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Prayer for Evangelism

Colossians 4:3-6

Intro: In our study of v2, we see Paul exhorting the Colossian Christians to establish a solid prayer life. This is the natural spiritual progression from all the examples he had previously provided of how they, and all other believers, are to demonstrate their love for Jesus Christ in the everyday details and routines of their lives. I say it is the natural progression because in order to properly live a life that is fully pleasing to the Lord (1:10) requires a strong prayer life. Since this is the case, Paul calls them to engage in prayer faithfully (continually), to be earnest in their prayers, to be watchful in their prayers and to remember to be thankful as well. While this is not the end-all-be-all description of Christian prayer, if your prayer life possesses these 4 characteristics, you will be doing just fine.

But, as we continue to make our way through this passage, we'll see that Paul intends a 5th characteristic of effective prayer. In v3 Paul will ask the Colossian church to pray for him; not just for him generally, but specifically that he would continue to have opportunities to preach the gospel. This tells us that our prayers should also be purposeful.

Too often our prayers are vague and general. "Lord, bless the missionaries!" This is not a wrong prayer as it comes from a heart of concern, but how deep is that concern? How much better would it be if we would pray for specific needs. By doing that, we would know when God answers our prayer and we could praise Him for it. I realize that it is difficult to pray for specifics if you don't know them but we can always pray for the Lord's provision, protection and constant opportunities to share the gospel and that the Holy Spirit would prepare hearts to receive the gospel.

It has rightly been said that the purpose of prayer is not to get man's will done in heaven but to get God's will done on earth. Prayer is not telling God what to do or what to give. Prayer is petitioning God to do what He already wants to do and to give what He already wants to give, according to His will (1 Jn 5:14-15). How do we discover this? As we faithfully read the Word and fellowship with the Lord, we discover His will and then boldly ask Him to do what He has planned. It's been said that prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance; it is laying hold of His willingness. Nowhere does the Bible

provide any sort of philosophical rationale as to how prayer works, but it consistently assumes that God both hears and responds to the prayers of His people. As we will see, prayer is actually the way God includes people in His work. Distance is no hindrance to a shared ministry if that sharing is expressed through prayer.

3- As Paul has just exhorted them to cultivate a solid, consistent prayer life, he seems to throw in the idea that, since they're going to be praying, how about remembering him in prayer too. You know, support your local apostle! Paul knows his dependence on God and asks for intercessory help from them in prayer, just as he's prayed unceasingly for them (**1:9-11**). He's telling them that they can play an active part in his ministry simply by asking God to provide opportunities for him to preach the gospel.

Notice that he doesn't ask them to pray for anything that will bring any personal advantage to him. He doesn't even ask for prayer for his personal needs, which would have been many. All he asks is that they pray that God would continue to open doors so that he could preach the gospel. Even in the midst of imprisonment, Paul's sight remains fixed on his mission calling (**1:25**). How could this be? On one hand, it doesn't appear that Paul saw imprisonment as a hindrance to the gospel (**Phil 1:12**). These opportunities exist even in prison. In fact, he told the Philippians that his imprisonment has helped to advance the gospel. The entire palace guard knew that he was in chains because of his testimony for Christ and his imprisonment has embolden others to share the gospel without fear. He also declared that there were even saints in Caesar's household (**Phil 4:22**).

Clearly, it's more important to Paul that he be a faithful minister than a free man. Still, though he doesn't fear being in prison, the possibility of deliverance is also important to him (**Philem 22**) because it will open up unrestricted mission opportunities. His request here may be similar to the one he made in his 2nd epistle to the **Thessalonians** in **3:1-2**. We should take note that God not only answered Paul's request here but He answered it in spectacular fashion, in a way that Paul never could have dreamed to be possible. Paul was asking for open doors of opportunity to preach or share the gospel personally, one-on-one if possible. What he didn't realize was that the letters he would write from prison would become sacred Scripture that would kindle countless flames of Christian devotion from that day to this. Only God knows how many souls have been brought to a saving

knowledge of Christ through Paul's epistles or how many believers have been instructed, encouraged, challenged or corrected by the Holy Spirit while reading them. Paul's contribution to the growth and advancement of the Body of Christ is immeasurable.

Paul again mentions the content of his message as the mystery of Christ, which is God's plan of salvation that brings the possibility of a new relationship with God through the indwelling presence of His Son. More specifically, the mystery Paul preaches is God's purpose to reconcile the world through Christ and to welcome the Gentiles into His family. Preaching the gospel doesn't always win friends and influence people. It can produce enormous hostility and it is exactly this type of preaching that has result in Paul's current imprisonment.

