

Living
THE LIFE

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Colossians 4:2-6

Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians from prison to encourage the believers and to instruct them regarding some dangers they were facing. In the fourth chapter he gives some applications to what he has already said about doctrinal matters, about their relationship to Christ, about their belonging to Him and the implications these things have in the life of the believer.

Paul addresses two main areas of life in Colossians 4:2-6. The first area is the matter of prayer by believers in their personal lives. The second area is what Paul expects of them as God's children in their walk before people of the world. In these verses he is telling us how we are to live our lives day by day.

The Believer's Prayer Life

Devoted to Prayer

Paul begins verse 2 with a command in the present tense: "Devote yourselves to prayer." The word which is translated "devote" means to adhere to something, to persist in, to busy oneself with, to be busily engaged in. The Colossian believers are to become occupied with the matter of prayer. They are to be actively engaged and involved in it so that it absorbs their attention. Prayer is the privileged communication believers have with God on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ. Through His death, Christ opened the way of access into the presence of God Himself. Now God desires that we be busily engaged in conversation with Him.

That is an encouraging fact. There are many kinds of people in the world. Some of us talk more than others. Some seem to be retiring, quiet and shy, while others are very outgoing, seemingly talking all the time. But it is encouraging that God exhorts believers to be busily engaged in prayer. He wants us to be talking to Him all the time.

It is a tremendous privilege that God would encourage us to talk with Him all the time and to absorb our lives in communicating with Him. Sometimes we get concerned that we may be talking too much, that He may get tired of our talking to Him all the time. But He tells us that we are to be absorbed in prayer, busily engaged in it. One of the amazing things about prayer is that we can pray while doing other things. That is one of the advantages of routine tasks which do not occupy our minds with a great deal of concentration. While doing these routine things, we can be busily engaged in prayer at the same time. We sometimes complain about the routine things, but this may be God's blessing by granting us added time to engage ourselves in talking to Him.

There are many things which intrude into our time and occupy our attention. Some people prefer to have the television or radio on all the time, but we need to be careful about this. Sometimes it is good for us to have those things turned off so we can concentrate our minds on talking to God without distraction. If you develop a pattern of constantly talking to the Lord in prayer while doing other routine tasks, that practice will become more familiar and more comfortable to you in your responsibility of prayer. We sometimes refer to prayer as a responsibility, but in reality it is a great privilege which is limited to believers in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament tells us that the prayer of the wicked is an abomination to God.

God is not simply looking for people to talk to Him, but He is wanting His children to commune with Him, to talk intimately with Him, to express their deep desires to Him. We spend too much time mulling things over in our minds. We should be spending more time talking to God about these things and laying them before Him. We need to be telling Him what we are thinking about, the things which are confronting us or the needs we have. Paul will mention some specifics, but his desire for believers in Jesus Christ is that they be devoted to prayer.

Does this kind of praying characterize us? Prayer can easily

slide by the way because it is a private matter. You have no idea how much time I spent in prayer during the past week, and I have no idea how much time you spent in prayer. If the Lord focused on a screen each of our names with a computer printout of our praying for the past week, I wonder how revealing it would be. I am not referring to time you might spend in personal devotions or private prayer, but rather I am thinking of the general activity of our lives. How much time do you spend at your job communicating with the Lord? Do you spend time with Him in prayer while driving from place to place? Do you seize these opportunities to talk things over with God or do you let them slip by? If I am alert to the opportunities to spend time conversing with the Lord, I can utilize much time that otherwise would be wasted. God does not ask us to stop everything else we are doing when we pray. Some people can block out several hours of time for prayer, and that is fine. But all of us can be busily engaged in prayer in whatever we are doing.

Keeping Alert. Whenever you spend a lot of time doing something, there is a danger of becoming sluggish while performing it. That is often a characteristic of routine tasks we do which we do not have to think about. While doing them we sort of let our minds unwind. If we are not careful, that happens when we should be engaged in prayer. Our praying can degenerate to be only a routine task which we no longer think about. Did you ever start talking to the Lord about something and suddenly realize that your mind has wandered off to something that has nothing to do with anything? That is what Paul cautions against in the next phrase of verse 2 when he says “keeping alert in it.” To keep alert means to be wide awake or watchful.

Attitude of Thanksgiving. Paul says that one of the things which will keep us alert in our praying is to have “an attitude of thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2). Concentrating on the things we can thank God for sparks up the prayer life. That does not mean that prayer is only thanking God, because Paul is going to mention some things in the succeeding verses which we ought to be asking for. But it is important that we saturate our prayer lives with an appreciation for what God has already done for us. The more sensitive I am in my prayer life, the more sensitive I am to the work of God in my life and the more I have to be thankful for. While praying I can be constantly thanking Him for His blessings in my life, and that will help me

stay alert and sharp in prayer.

