



# Christ Reformed Community Church

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## “Making the Best Use of Your Time, Part 1” Colossians 4:2–6

I want you to take your Bibles this morning and be turning with me to the book of Colossians chapter 4. We have been in the study of Mark for a couple of years, but I thought it might be prudent for us to look at a passage of Scripture from Colossians chapter 4, just a few verses, and we’ll look at these verses not only this morning but also this evening. I want you to stand to your feet in honor of the reading of God’s Word. We’ll pick up in verse 2, and I’ll read through verse 6. Paul writes under inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

*Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.*

*Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.*

May God add His blessing to the reading of His Holy Word. Please be seated, and let’s ask for the Lord’s help this morning.

Our Father, we are grateful for this text, in particular. We are grateful as well for the gift of time. We confess to You that we are all guilty at one time or another of wasting our time, wasting our days, wasting our energy on fruitless, frivolous things that don’t bring You honor and don’t bring You glory. So we ask, Lord, that You would help us to meditate deeply upon the gift of time, what it means for us, what it means to live for You, to live our lives for You before the watching world. We pray Your Spirit would be with us as we study. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Well, as many of you know, we set our clocks forward an hour at 2:00 a.m. on the second Sunday in March every year, which means that we all missed an hour of sleep last night. In November, the first Sunday in November at 2:00 a.m., we set our clocks back an hour. So, we set them forward in the spring; we set them back in the winter. We refer to this, obviously, as daylight savings time. One of my pet peeves in life, and anyone who knows me and has known me for any length of time, understands that patience is not something that I generally demonstrate. One of my greatest pet peeves is seeing people waste their time, seeing people waste their energy, seeing people waste their strength on things that really don’t amount to a whole lot in the large scheme of things.

I came across a sermon that was preached by Jonathan Edwards entitled “The Preciousness of Time and the Importance of Redeeming It. The Preciousness of Time and the Importance of

Redeeming It.” In that sermon, which later turned into a little essay, Jonathan Edwards gave four reasons why time is precious. First of all, Edwards said time is precious because eternity depends on it. Time is precious because eternity depends on it. Secondly, Edwards says that time is precious because it is very short. We don’t have a lot of it. Third, says Edwards, time is precious because we do not know how much of it we have left. And fourth, Edward said that time is precious because once it is gone, it is gone. You cannot ever recover time. You can never make up for lost time.

Well, the apostle Paul as he writes to the believers in the city of Colossae, which was located in the Lycus River Valley, he’s trying to get them to have the right set of priorities in their lives. They are guilty of being time wasters instead of time redeemers. As a matter of fact, he says there very bluntly in verse 5 that they need to be about the task of making the best use of their time. Or if you are using another translation, they need to learn to redeem the time. The problem was not laziness. The fact is, the Colossians were busy trying to be spiritual and trying to live righteously. The issue was the wrong appropriation of their time in pursuing the sort of self-absorbed pietistic, individualistic spirituality. For them, Ecclesiastes 7:16 would have applied which says, “*Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise.*” The issue in a nutshell was this; some false teachers had infiltrated the ranks of their church, and they had thrown off the spiritual balance, as it were, of the Colossians, suggesting to us as we read through this letter that the Colossians’ focus on Christ and God’s mission for them in the world regarding the kingdom of God was lost. They had lost their focus, and they were rendered essentially useless as Paul writes to them. They were focusing on what we could say were less important things instead of the more important things regarding the kingdom of God.

Here is what one commentator says and I quote: “What had been happening in the church in Colossae was not dissimilar to what happens in many churches when distracting influences surface in their midst. Almost invariably, they become so caught up with the internal affairs and problems of the church that they lose sight of their calling to be salt and light in the world.” And that is precisely why Paul writes to the Colossians—to correct their faulty way of living. Now, Colossians is a book that has much rich theology. The practical portion of the book of Colossians is chapters 3 and 4 where our text is found, but in the first two chapters of Colossians, Paul develops this glorious doctrine of the believer’s union with Christ. And he speaks specifically as he moves into chapter 3 how the Christian’s life is hidden with Christ in God, but that that life that is hidden with Christ in God is not to be hidden from the rest of the watching world. For example, if you note with me in chapter 3 beginning in verse 14, Paul speaks about how the doctrine of union with Christ affects our interactions with our fellow believers in the context of the church. He says:

