This is so poignant. Paul says, "Remember my chains."

As Paul wrote these words, it was his chains that were dragging across the letter. He heard them every time he moved his pen. It was his chains that bound him to a Roman guard who never left his side. But this is not a plea for sympathy.

Paul didn't even bother to ask people to pray that he be released from his chains, because his chains—a sign of disgrace and weakness in that world—had become for him a symbol of the power of the gospel. They were part of his story.

What's amazing here is that Paul doesn't say, "Remember my brilliant words; remember that I am an apostle; remember my leadership; remember my amazing spiritual maturity." He says, "Remember my chains. It's because of those chains that the gospel is being spread to Rome itself. They could chain me, but couldn't chain the gospel."

Paul in effect says, "Remember my chains, for I do not write as one who doesn't know the cost of following Christ. I, too, have my own little cross to bear, for my story is not a story about a title or a position or a diploma or glory."

Paul was in chains because he wanted people to know the nearness of God to them through a relationship with Jesus Christ. God shows you through the people around you his

nearness, his presence, his character, and his love. And, if you live out these ten diagnostics in your life, you may be helping other people see that God is closer than they think as well.