

“Prayer and Outreach”
Colossians 4:2-6
December 4, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

How is your prayer life? When is the last time you talked to someone about Jesus? These two questions are almost certain to provoke a response of guilt in the hearts of Christians. Few of us feel like these two areas of our lives are up even to some minimal standard. But guilt about these does no one any good. It doesn't do us any good because it is an inadequate motivator for change. And it doesn't do others any good because guilty consciences are more self-centered than other-centered. But what if our guilt could be changed to hope? What if we could come to view these areas of prayer and evangelism with a confident expectation that God is at work in our lives to teach us in both of these areas?

Is it possible that there can be change in these areas of our lives? Paul has been presenting Jesus as the exalted Savior who is now seated in heaven with all power and authority. The necessary changes in our lives happen when we trust him rather than when we try hard to do the right thing. When we come to trust in our risen and exalted Savior, he always enables what he commands. So his command to pray and his command to declare the gospel to unbelievers can be read as promises from him about what he is doing in our lives. Can you believe that? Can you believe that God wants to help you learn to pray and learn to love unbelievers well? Let's look at these things more carefully, but do so with hearts full of faith and hope rather than guilt.

I. Speaking to God about Men – v. 2-4

Paul tells the Colossians to continue steadfastly in prayer. And what are they to pray about? He wants them to pray for outreach, specifically that God would provide opportunities to declare the good news about Jesus and then the ability to speak that good news clearly. Outreach starts with prayer, not with learning some special technique. If you think about it, there is a significant similarity between prayer and outreach. We are trusting God when we pray to him, and in outreach we are inviting others to trust God. There is a fundamental inconsistency if we invite others to trust God while we ourselves are unwilling to do so.

So Paul wants us to persevere in prayer. That's the hard thing, isn't it? It's relatively easy to begin praying for something, but quite a bit more challenging to continue praying for someone. We tend to grow weary and begin to doubt if we pray for someone to come to faith in Christ but don't see it happen soon enough. But Paul wants us to persevere in prayer. He then mentions two

qualities that should mark our prayers, watchfulness and thanksgiving. We need to be watchful in our prayers because there are real dangers we face. A night watchman keeps watch for dangers, and the reality of the dangers helps him stay awake. The dangers we face as praying Christians are real dangers. There are spiritual dangers, dangers of sin and temptation, dangers of lies that will destroy us and others. But our prayers are also to be dominated by thanksgiving. This is now the last time Paul will mention this theme of gratitude, one that he has referred to often in this letter. Gratitude lies at the core of a gospel attitude because it is the response of someone who knows that our relationship with God is more about receiving than achieving. Our prayers are to be saturated with thanksgiving. Even when we confess our sins we give thanks because we know that there is a remedy for our sins in the blood of Christ. When we pray for the salvation of loved ones who don't know Jesus, we can give thanks for the miracle of our own salvation and the power of God to save others.

The two qualities of watchfulness and thanksgiving may seem incompatible to some. How can we be thinking about dangers we face and watch out for such dangers at the same time that we are filled with gratitude? Instead of being incompatible, I think these two qualities depend on one another. We experience this interdependence in other areas. When you drive a car, you are automatically watchful of dangers. You know the dangers of veering out of your lane, of running stop lights and stop signs, of not yielding to those who have the right of way. Awareness of such dangers and being on guard about them is necessary if you are going to enjoy driving. Childrearing, marriage, and almost any other area you can think about, involve the same two qualities.

Paul asks the Colossians to pray for outreach. He wants them to pray for open doors for the word of the gospel. Interestingly, he doesn't pray for his prison doors to be opened. There is a very important principle we find in this. God is able to make you fruitful for him right where you are. We tend to think that we would be more evangelistically fruitful were our circumstances to change. When I have more time, more freedom, more money, better health, then I can think about sharing the gospel with unbelievers. Paul's mindset was different. He trusted in the sovereignty of God and believed that he was right where he was supposed to be, and that these very circumstances were not an obstacle to sharing the gospel but an opportunity. So he asks his friends in Colossae to join him in praying for open doors. There are doors that are more securely locked than those in the most secure prison. It is the door of the human heart against the loving intrusion of God into our lives. It is our nature to shut him out. No amount of clever speech or good technique can open these doors. But God can do so, and he is pleased to do it through prayer.

It is significant that Paul begins this section on outreach by talking about prayer. He believed that prayer was essential for effective outreach. Paul is asking for prayer for him as an evangelist, but there are also other ways that

prayer and evangelism can work together. One of those is to pray out loud for unbelievers in their presence. Our missions conference speaker several years ago, John Smed, conducts prayer training that he calls prayer evangelism in which he recommends just this approach. I read a story from him recently in which he described a young lady who had just completed this kind of prayer training. She was saying goodbye to her childhood best friend as they parted ways to attend college in different cities. This friend had grown up in a staunchly atheistic home and was herself an atheist. The Christian friend decided to try out for the first time her evangelism prayer training and asked her atheist friend if she could pray for her right then, to which she timidly agreed. As she prayed, her friend began to weep. Wondering if something was wrong, she asked if her prayer was causing distress and asked, "Are you okay?" Her friend replied through tears, "I think I just met God." John Leonard, in his excellent book, *Get Real*, also recommends the same thing. He advises that when we do so that we pray with our eyes open, for the simple reason that such prayers are often done in public and unbelievers feel uncomfortable with bowed heads and closed eyes. But they often don't mind Christians lifting up prayers for their concerns. To do so is actually a first step in teaching them to trust God.