*And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

In other words, Paul is saying that the doctrine of our union with Christ is such a powerful doctrine that it even affects the way we love our fellow believers in the local church. It affects the way that we receive the Word of Christ so that it dwells richly within us, but Paul is not finished. If you

look there, beginning in verse 18, he speaks about how the doctrine of union with Christ affects our closest relationships within our immediate family, namely between our spouse and our children. Verse 18: *“Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.”* And he even speaks to the children of the church. He says, *“Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord,”* and *“Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.”* But Paul’s not finished. Not only does the doctrine of our union with Christ affect how we view others in the church, our fellow believers and brothers and sisters, it affects how we view our spouse and our children and the raising of our children, but the doctrine of union with Christ even affects our relationships within the workplace. Notice verse 22:

*Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.*

And then verse 1 of chapter 4: *“Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.”* This is speaking about the slave owner and slave relationship, but it has practical application in our current day for the workplace: superiors and inferiors, bosses and workers, employers and employees. And so, Paul is saying, flowing from chapters 1 and 2, that one of the ways that the doctrine of our union with Christ affects us is how we deal with our relationships with others in the workplace. Our identity is Christ, and everyone around us, whether it’s those in the church or it’s in our home or it’s in the workplace, we are to manifest before everyone the rule and the reign of Christ. We are to show the world the reality that our life is hidden with Christ in God. But as we come to chapter 4, verses 2 through 6, which is our text, Paul explains how our doctrine, the doctrine of our union with Christ, affects our relationship with nonbelievers. In fact, in verse 5 Paul says, *“Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.”* Paul is simply reminding the Colossians that the world is bigger than your own personal problems.

The kingdom of God is bigger than the church. Paul is reminding them that—and we’re going to see this—that they need to follow his example. Paul was not complaining about his own circumstances of being imprisoned. Paul was looking for all sorts of opportunities to speak forth the glories of the gospel. Paul was looking to be a bold witness for Christ, even as he was in prison. He didn’t view those unbelievers who incarcerated him as his enemies. He viewed them as objects of evangelism in which he would shine the light of the gospel to and have an impact on their lives. And Paul writes these Colossians also to tell them that not only as we give the Word of God to the world in general and the gospel of God in specific to the world, we do that not in the flesh but through the power of prayer, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul believed that all of life was under the rule of Christ, and that all Christians were expected to manifest His rule and His reign in every sphere of influence, in every relationship, in every second of time that God gives us on this earth. And the fact that Paul speaks so bluntly might be a little bit surprising to you when you consider the fact that Paul had never even visited the church at Colossae. We know from chapter 4 and verse 12 that Epaphras was their pastor, and Epaphras was a man who traveled years earlier to hear Paul preach in the city of Ephesus, and he was converted under Paul’s ministry.

Acts chapter 19 tells us that Paul entered the synagogue at Ephesus *“and for three months [he] spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about,”* listen to this, *“the kingdom of God.”* And after he was kicked out of the synagogue, he went to what was called the Hall of Tyrannus which was a public forum where he gave lectures and sermons and reasoned with the people again about the kingdom of God. And Epaphras had traveled to hear Paul preach and was converted. In fact, Paul brings that up in chapter 1, verse 7: *“Just as you learned it,”* speaking about the gospel, *“from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and he has made know to us your love in the Spirit.”* Years earlier when Epaphras was converted, he went back to the Lycus River Valley, and he planted the church in Colossae. Evidence also suggests that he may have helped plant the church in Laodicea and Hierapolis as well. But as we come to the end of the letter, we learn that as pastor of this Colossian congregation now for some years, Epaphras has left them, and he has traveled to Rome where Paul is in prison, and he’s visiting the apostle Paul. In fact, when this letter reaches the Christians in Colossae, the letter did not return with their pastor. It returned by a man by the name of Tychicus, who returns with the letter and carries the letter—chapter 4, verse 7 tells us that—to the Colossians. Epaphras stayed with Paul in prison to provide some sort of comfort for him in his time of trial.