Jesus exhorted us along this same line in Matthew 26 and used the same words that Paul uses in this passage to remind us to keep alert in prayer. In that chapter Peter, James and John had gone with Jesus to the garden to pray just before His betrayal. They were tired and worn out, so they fell asleep when they should have been praying. Jesus told them, “Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41). The weakness of the flesh is a great trap which endangers an effective prayer life. Did you ever notice how tired you get when you pray? You can sit glassy eyed in front of the tube watching a game for four hours without falling asleep. It may be a boring game, but you have no problem staying awake. If you decide to sit down and pray, five minutes later you may find yourself snoring. You are in the same location. You are sitting on the same couch. But all of a sudden you are dead tired. Why? The flesh does not respond to spiritual activity.

When I pray, I find it easier to pray walking around. I am not a kneeler. I do not have praying hides or camel knees. Every time I kneel down beside my chair, I go to sleep! I have had some great rests while intending to pray, but they are not effective prayer times.

The Lord did not tell me I have to kneel down to talk to Him. I can walk around and talk to Him, and I find I do not usually fall asleep while I am walking, at least not more than once or twice! One of the beauties of prayer is that we can engage in it while doing other things—walking around, shuffling papers or whatever.

Specific Requests

Next, Paul begins to list some specific prayer requests. The Apostle Paul, who communed with the Lord, and had the privilege of being carried to the third heaven to see things you and I have not yet experienced, asks the believers at Colossae to be praying for him. It is interesting because although Paul is in prison anticipating a trial, he does not pray that God will get him out of there. He does not even ask them to pray that God will give him the grace to endure the hardships. Paul is not participating in a pity party. He is not taking advantage of the opportunity to lay out to the Colossian believers how spiritual he is in all of his suffering. His prayer request is focused in another direction.

Opportunities for Presentation. Paul wrote in verse 3, “Praying at the same time for us as well, that God may open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned.” He was imprisoned for one reason—preaching Jesus Christ. Now he wants the believers to pray for him that while he is in prison, God will open up special opportunities for him to present the truth of Christ. Wherever Paul is he has one consuming passion—to make Jesus Christ known. He is not praying that God will get him out of there, although that would not be an invalid prayer. However, he wants them to pray with him that God will give him the opportunities while he is there to make Jesus Christ known.

Paul’s attitude is amazing. He does not view his life as being wasted in prison. He is not thinking of all the cities which yet need to be reached for Christ. He sees himself as placed in prison by God, so now he asks them to pray that God will give him an open door of opportunity right where he is.

Paul wrote on other occasions as well about open doors. From Ephesus he wrote, “But I shall remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries” (1 Cor. 16:8, 9). Paul says there are many opportunities there to preach Jesus Christ, but there is also much opposition. He has a unique opportunity to preach Christ, so he is going to stay there and take advantage of that opportunity.

Paul also wrote in 2 Corinthians 2:12 that “a door was opened for me in the Lord.” He had opportunities to present Christ at Troas, but he could not stay on that occasion because of the burden he had to go on to Macedonia.

Jesus told the church at Philadelphia in Revelation 3:8, “I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut.” Paul is telling the Colossian believers in chapter 4 that this is the kind of opportunity he wants in prison.

The reason Paul wanted the door open was “so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ” (Col. 4:3). The mystery of Christ is the revelation that God has given concerning Christ and His finished work. That is a truth you can know only by revelation. A mystery in Scripture is something you cannot find out by your own natural, reasoning process, but instead is something which can only be

known by revelation of God. The mystery Paul is speaking about is that salvation is found only in God's Son, Jesus Christ. Paul is asking them to pray that he would have the opportunity to present that mystery.

Clarity in Presentation. Notice Paul's continuing prayer request in Colossians 4:4: "In order that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak." This verse, I must say, is as amazing to me as any other verse in the Book of Colossians. This mighty Apostle Paul, to whom was revealed the mystery concerning the Church of Jesus Christ, asks the believers to pray that he would make the message clear which he was presenting.

You may feel that anyone can make the message of the Gospel clear: you are a sinner, Christ died on the cross as the atonement for your sins and was raised from the dead and if you believe that you are saved. Isn't that clear? There is no need to pray about that, is there, Paul? If Paul realized the need for God to be working in the presentation of the message, how much more do we need to understand that? His great concern was that the message would be presented in such a way as to be effective to those who heard. The effective presentation of the Gospel message is not simply a matter of learning a few rote phrases and then dumping them out in the face of everyone we meet. It is a matter of being sensitive to the people we are with and sensitive to what God is doing in their lives so that we can present the Gospel to them in the power of the Spirit and in a way that God can use.