II. Speaking to Men about God – v. 5-6

In my experience, most Christians don't engage in evangelism. There are many reasons for this, but I think one of them is that many have a wrong view of what it means to evangelize another. I thought when I cancelled my land line that I would be done with phone solicitors. Just this week, I received two such unwanted solicitations on my cell phone. I try to be polite to the callers, unless they're robo-calls, because I think they are people who must have feelings too. But it is not easy. They start with a long spiel that I listen to, waiting for the first opportunity to say "No." When it finally comes, they don't stop but often have a second request, and sometimes even a third. We sometimes think of evangelism like the phone solicitor, forcing people to listen to some memorized spiel that they really don't want to listen to. That is far from the evangelism that is biblical. Let me point out several qualities of biblical evangelism that we find in these brief verses.

We need to start with the need for the message itself to be faithful to the Scriptures. We can see that in the fact that Paul was in prison because of his declaration of this gospel (v. 3). He viewed his job as that of declaring the gospel clearly. He was not to alter its content in order to make it more palatable, but simply to state it simply and clearly and let God do with it what he wanted. There will always be elements of the gospel that are offensive to sinners. The gospel truths that are offensive to our contemporary culture deal with the idea of eternal condemnation and with faith in Jesus as the only way to eternal life. The temptation is to shy away from these truths because of the

reaction we know they will garner. But if we do so we actually leave people worse off than they were before we spoke to them. If a person thinks they have come to Christ but don't accept either of those ideas, more than likely what has happened is that we have won a false profession of faith.

The next quality of biblical evangelism is the need for wise behavior. **“Walk in wisdom toward outsiders”** (v. 5). There is such a thing as witnessing without words, and that's what Paul is talking about here. The nature of our marriage, family and work relationships, the very categories Paul has just addressed, is an important part of our evangelism. But the temptation when an emphasis is given to winning without words by the character of our lives is that we never get around to using words. So Paul adds the next phrase, **“making the best use of the time.”** He's not talking about the efficient use of time, as if we could satisfy this requirement by all attending a time management seminar. Rather, he is saying that there needs to be a sense of urgency in our witnessing. The time is short. As in fishing, there is a time to leave the hook in the water and be patient. But there is also a time to act decisively and pull that line in order to catch the fish. Paul wants us to know the difference between those two times. The assumption here too is that God will be providing us with opportunities to speak with others about the good news of the gospel. When he does so, we are to labor not to waste such opportunities.

If we are going to be fruitful in our evangelism, we are going to have to speak. Actions alone are insufficient. So Paul tells us in verse 6 about some of the qualities that ought to mark our speech, beginning with grace. **“Let your speech always be gracious.”** Gracious speech, like the grace of God, is generous beyond what a person deserves. For example, we don't have to point out everything that's wrong in a person's beliefs. If you start out with where you disagree with another, the discussion tends only to harden another person against the gospel. It is better, as well as being more gracious, to begin with where you agree with others. We are to treat people as people like us, with very similar concerns, fears and struggles that we have. We can connect with others as people like us rather than viewing them as people unlike us.

Another implication of gracious speech is a commitment not to speak if people don't want to hear from us. I often get into conversations with people about spiritual things because I'm a pastor, and a common question people ask one another concerns their job. Sometimes people really do want to talk about spiritual things when they find out I'm a pastor, and sometimes they don't. If they don't, the gracious response is not to force feed them the gospel. Just back off and wait for God to open the door.

The next phrase provides a balance to the previous one about gracious speech. If you are always focusing on where you agree with people, it would be easy for our speech to become a bland blather that simply confirms people in their unbelief. So Paul adds this next phrase that we are to have speech that is

“seasoned with salt.” Salt does a number of things to food, including making it taste better. But another result of salt is to make a person more thirsty. In the words of John Leonard in his book *Get Real*, we should seek to raise curiosity in the hearts of people. He gives an illustration of what he means by describing a dinner conversation he had with a young man named Joseph. Joseph said, “No one can know what is going to happen to themselves when they die.” John Leonard replied, “Yes, the Bible tells you clearly what will happen to you when you die. There are passages in the Gospel of John that are so clear that anyone reading them would know what is going to happen to themselves when they die.” “Show me the verses!” Joseph said. Leonard refused and told him to read and search John for himself. During dessert, Joseph asked again, “Will you show me the verses?” Again he refused. While Leonard was driving Joseph home, he asked one last time to be shown the verses. Leonard said again that he needed to search them out himself, but added that he would come by the following Wednesday and they could talk about it. That’s seasoned speech that increases thirst. Jesus did the same thing in his conversation with the rich young ruler. When he came to ask Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus didn’t launch into a gospel presentation. Instead, he increased the man’s thirst by replying, **“You know the commandments”** (Luke 18:20). I was once getting to know someone who I hadn’t previously met as we were both getting ready to go on a group bicycle ride. As the two of us were talking, another person said to the person I was talking to, “You better watch what you say with him; he’s a preacher.” The person I had just met, who was also a Christian, replied with a gospel word that was seasoned with salt, “Robert, don’t you know that hell is filled with good people and that it’s the bad people who go to heaven?”

And then Paul concludes with these words: **“so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”** When God opens a door, people will be asking questions. Our role isn’t to answer a question before it is asked, but wait until God works in a person to bring to the place of asking the question. Then we do need to be prepared to answer their question, not to give a one-size-fits-all gospel presentation. It is the questions of the unbelievers that we are to answer. We give them the power and we take the place of weakness in the conversation.

CONCLUSION:

One final truth needs to be pointed out. Did you notice that Paul refers to unbelievers as “outsiders” (v. 5)? That’s interesting, because it was the Colossian Christians who would have been marginalized and looked down on in their community. But the gospel truth of our riches in Christ was so real to Paul that he viewed unbelievers as the real outsiders. One of the most significant things we can do to be fruitful in outreach is to make sure the gospel is good news to us.