Now, the letter that Paul writes indicates that overall Epaphras gave a good report to the apostle Paul concerning this church, but he also notified Paul of two primary problems they were facing. The first problem was a temptation of some church members to relapse into pagan immorality, and that is why in chapter 3 Paul speaks about sexual immorality in particular. These were gentiles who had converted to Christianity. They were used to going to the pagan temple. They were used to participating in the orgies and all sorts of sexual immorality, and they legitimately as true Christians, were falling back into that way of living. And so, Paul says in chapter 3, *“You need to put off the old clothes of the old man. Put on the new clothes of the new man which is Christ. You are a new creation in Christ. God views you as if you are one with Christ. Now you need to live like him. Stop sinning sexually. Stop sinning immorally.”* So there were real people in this church that had real issues and real temptations, and Paul addresses that in chapter 3. But the second problem that Epaphras reported to Paul was the presence of what theologians and commentators have referred to as the Colossian heresy. We read about it in chapter 2 and verse 8. Paul calls it a philosophy of empty deceit. Some heresies are not soul damning. Some are. Whatever the Colossian heresy was, it was something that so concerned Epaphras and so concerned the apostle Paul that he has to address it head on.

What was the Colossian heresy? Well, essentially the false teachers were telling the congregants that one of the ways they could overcome their temptation to sin was by focusing on themselves, focusing on maybe a strict diet in accordance with Old Testament law. *“Maybe you’re not holy enough because although you’ve been baptized, you’ve not been circumcised. Maybe you need to be circumcised. Maybe that will make you holy.”* And Paul writes to say that is legalism. Paul writes to say stop focusing on yourself and start focusing on the fact that you are in Christ, that Christ has changed you. For example, chapter 3 and verse 1:

*“If then you have been raised with Christ,”* Paul says, *“seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things*

*that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”*

But the false teachers had taken their focus off of Christ. Paul is saying this is a philosophy that doesn't work. It is full of empty deceit. It sounds good, but it is powerless. It was sort of a synchronistic mix of Jewish and pagan elements. In the second century, there was a heresy that was developed in the church referred to as Gnosticism. G-N-O-S-T-I-C-I-S-M, Gnosticism. And Gnosticism spoke about secret knowledge and secret wisdom and a secret philosophy. It spoke about mystery. Now, Paul is writing in the first century, but this must be some sort of incipient or early form of Gnosticism because Paul highjacks the gnostic vocabulary, and he says that in Christ is found knowledge, in Christ is found wisdom, in Christ is found the true mystery. And by the way, the Gnostics later taught that the body was evil. In fact, all matter was evil. Anything you touched with your human hands was evil, including your flesh, and your spirit was the only thing that would be saved. And there were Jewish legalists in the church. There were incipient Gnostic teachers in the church. There may have even been an Essene influence. The Essenes were a sect of the Jews that separated themselves. They were the purists. They were the fundamentalists of the day. They separated themselves completely from the world, and the Essenes taught that the body is corrupt, and the soul is imprisoned by the body. So, one of the wings of early Gnosticism and even later Gnosticism was a legalism that taught the body is the problem of evil, so you need to starve your body. You need to involve yourself in rigorous asceticism, extreme treatment of the body. But that's not it. This false theology/philosophy taught that the secret to conquer sin in an individual's life came through experientialism; that is, the seeing of visions. Notice with me in chapter 2 and verse 18, Paul says:

*“Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.”* I mean, Paul was dealing here with an experientialism that said, “I'm super-holy compared to you because I have seen visions.” But it wasn't just experientialism; it was also Judaistic ceremonialism. For example, chapter 2 and verse 11, Paul speaks about the fact that *“In him,”* that is, in Christ, *“also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.”* In other words, he's saying, “Your circumcision has already happened when you became a believer, when you were regenerated.” And so, he says in verse 16: *“Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink.”* This is Judaistic ceremonialism from the Old Testament. Or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath, Paul says these are shadows of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. In other words, these Jewish false teachers were going back to the Old Testament, and they were saying the way to be super-holy is to have a strict diet, to be physically circumcised, and to observe the Sabbath in an extremely strict manner. Stay away from the world, stay out of the world, stay in the peace and quiet of your own home. And Paul writes to say all of those Sabbaths, all of those food and drink laws, were shadows. The substance is Christ. You have Christ. You don't need all of those other things. You have the power of Christ to live a godly life.

