

**PRAYER AND EVANGELISM**  
**(SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2013)**

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**SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 55; COLOSSIANS 4:2-6**

**INTRODUCTION**

We know where we are headed as a state and nation. The vote legalizing so-called same-sex marriage in Illinois is the fruit of many years of rebellion and turning away from God and His Word. As Ken Talbot reminded us last week, when families are in a serious state of disrepair how can the state and church ever function properly?

What we don't know is how quickly we will face even greater threat to the freedom we have to gather for worship without opposition and to freely evangelize. How long will we still have the freedom to teach children the Word of God?

Let me pose what I think is a convicting question for myself personally and I trust for others. Imagine if Illinois or the Federal Government passed a law outlawing evangelism. Would that law affect you? Would we be guilty of breaking such a law? Would we like Paul ever face jail time for speaking the mystery of Christ?

I have chosen an important passage from Colossians as an encouragement to this church in two related areas – prayer and evangelism.

I don't want to minimize the threat to freedom and the state of tyranny we are already facing. But let us consider that we still do have significant freedom in terms of evangelism and public witness. And no government has the power to keep God's people from praying. The struggle for truth must continue as we stand fast on the Word of God and seek to still bring a prayerful witness to our friends and community. It is our sin and laziness that we must especially fight in order to be faithful.

Now I must say that we don't all have the same calling. You can see this from our text. Paul wasn't expecting the Colossians to do exactly what he was doing. But we must see that together we have the same goal. We must be united in prayer and doing what we can as God enables and calls. And there is a place for service for each one of us if we are truly willing to be focused on what is most important.

**Pray and seek for the salvation of men, women, and children.**

Our verses contain two main parts, verses 2-4 focused on prayer and verses 5-6 focused on a wise witness to unbelievers.

**1. YOU ARE CALLED TO PRAY, COL. 4:2-4**

**Col. 4:2** Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; **3** meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, **4** that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.

There are two aspects related prayer in these verses. In verse 2 you see a command about being devoted to prayer. And then related to the command in verses 3 and 4, Paul gives specific requests to the Colossians concerning his desire for an open door to proclaim the gospel.

The first command from verse 2 is to be devoted to prayer or continue earnestly in prayer.

The expression continue earnestly is a very important description which captures the spirit of the early church in the book of Acts and contrasts with the spirit we see in so much of the church today.

Acts 1:14 describes the 120 who waited for the Holy Spirit. While waiting they devoted themselves to prayer. Acts 2:42 uses the same language to describe the early believers who steadfastly continued in the teaching of the apostles, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. And then in Acts 6:4 we have a description of the need for deacons so that the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. There is a passion and devotion that we see in the book of Acts. That same passion and commitment is part of your calling in prayer. Paul in Romans 12:12 issues the same command.

I think we all know what it is like to pursue something with commitment. When there is something you want to buy or something very important you have to do, you know how you can be focused and committed. Whether that means getting up early, working late, spending money, whatever it takes you will do it.

You also probably know very well that spirit of doing something when you get around to it, the spirit of maybe tomorrow, if I get a chance to do it, if my schedule frees up a bit.

What better describes your attitude and commitment to prayer? Is it a passionate commitment or a maybe tomorrow attitude?

As I have noted before almost every sermon probably could contain the command to make sure you pray more. Unfortunately part of our weakness in prayer is the general ease of life combined with business, distractions, Facebook, and the like. May God grant each of us conviction. As fathers and husbands, may we set the example for our families.

The goal is not to impress God with how much we pray or how long we pray. The goal is that there is clear evidence of devotion to prayer. Is there devotion to prayer in your private life and in the life of this church?

Paul then adds to this command two vital characteristics – vigilance and thanksgiving.

Vigilance or watchfulness is frequently connected with prayer. What did Jesus tell his three closest disciples in the Garden?

**Matthew 26:41** Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak.”

**1Cor. 16:13** Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong. (KJV)

Our devotion to prayer is not for the purpose of vain repetition or babbling. The picture of prayer that some have described is that you are a soldier on a battlefield.<sup>1</sup> You seek to be aware of your own dangers and those facing others. Pray with your eyes open we could say – open to threats and dangers.

So beautifully and importantly Paul also says that our prayers should be characterized by thanksgiving. Not only are we often ignorant of spiritual dangers but we also tend to be an ungrateful people. Indeed if we focused more on being thankful I think we could also be much more devoted to prayer. If we truly believe that we are daily loaded with blessings, than shouldn't it only be appropriate to express our thanksgiving to our Heavenly Father, our thanksgiving to our Lord and Savior, our thanksgiving for the presence and help of the Holy Spirit?

There is a lifetime of challenge in verse 2. Let us consider the specific requests Paul asked the Colossians to pray concerning from verses 3 and 4.

As we see from verse 3, Paul was in prison when he wrote Colossians. It is one of his prison epistles. And what does Paul request? Does he pray for safety? Does he pray for release? In a sense he does. But the two main requests are for an open door for the word and that Paul would proclaim the gospel as he ought to speak it. Paul requests opportunity for gospel proclamation and for boldness.<sup>2</sup>

Isn't this significant that Paul who had been ministering for almost thirty years still was focused on opportunity and for boldness in his witness and gospel proclamation?

As I mentioned earlier we don't all have the same calling or gifting as Christians. We are not all going to be "evangelists" travelling around the country or even our own neighborhoods boldly preaching the gospel. However, verses 5 and 6 indicate that there is a duty that we all have toward the lost. And so two main requests that we find here in Colossians 4 are very relevant also for you to pray. Pray for opportunities. Pray for boldness as God grants those opportunities.

