

## Tychicus: Content to Work Behind the Scenes

### Colossians 4:7-18

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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When I realized there were eleven names in this text, I got to thinking about football... football, with its eleven-man teams. The NFL kicks off a week from tomorrow night when eleven Redskins will meet and beat eleven Broncos in the Pro-Football Hall of Fame Game in Canton, Ohio. College football picks up later in the month, when USC meets and beats Virginia Tech in Landover, Maryland. You Virginians can pelt me with tomatoes if you wish, but ever since I laid out thousands of dollars to get a daughter through USC's School of International Finance, the Trojans have been my team. And this year they will not be cheated out of a national championship by a witless computer!

The eleven persons mentioned in this text are on Paul's team. When it comes to spreading the Gospel, Paul may be the first-string quarterback, but the others are the linemen and the wide receivers and the running backs without whom Paul could never have scored.

It goes without saying that football is a team effort. So when a running back demands the ball all the time so he can set a new rushing record, when linemen do less than their best because they aren't paid as much as the quarterback, when the coach can't get along with his players, morale suffers and the team plummets to the bottom of the standings. The church, also a team effort, is susceptible to the same viruses. In every church, for example, there are some who opt to sit on the bench. They want the benefits of church membership: low cost weddings, visits from the pastor when they are in the hospital, burial in the columbarium. They want the benefits but not the obligations: financial commitment, committee work, ministry in the community. But no church can succeed if only 20 percent of the team are playing their hearts out while 80 percent are sitting on the bench drinking Gatorade.

Let me switch the channel to basketball for a moment. Al McGwire coached the Marquette basketball team to an NCAA championship in 1976. Butch Lee was a prima donna on that team. Butch hogged the ball and wanted to take all the shots, so McGwire took him aside and said, "Butch, the game is forty minutes long, and if you divide that between the two teams it means there are twenty minutes when one team will have the ball and there's twenty minutes when the other team will have the ball. There are five players on each side. That means each player will have the ball for about four minutes. Now, Butch, I know what you can do with the ball in four minutes. What I want you to show me is what you can do for the other thirty-six minutes." In other words, play team ball!

When Gareth Icenogle arrives next month, I guarantee that he will play team ball. He knows he can't win all by himself. So his game plan will be to pass the ball at every opportunity. That is, he will empower you to serve Jesus Christ just as Paul empowered Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Nympha, and the others on his team. Gareth will not measure his ministry by the number of sermons he preaches, classes he teaches, and hospital visits he makes. He will measure instead by the number of people who show up every week for training, here in the sanctuary or in a Bible class. Neither will he measure by the number of names on the church roster; he will measure instead by the number who run out on the field, people who teach Sunday school, lead youth groups, organize Bible studies, feed the hungry, care for the lonely, tutor children, build homes for the working poor. Like Paul speaking of Tychicus, he will expect you to be "faithful ministers, and fellow servants in the Lord," (Col. 4:7).

And, like every successful coach, Gareth will help you find the right position to play, the proper ministry to pursue. Have you noticed that in some football games a couple of players on the offensive team will alternate from play to play? One runs off the field while another runs on. They don't do that because they're tired or injured; the one running on the field is carrying the next play from the offensive coordinator to the quarterback. With the fans screaming for a touchdown and with the play clock ticking down, it's crucial that they hear it straight and tell it right. That was the position Tychicus played. Paul,

when he wrote this letter, was stuck on the sidelines. He was in prison, so he asked Tychicus to suit up in his place, to act as his emissary to the Christian team in Colossae. "Tychicus will tell you all the news about me." And the Greek word for "tell" has an emotional ring to it; it conveys far more than a perfunctory recital of facts. Had Paul wanted to convey mere data, he would have added another chapter to this letter. Instead he wants to express the fear he feels in prison, the hope he fosters for release, the stress he's undergoing because he can't travel among the churches, and the great joy he feels when he thinks about his Christian friends in Colossae. A letter won't do it because words on paper are so often cold and flat. What's needed is a voice to express affection, eyes to convey emotion, hands to exhibit feeling, a body to stand in for an absent friend. And that was Tychicus' role, to serve as Paul's proxy to the people he loved in Colossae. And not only in Colossae, but in Ephesus as well. In Ephesians 6:21, Paul writes, "So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus will tell you everything. He is a dear brother and a faithful minister in the Lord. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, to let you know how we are, and to encourage your hearts." Tychicus was Paul's courier. He was his stand-in, his substitute. Tychicus wasn't a star player. His face would never appear on the cover of Christianity Today. His resume would not have been among the hundreds considered by your Pastor Nominating Committee. But he had a gift for listening carefully and then conveying accurately what he heard. So he was content to work behind the scenes, to use the simple gift God gave him, and that simple gift made him an indispensable partner to the great apostle Paul.

When macular degeneration destroyed Jane Weyrich's eyesight, she might have said to herself, "Well, that's it! I can't serve the Lord any longer because I can't see to do anything." Instead she came to me and said, "I need something to do." Now, it happens that she is a superb pianist, so I suggested that she play for our Sunday school and our weekday preschool. Not a very grandiose prospect for one who had produced her own CD just a few years earlier. But she promptly volunteered and happily went to work, playing such stalwarts as Jesus Loves Me, This Little Light of Mine, and Jesus Loves the Little Children. She not only brought lively music to our children; she found a rewarding outlet for her gifts. And what about you? Are you in the game? Or are you sitting on the bench? Oh, you may have good reasons for not suiting up. But tell me honestly, are your reasons any more debilitating than blindness?

My late friend Wes Dunn was another team player who worked behind the scenes on Christ's team. Even as acute illness ravaged his body, Wes mailed Bible studies to prisoners all over the country. When the prisoners filled out the answers and sent them back, Wes corrected their papers and mailed them another study. Periodically, when his health permitted, he sent his friends and supporters a newsletter containing excerpts from the letters he received. Here's one from a prisoner in Chino, California:

I was a lost sinner doing so much wrong. I called upon the Lord with a humble spirit asking Him to forgive me, but like Peter I took my eyes off of Jesus and began to sink. Jesus left the porch light on, enabling me to find my way back home. I am determined in my heart to live for him and to do the full will of God.

Jesus left the porch light on. Sounds like a commercial for Motel 6, doesn't it? But in this case, it's a promise from Jesus Christ. Our Savior never gives up on us. You may be chained to a guilty conscience or shackled with physical disabilities. You may have failed so often that you imagine yourself ineligible for the squad. Or, like Tychicus, you may be a second- or third-stringer, a less-than brilliant player, so what possible use could you be to Jesus Christ? But Jesus needs you, this church needs you, Gareth needs you. Jesus left the porch light on. So isn't it time you came in out of the shadows and joined the team?