So it was experientialism and ceremonialism. I already mentioned the asceticism. Notice again in verse 18: *“Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism.”* That is extreme treatment of the body, starving the body, beating the body, extreme fasting. Experientialism, ceremonialism,

asceticism, and also this mysticism. They were actually worshiping angels. Paul says, “*Let no one disqualify you,*” verse 18, “*insisting on asceticism and worship of angels.*” I mean, this church was in a lot of trouble. Paul says in verse 20: “*If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?*” False theologies, false philosophies. Paul says in verse 23: “*These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.*”

Now, you may be tempted to think this morning that the church has come a long way, and in one sense, indeed it has, but in another sense, would you agree with me this morning that the spirit of the age has always affected the people of God? That’s why the prophets in the Old Testament, like Jeremiah, called Israel back to walk the old paths in Jeremiah 6, and that is what Paul is doing here in the book of Colossians. He’s calling the church back to the old paths, to say that Christ is sufficient, that God’s Word is sufficient. But even in our own day, there are many in the church that are caught up in legalism. There are many who think that they are super-spiritual, and they follow all sorts of rules and regulations, and they damn you when you don’t follow their rules. There’s also the presence of experientialism. What about the charismatic movement and the influence of charismatics speaking about the Holy Spirit speaking to them and the Holy Spirit giving them visions, and God appearing before them, and them seeing the Holy Spirit move? There’s also pietism—this sort of inward focus on one’s personal devotion to God, a sort of inner mysticism with very little Scripture, very little gospel, and very little impact upon the world.

The church today is blind, it seems, to the fact that Christ has established His kingdom and He has called His people to influence the world to manifest the rule and the reign of Christ. For example, chapter 1, verse 12: “*Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.*” We are in the kingdom of His beloved Son. Verse 15:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

This is the sovereign supremacy of the rule and the reign of Christ in the first century. Christ is a cosmic King. Christ is not merely the King of your sweet little heart. Christ is meant to be the King of this church. Christ is meant to be the King in your home. Christ is meant to be the King in your neighborhood, and at your workplace. And however you spend your time with whoever you spend your time, you are to demonstrate the rule and the reign of Christ. Our fathers, the fathers of the western civilization, believed that. They believed that the kingdom of Christ had been inaugurated. And reformation and revival cannot happen unless we begin to believe that again. God has called us not to churchify the world; He’s called us to Christianize the world. He’s called us to go outside of the church. He’s called us to have a life that is separate from the church in a sense where we actually know unbelievers and interact with unbelievers and share with them the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. To Christianize the culture is for Christians to seek to bring everything under submission to Christ. You say, “Well, that’s hard to do.” Of course, it’s hard to do. “That’s a long

process.” Of course, it’s a long process. That’s why Jesus gave the parable of the leaven. It’s a leavening process. But do you remember the promise of hope that we read about in Acts chapter 17 where those hostile to the gospel said that the church was literally turning the world upside down? And if history has taught us anything, it’s taught us that this truth is evidenced just by the way the world began viewing time and history itself—two divisions of time, BC, before Christ, AD, *anno Domini*, “the year of our Lord.” All of time, as it were, has Christ at the center. Things have never been the same since Jesus of Nazareth got out of that tomb and walked and ascended to the right hand of God. Now, that’s my introduction. *[Laughter]*

And you say, “Well, what is the point of all of this?” Well, I’ll remind you, we are in the practical section of Colossians. This is very practical because in verses 2 through 6, the apostle Paul helps us see very practically how we can use our own time wisely in the times we live in, and he does so by providing three responsibilities of kingdom time management, three responsibilities of kingdom time management. So, here’s the question I will pose to you: How do we best use our time in this time for the advancement of the kingdom of God? How do we use in the best way our time in this time for the advancement of the kingdom of God?

Well, first, we have the responsibility to possess, number one, a prayerful watching. This is found in verses 2 through 4, and this is all we’re going to look at this morning. We’ll look at the rest later tonight, but a prayerful watching. In other words, your impact on the world in advancing the kingdom of God, the way in which you can most wisely use your time in this time comes like all things—through the power of prayer. I’m calling it a prayerful watching, and this prayerful watching has three facets to it. Number one, it has a certain perseverance about it. Notice in verse 2, Paul says, “*Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. Continue steadfastly in prayer.*” This persevering prayer is to be ongoing: “*continue steadfastly.*” It’s *proskartereō*. It means “to courageously be persistent,” or “to hold fast and to not let go.” Paul is calling upon the Colossians to be about the task of praying. Why? Well, because apparently the Colossians had stopped the earnest prayer that had earlier marked their church, and they were preoccupied with rules and regulations and religious discipline. They had lost the power of God using them because they had stopped praying. They had a focus on themselves instead of influencing the community, and so as they were wrapped up in all this self-discipline and trying to look holy, they essentially were useless. In fact, apparently Epaphras on his visit told Paul that they lacked prayer. Go with me to verse 12. Paul says, “*Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you.*” And let me tell you something about your pastor, he’s “*always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.*”