The mystery of Christ refers directly to Gentile inclusion, which is what provoked such strong Jewish opposition to the gospel. It was precisely because Paul contended for Gentile liberty, offending Jewish prejudices, that he found himself a prisoner. How strange is it that Paul now wants God to help him do the very thing that caused his arrest. He had no intention of giving up his ministry or of changing his message. But, Paul's situation and his request is a subtle notification to his Colossian readers that proclaiming the mystery of Christ crucified is more likely to open the door to a prison cell for them instead of the door to financial and social success. That was true for many, if not most, of the early church and is still true today for many believers around the world but has been thoroughly lost to most in the western churches who's mercenary Christianity seeks only health, wealth and material satisfaction.

4- Whatever the place and circumstances of his captivity, Paul's main concern was for the preaching of the gospel. So he asks for prayer that he might be able to explain it clearly. Some Bible translations suggest here that Paul has the responsibility to proclaim the word so that people will not misunderstand – so that the message is clear to all. This view may be a bit misleading because some people remain blind to the truth no matter how clearly or simply it is proclaimed. Just look at the ministry of Jesus! What Paul's referring to is his own proclamation of God's revelation. His implication here is that his own preaching stands in continuity with God's own revelation – the mystery of Christ. What God has revealed in history, Paul now reveals in his own preaching.

The verb translated make it manifest simply means Paul desires to announce the mystery that has been revealed in Christ intelligently. Like all good communicators, he knows that the way the message is delivered is just as important as the content of the message. Nor does he assume that years of experience will take the place of good preparation and delivery. As wonderful as Paul's preaching was to his hearers, and seems to us, he was never satisfied with it. Each place where the gospel is preached has its own concerns, its own culture and its own needs. The job of the missionary, the evangelist or the preacher is to know what those needs are and to address the gospel to them. This is a fact that the church needs to rediscover in each generation, as it seeks to find out just how the gospel speaks to those lost souls among whom the local Christian community lives, serves and proclaims the message.

The last clause of this verse reinforces this point by reminding us of Paul's sense of calling. Paul was conscious of being specially chosen by God for the ministry of gospel proclamation, especially among the Gentiles, a calling that compelled him to preach Christ where ever he could (**1 Cor 9:15**). Paul refers this same sense of divine compulsion here; not just the need for making the message appropriate for the audience but a sense of oughtness. Another translation that might express it better would be, "as I am bound to do." When we begin to understand that Paul was bound more by his divine calling and commission to preach the gospel than he was by his iron chains, we thus begin to understand why he was content to minister while still in chains. The location and circumstance didn't matter, just that the message was still proclaimed.

5-6 – In this section (**2-6**) Paul gives 2 imperatives: the first is for the Colossians to devote themselves to prayer. The 2nd is in v**5** – be wise in the way you act towards outsiders. Both of these imperatives pertain to mission work. Paul asks them to pray that he will have an open door to speak the gospel and that they themselves would seize every opportunity and know how to answer others. Notice that Paul assures them that they are both under the same sense of oughtness: as I ought to speak (**4b**) and how you ought to answer (**6b**).

This 2nd imperative advises the Colossians on how to act towards outsiders (those outside the body of Christ) in daily life. Of course, how Christians

relate to the world around them is of paramount importance for their effectiveness as messengers of God. As a minority in a hostile environment, the Colossian Christians should rightly be concerned about the impression they made on their neighbors. At that time, there were some distorted and salacious accounts of Christian conduct and belief in circulation. It was important for all early Christians not to provide any fuel to that false fire but, rather, that they should expose the rumors as false by their regular manner of life.

Of course, these believers weren't resentful that they were marginalized in their society. They understood and believed they had been given fullness in Christ, who is the head of all principality and power (2:10) and this truth caused them to look at the pagans around them as deprived outsiders, aliens to God's kingdom. This theological viewpoint can be dangerous if it leads to a false sense of privilege that would shut the door on outsiders rather than flinging the gates wide open. The Colossians share the responsibility of evangelizing unbelievers just as much as the traveling missionary and so do does every modern Christian today. Evangelism isn't just the purview of the selected few, it is the responsibility and the privilege of the Christian life.

How were they to do this? They're to do it by walking in wisdom or, being wise in the way they act. Believers should govern their conduct with unbelievers on the basis of biblical wisdom. Just what this conduct looks like specifically is left unsaid. Wisdom is a very broad concept and in biblical thought, it holds a strategic position right between thought and action. Here, wisdom is the awareness of God's will that enables the believer to live a life that is above criticism; a life that doesn't put off the outsider from wanting to know more about what goes on inside the church.