## **2. YOU ARE CALLED TO BE A WISE WITNESS, vv. 5-6**

**Col. 4:5** Walk in wisdom toward those *who are* outside, redeeming the time. **6** *Let* your speech always *be* with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

Very importantly Paul focuses on two aspects of our witness in these verses – your behavior and your words. Paul anticipates very well the two great objections raised against Christians today that we are hypocrites and that our words are either ungracious or irrelevant.

What does Scripture command here concerning our behavior? There are two things from verse 5. The main command is that you are to walk in wisdom to those outside the Christian community. A related duty then follows, redeem the time.

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<sup>1</sup> I think I first heard this analogy from John Piper. It is a fitting picture.

<sup>2</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 198-199.

Paul in Ephesians 5:15-16 gives very similar instruction concerning careful walking and making the best use of the time because the days are evil. 1 Timothy 3:7 sets the requirement that those in leadership must have a good testimony to those who are outside lest they fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. What we find in Colossians is obviously important but not unique to this book.

Increasingly as our culture becomes more antagonistic to the Christian faith, we need great wisdom in living our hostile culture.

What do you communicate to unbelievers? It is often very hard for any of us to be aware of blind spots, to be aware of some of the messages we send, sometimes not even aware. As a church and ministry we have to especially be careful of what we communicate to others about who we are. In no way is Paul advocating that we seek to blend in. Far from it. He is not advocating compromise in any way. But he does command carefulness and thoughtfulness.

Let us give attention to the message we communicate to those outside. What Scripture commands is not that we get people to like us or even understand us. Our goal is to seek to be wise and careful.

Listen to the comments of John Calvin here.

The Church is like a city of which all believers are the inhabitants, connected with each other by mutual relationships, while unbelievers are strangers. There are three reasons why these strangers or outsiders must be considered. First, so that no stumbling block is placed before them. Second, we must be careful not to do anything that would bring reproach to the message of the gospel. Third, we must be careful not to become defiled and wrongly influenced in our relationships with those outside.

The second duty related to behavior is found at the end of verse 5 – redeeming the time.

This expression is found just one other time in Ephesians 5:16 as I noted earlier. What does it mean to redeem the time? Other versions have making the best use of the time or making the most of the opportunities.

The words are a reminder of the brevity of our own lives in the face of eternal realities.

I truly believe this is one of the most difficult issues we face because of the pace of modern life and the almost countless distractions we have.

Francis Bacon stated, “A wise man will make more opportunities than he finds.”<sup>3</sup>

The duty here is similar to our duty in prayer. There must be a true passion and determination to do this otherwise it gets left on the never-ending “to-do” pile.

Scripture next gives direction in terms of our words. I think given the context we are especially talking about our words directed to outsiders or unbelievers.

Three things are stated about your words.

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<sup>3</sup> John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), n.p.

First, they are to be gracious words.

This cannot mean that we speak only about things that the world enjoys hearing. That is certainly not how Paul conducted his ministry. His words often provoked persecution, riots, and the like.

I think we can say that again the context is how we deal with individual unbelievers. The reason I say that is the end of the verse speaks of answering each one. And this I think we can say was clearly Paul's testimony as he dealt with the many unbelievers he dealt with in his ministry. Our goal must be to speak truth and to speak that truth with grace.

Second, our words are to be seasoned with salt. This is a very interesting expression. I think it comes directly from the words of our Lord.

**Mark 9:50** Salt *is* good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another."

What does it mean that our speech is seasoned with salt? I think the references to salt in the NT clearly speak of the fact that we are given the great duty of representing Christ and His truth. The words we share with others should be gracious but not pointless. We speak in love but in truth. Our words may not always then be what others want to hear but since they are spoken in grace we pray that God will use them.

Third, the final statement expresses the goal of our speech. It is so that you may know how to answer each person. We seek to give a message that is appropriate for each person. Consider the unbelievers you frequently see and know. Do you give special consideration to how you can answer the questions they ask? Let us think about how we can best do this for the glory of Christ.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

#### **Pray and seek for the salvation of men, women, and children.**

Let me share some encouragements that young and old alike can use in terms of witnessing. Some of you I know seek to use some of these tools, but listen to a few ideas and things that we can be doing right now.

- Ultimate Questions
- Bible Studies focused on God's Sovereignty
- Evangelistic DVD
- Tracts
- Books in our Book Room

What more can we be doing to strengthen our witness to unbelievers?

- Outreaches internally. Two upcoming programs for Thanksgiving and Christmas where I need people to be present to pass out literature and talk with families.

- Consider passing out copies of the Evangelistic DVD in your neighborhood with a note about who you are and why you are doing this.
- Consider leading an outreach Biblestudy either with friends or neighbors. We have a series that you could use for this purpose.
- Outreach to Nursing Homes
- Lord willing, I will share one or two other ideas as we seek to encourage each other and together seek to strengthen our witness to the lost.

Often the plea for evangelism and witnessing is given in terms of almost guilt. Consider how many people die each day who do not know Jesus Christ. I am not totally against such a consideration, but that approach is not really found in Scripture.

Rather the motive for both prayer and witness comes from considering who God is and His grace given to us.

You know the grace of God. This is the basis for both prayer and for witness.

You know the duty that God's Word gives to you. Take seriously the responsibility given to you.

May our motive then be love for God and a love for the lost, a love that compels us to greater service as God gives opportunity.

**2Cor. 5:14** For the love of Christ **compels** us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died;

## **Prayer**

### **Hymn 386**

#### **BENEDICTION – EPHESIANS 3:20-21**

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.