He was praying that they would be “*fully assured in all the will of God.*” What is the will of God? Well, that’s outlined in Colossians 1:28: “*Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*” And Paul even says, “*For this I toil, struggling with all [my] energy that [God] powerfully works within me.*” You see, these Colossian Christians had essentially become spiritual recluses. They were so focused on themselves, so focused on the reign of God in their hearts, that they separated themselves from the world. They had given up on the world. They had taken their eyes off of Christ and therefore prayer didn’t mark their lives, and they were becoming useless for the kingdom of God. And so, what does Paul say? He says, “You need to have a certain perseverance about your prayerful watching.

It needs to be ongoing. Don't stop. Continue steadfastly to pray.” Our prayers should be just like the persistent widow in Luke 18 where Jesus says, *“Will not God”* answer the prayers of *“his elect who cry to hm day and night?”* He will not delay long over them. God's delays are not always God's denials. God calls us to be persistent in our prayers. Romans 12:12: *“Be constant in prayer.”* First Thessalonians 5:17: *“Pray without ceasing.”* Prayer should be constant. It should be as normal to a Christian as breathing is. And if you look back at the early church, they were unfettered in their impact on the culture because their focus was simple. It was on the study of the Word of God and prayer. Acts 2:42: *“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”* And because they were committed to the Word of God they had, has Epaphras prayed for the Colossians, a full assurance in the will of God. They had firm conviction. They knew what to pray for, and this had an impact on the world around them.

The day of Pentecost, three thousand were converted, but they never stopped praying, *“praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”* In other words, they had an effect on the outside world because they were involved in prayer. They persevered in prayer. But the Colossian Christians were living with no conviction of the Word. They didn't have the full assurance of the will of God. They were caught up, as it were, in the distractions the false teachers placed on them, an incessant introspection, seeking mystical experiences and encounters with God, following rules and regulations according to the Old Testament that were shadows of Christ who was to come, and they were essentially ineffective any place except inside the church. They didn't know any unbelievers. They didn't have any impact on unbelievers. They weren't praying for the lost. They weren't praying for the community. And a prayerless church makes a big target for the devil. Without the study of the Word and prayer, there is no conviction, is there? There is no assurance of the will of God. There is no direction. There is no leading of the Spirit of God. And so, Paul says, *“There needs to be a certain perseverance that marks your prayerful watching if you want to have an impact upon unbelievers, and this perseverance must not only be ongoing, but it also must be optimistic.”*

Notice back in verse 2, Paul says, *“Being watchful in it with thanksgiving. Being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”* The sister passage to this is Ephesians 6 where Paul says, *“Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance.”* Just as Jesus urged the apostles to stay watchful and not fall asleep, so too Paul urges the church to be awakened, to be alert, to be aware of the important matters of the day. Persevering prayer is optimistic prayer. It's being fully assured in the will of God. It's knowing where God is leading you, where God is guiding you, what God has put in front of you. It's having this optimistic confidence that God wants to use His Church. God wants to use you to manifest the rule and the reign of Christ in your workplace. God wants to use you in a powerful way, but you're not praying. And Paul is saying this perseverance isn't just ongoing, it's optimistic, and notice, he quickly adds we are to pray watchfully. Notice this in verse 2: *“with thanksgiving.”* Why is that? Well, it's simple. Thanksgiving or gratitude is the thing that fuels our prayers. As we pray for God to use us, we are optimistically believe He will, being fully assured in the will of God that He will use us, but what motivates those prayers? It's thanksgiving. It's having a heart of gratitude for all that Christ is to us and all that He became for us.