As believers immerse themselves in the life of Christ, having put on the new man, their minds are renewed by God's Spirit. Wisdom will enable us to determine just how, in any given situations, our new way of thinking, our new set of biblical values, should be put into effect. At the beginning of this letter, Paul told them that he was continually praying to God to fill them with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him in every way (1:9b-10a). Paul picks up this basic concern again and applies it directly to those outside the community of the church. Paul's concern here

makes good sense in a letter that focuses so much on the need for Christians to distance themselves from certain kinds of outsiders (false teachers). While resisting the wrong kind of outside influence, the Colossians still needed to stay engaged with their fellow citizens and seek to win them to Christ.

Of course, to do this effectively and consistently, Christians are to make the most of the time available to them. The phrase Paul uses here is actually a commercial phrase that means *to buy at every opportunity*. Christians are to snap up the available moments. The word for time is *kairos*: the moment of opportunity. This means Christians are to seize every available moment. For what? In one sense, Paul's stressing an aspect of the Christian's stewardship of time. The time we have is a gift of God, to be used wisely as any other gift, and not to be squandered pointlessly. In the present context of dealing with outsiders and proclaiming the gospel, Paul's likely thinking of the opportunities we have to share the good news about Jesus. No opportunity should be wasted to show compassion, courtesy and a loving awareness of others. Nor should we miss the chance to let the reality of our own faith be known.

Still, it's not enough simply to walk wisely and carefully before unbelievers. We also must talk with them and share the gospel with them. But we must also take care to see that our speech is controlled by grace, so that it accurately points to Christ and glorifies the Lord. This naturally implies that we must also have grace in our hearts, because it's from the heart that the mouth speaks. With grace in our hearts and on our lips, we will be faithful witnesses and not judges or prosecutors. Our speech is supposed to minister grace to the hearers ([Eph 4:29](#)) but it can't do that unless we have grace in our hearts and on our lips. Speaking the truth in love is God's ideal for our conversation.

The descriptive phrase *seasoned with salt* is not equivalent to the modern concept of *salty language*. Paul's concept of *salty language* is the same as what was found in Greco-Roman literature; it refers to speech that is winsome or witty. It's related to speech that is amusing, clever or humorous. The Bible is never boring but I have heard plenty of speakers who have made it seem that way. One of the instructions we were given in preaching class in Bible school was: if you haven't struck oil in 30 minutes, quit boring!

Part of the normal witness of Christians to the world should be their interesting and courteous speech. Those who seek to put on and bear the virtues of the kingdom of Christ should be people whose company is worth having, whose speech is respectful but still full of conviction. Paul likens Christian speech to well-seasoned food: it is something to be savored. Harsh and condemning speech repels the unbeliever, no matter how accurate it might be with the facts, it's still wrong in its tone and motivation. You can't argue someone into the faith but you can argue them into a defensive position that will close their mind to the truth. Paul exhorts the Colossians to add salt to their speech to prevent them from being ignored as irrelevant bores.

Finally, Paul expects the Christian life that is well lived to raise questions in the minds of unbelievers. Why do you hold these strange beliefs? Why do you act with such graciousness? Why do you treat all your members alike, be they slave or free? To all these there should be ready answers. Some questions may come from the innocently inquisitive while others may be hostile. Because the early Christians lived in a generally hostile environment, they needed to have their answers ready for those who might challenge their faith or for those who were merely curious of their faith.

An appropriate Christian response will not only communicate the content of the gospel but it will also be done in a manner that makes the gospel attractive. The apostle Peter makes a similar point in his first epistle (3:15b), "always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" or with gentleness and respect. In order to do this, the believer must be well grounded in their faith. What Paul sees and, in fact, expects is a church that is capable of holding its own in the social setting of the marketplace, the gate of the city or the dining table and to win the attention of the lost by the attractiveness of its life and speech.

Christians must be prepared to explain their faith and, by the attractiveness of their life, draw others towards the only One who can reclothe us in the new humanity. It's not enough to just know the facts of the gospel, we also need to know how to communicate them in a manner that is attractive, not offensive; a manner that is gracious, not judgmental or condemning. Yes, we need to know the facts of what we believe but we also need to pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us, empower us and inform us as we witness. We

also need to ask the Holy Spirit to go before us and prepare the hearts of our intended audience to receive the truth.

This is how effective evangelism is conducted. It's not an occasional shot in the dark as we fly by the seat of our pants but it is a determined lifestyle that seeks to know the truth of one's faith and seeks to communicate that truth in a way that produces faith in the hearts of the hearers. It is a verbal witness that must be backed up by our lifestyle. 😊