Sometimes we present the Gospel as though we are robots. We walk up to a person, push the button, then dump our speech. Then we are off to the next person. But that is not the proper approach. We must have sensitivity to those to whom we minister. I believe this is what Paul is talking about. He obviously knew the facts of the Gospel. After all, we go to 1 Corinthians 15, a passage Paul wrote, to find clarification of what the Gospel is. The problem is not that Paul was unclear on the facts of the Gospel. What he wanted was the ability to make the Gospel clear to the people with whom he was in contact. His concern was to communicate the truth of Jesus Christ to them in the power of the Spirit in a way they would grasp and understand.

Paul desired the believers at Colossae to be praying with him about his clearness in the presentation of the Gospel. We, too, need

to be praying for one another about that. One of the things I pray for most about believers here is that God will give us the courage, boldness and wisdom to present Jesus Christ wherever we are. We also need sensitivity to the Holy Spirit in each situation so we can present Jesus Christ effectively. I have no desire to run around saying, "Thirty people heard the Gospel from me today!" Praise the Lord if thirty people heard it from me today, but there is another question. Was I effective in presenting the Gospel to those thirty people? I am not asking if thirty people believed it. But did I make it clear to them and reach them where they are so that the truth of the Gospel was understandable to them? Paul was not asking that they pray particularly for what he ought to speak, but in the way he ought to speak. He was looking for the best point for him to pick them up and lead them into a conversation about Jesus Christ. He was looking for ways to break down the wall and reach them with the Gospel of Christ.

We need to be praying for one another. We should be asking the Lord to open doors for us to present the Gospel. Then we should be asking Him to give us wisdom to present the truth of the Gospel in a way that the Spirit can use it to reach the hearts and lives of those to whom we present it.

The Believer's Public Life

In the next section of this chapter, Paul wants to address the conduct of believers. His approach is related to making the Gospel clear and has to do with the way we live our lives. An ineffective life cancels out any effectiveness in the presentation of the Gospel. Most of us believers know that when our lives are out of step with the Word and an opportunity arises to present the Word, we are embarrassed or afraid to do so. Disobedience in the life intimidates us from sharing the Word with others and destroys the confidence of the disobedient believer. Now Paul wants to address the walk of believers as it relates to taking advantage of opportunities to present the Gospel.

Paul says in Colossians 4:5, "Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity." The word which is translated "conduct" is actually the word "walk." So Paul is saying, "Walk yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders." As he proceeds in his writing, he builds on what he has already written. If

we have the right kind of personal relationship with the Lord, communing with Him in prayer, praying for opportunities to share the Gospel and being effective in that presentation, Paul now says that we are to walk before the world in an effective manner.

Walking Wisely

He says that we are to walk wisely. Sometimes Christians just barge and crash their way through life. But we are to be walking wisely toward outsiders. As unbelievers observe our walk before them, the way we walk should provide opportunities and open doors for us to present the Gospel. Walking before them properly will make them open to our testimony and to our words. We must live wisely toward outsiders.

Paul also said:

Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need (1 Thess. 4:9–12).

Proper Life-Style. Believers are to be diligent, working properly to meet the needs they have so they will be a good testimony before outsiders. We must be careful of our life-style and conduct because unbelievers are watching. People in the world can do things that believers cannot do because the testimony of believers is at stake. We do not want to give unbelievers any excuse to turn off the Gospel of Jesus Christ because of offenses in our lives. They may be offended by the Gospel, but we do not want our lives to be an offense. Therefore, Paul says believers are to work hard with their own hands so no one can criticize them for being lazy. Walking wisely before unbelievers includes a broad area, not just spiritual matters but basic, practical matters as well. This includes how we conduct our business affairs and the way we go about our jobs.

Quite frankly, this is the reason I started having my lawn fertilized and weed killer applied. I was concerned about what the neighbors thought about me. I did not want them to look at my lawn and say, "The worst lawn in the neighborhood belongs to that preacher."

We must be sensitive as to how we conduct ourselves as believers so unbelievers have nothing to accuse us of.

Orderly Finances. We must also be very careful in our financial dealings. If I incur debts I cannot pay, how will that affect my testimony for Christ? Believers must be honest, upright and transparent. We must be careful to conduct ourselves above reproach in these critical areas.

If believers do not walk wisely in these practical areas, they are undermining any opportunities to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ effectively with unbelievers. An improper life-style or poor conduct becomes a barrier to unbelievers accepting the message of the Gospel from us. We want to remove anything which will provide an opportunity for unbelievers to reject our testimony of Christ.

Seizing the Opportunities

After telling believers to conduct themselves with wisdom toward outsiders, Paul adds, “making the most of the opportunity” (Col. 4:5). The King James Version translates this phrase, “redeeming the time.” This expression carries the meaning of buying up the opportunity. Paul is saying that we should make the most of the time God gives us by using it in the most effective way. My whole life should be built around looking for opportunities to present Christ, seizing the time and using it wisely.

We must evaluate all of our activities and determine how they affect our testimony for Christ. Will any particular activity provide an opportunity to present Christ or will it make it more difficult for me to present Him? It is interesting how Paul describes the opportunities. They do not just fall into our laps, but we must buy them up. This means we must look for them and use them. We are to make opportunities, humanly speaking. Our opportunities are the result of the Spirit working, but it is the Spirit working as we are willing to be biblical. As we approach our neighbors, friends and people we work with on our jobs, are we looking for opportunities to present Christ to them? Such an approach will affect our conduct. We would not want to say or do anything that would detract from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Guarding Your Speech

Paul elaborates on this in Colossians 4:6: “Let your speech al-

ways be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person.” Pleasing speech should characterize believers. We need to be careful what we talk about. Our speech should be seasoned with salt. Salt gives flavor and retards corruption. Paul also speaks of gracious speech in Ephesians 4:29: “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

Gracious. If I am always complaining about my job or about the boss, then turn around and try to talk to my co-workers about the graciousness, love and kindness of Christ, is that what they have seen in my actions and words? If I have talked about things which are questionable or doubtful for a believer to be involved in or if my conversation has been absorbed with things of this life, I have undermined my effectiveness as a witness for Christ.

We must be careful that we do not destroy our opportunities in subtle ways. We can nullify our effectiveness in presenting the Gospel by walking improperly before unbelievers. Our effectiveness in making Christ known is not just simply to walk up to someone and hit him with the Gospel. It is true that unbelievers do have to hear the facts of the Gospel if they are to be saved, but the continuing impact of my life as a witness must also be considered. They should see a difference in the things I talk about and in the way I walk as a believer.

Some believers work in difficult situations where the language is corrupt and vile, characterized by grumbling, complaining and dissatisfaction. But that is an opportunity for your language to stand out as different. You do not have to approach it with a holier-than-thou attitude by telling them they ought not to complain. Why shouldn't they complain? However, they should see a difference in the way you talk in their presence. They should recognize that you do not grumble, complain or run people down. They should know that you do not gossip about someone else. A believer's speech is to be gracious, seasoned with salt.

Consistent. Paul goes on in Colossians 4:6 to tell us that the reason that is true is “so that you may know how you should respond to each person.” That enables us to give the right answer at the right time. The believer should be developing a biblical pattern of speech. That does not necessarily mean you should be speaking

in King James English, but the emphasis is on speaking biblically. Our speech should be consistent with the Word of God and the character of Christ. It should be natural for us to talk about the things of the Word. That does not mean we cannot talk about the ball game with the men at work or that we must talk only about spiritual things. But there are some things believers cannot talk about because they are corrupt and would be inappropriate. When your co-workers are having a complaining party, you will not want to contribute to that. When they are running someone down, you will not want to contribute. As we talk and walk biblically, we are opening the door and having the wisdom to respond to each person. Such an approach becomes part of the natural flow of our lives as we submit ourselves to the Spirit, and He will enable us to make Jesus Christ known.

We do not live and work in isolation. Our entire lives are involved in making Christ known. Our ability to witness effectively is founded on a firm prayer life in which we talk to God about the things that concern us. Praying for others and their opportunities as effective witnesses sensitizes us to the needs of others. It makes us more alert in conducting our lives honorably even among unbelievers. The unbelievers around us may not like our identification with Christ. They may not like our commitment to the Word, but they should not be able to say anything against our honesty, integrity, truthfulness, kindness and thoughtfulness. We should be above question and above reproach in those regards. If our lives are lived above reproach, that will give us the wisdom to respond to each person with the opportunities an upright life will provide.

Maintaining a Clear Conscience

We are told in 1 Peter 3:8 and 9 how we should act even when we are mistreated:

To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind-hearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing (1 Pet. 3:8,9).

Peter continues this instruction:

And who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and

do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame (1 Pet. 3:13–16).

Nothing is more disastrous to a believer in his efforts to witness than an accusing conscience which destroys our confidence and effectiveness. Therefore, we must maintain a good conscience by proper conduct.

Christ is Lord, and He is sovereign in my heart. He is determining the activities of my life, and I am ready whenever the opportunity presents itself to make Jesus Christ known.

We have all had occasions when the opportunity has presented itself and we walked away because we were not ready. We were taken totally by surprise. If we could go back and work through those situations in another way, we would try to handle them differently. But the important thing is for us to be ready at all times. If we are, we will find that opportunities are around us all the time.

Paul has given us encouraging words. This instruction is founded first on our walk with the Lord. We are to busy ourselves with prayer, talking with God at all times. Whatever else we may be doing, we can be in communication with Him. Then we are to be conducting our lives in ways which honor Him, speaking properly and always being ready to take advantage of open doors to effectively present the glorious truth that Jesus Christ is the Savior. What a privilege to share that message with others and to build our lives around something that has eternal value and importance.

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