Skip back to chapter 3 and verse 15. Paul says, *“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.”* And what does he say? *“And be thankful. Let the word*



*of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”* What does it say? *“With thankfulness in your hearts to God.”* And then he says in verse 17, *“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”* You see the theme? It’s thanksgiving. It’s our awareness of the gospel, the power of Christ to save us, the joy of being placed in the body of Christ, our submission to Him as our head, His rule in our hearts that causes us, to borrow the language of verse 17, in whatever we do, in word or deed, to do in the name of Jesus Christ. Giving thanks to manifest His power in the world. Thanksgiving is the catalyst for seeing how to shine forth the rule and the reign of Christ in whatever we do as we pray. So being watchful in prayer means we’re persistent in prayer, we’re optimistic in prayer. That means that we’re constantly awake and alive to the will of God to the need of the world around us. It means that we know the circumstances of our lives, and we know the circumstances of our neighbors’ lives, those that God has sovereignly placed us in relationship with, on how we can most effectively give them the gospel, both by lip and by life.

And think about this for a moment. Paul writes about thanksgiving in verse 2. He’s in prison, and yet Paul says, *“Be watchful in [prayer] with thanksgiving.”* Paul was so optimistic he just knew that the Lord was going to use him where he was in prison, and he’s telling the Colossians the Lord’s going to use you where you are, but you’ve got to be awake, you’ve got to be alive, you’ve got to be prayerfully watching. When we have a heart of gratitude because of the gospel, it helps us to be optimistic regarding the building of God’s kingdom in the world because we are reminded in Scripture of God’s powerful goal. What is His powerful goal? Well, I’ll give it to you. Hebrews 12: *“Therefore let us be grateful.”* Why? *“For receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.”* You are part of a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Your church may be shaken. Your life may be shaken, but the kingdom of God cannot be shaken. This is God’s powerful goal, and Satan cannot thwart it. But what about God’s powerful goodness? You’re familiar with Paul’s words to the Romans, the Christians in Rome: *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”* God’s powerful goodness. His powerful goal for us to be part of a kingdom that cannot be shaken. What about His powerful guidance? Isaiah 58:11: *“And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water.”* You see, the apostle Paul believed that, and so he urges these Colossian believers, *“You need to be about the task of prayerfully watching on how God can use you, and this is going to involve a certain perseverance in prayer.”*

Secondly, there’s a certain priority. Notice verse 3. Paul says, *“At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison.”* Paul’s speaking about a priority, and first of all this prioritizing of opportunities for himself and his associates. Later, he talks about Tychicus in verse 7 and Onesimus and other people, but Paul says at the same time, *“Pray also for us.”* You know, let me just stop and say this. Paul as a pastor and as an apostle was never too shy to ask the church to pray for him. In fact, he put it this way to the Corinthians. He says, *“You also must help us by [praying].”* He wasn’t too shy to ask for that. All preachers are reliant upon the prayers of the saints to fuel their ministry, but notice what Paul’s prayer request is regarding. He says, *“Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison.”* I mean, this is amazing. The very thing that got Paul in prison was preaching the gospel, right? And

he even says that: *“On account of which I am in prison.”* And yet he’s praying not for the prison doors to open for his release, but for gospel doors to open for the message of Christ to be released. He says there *“That God may open to us a door for the word.”* Pray that, he says. The word door there is obviously a metaphor for an opportunity to access ministry, for God to use Paul. Paul spoke about doors of ministry in 2 Corinthians 2, that God had opened a door for him and then shut it. He speaks in 1 Corinthians 16:9 how *“a wide door for effective work”* God had opened for him. In Revelation 3:8, Christ speaks to the church and says, *“I have set before you an open door,”* an opportunity to walk through. That’s what Paul’s asking for—an opportunity while he’s in prison for the gospel to be preached.

Now, Paul was under house arrest in this particular imprisonment, and so his freedom of movement was obviously restricted, but a door could be opened for others to come to him, and others did come to him. He wanted the Colossians to pray that more opportunities might come. If you go all the way back to the end of Paul’s third missionary journey, we read that he was arrested, and it was in this imprisonment that he writes Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, Philemon. We refer to these as the prison epistles, and throughout these epistles he speaks about how God has used him even behind bars, that God had opened all sorts of doors for the gospel. In fact, when Paul was originally arrested, that mob of Jews in Jerusalem, he stood before them, and he gave his gospel testimony. He said, *“Let me tell you what happened to me on the Damascus Road.”* He preached the gospel to the mob that wanted to kill him. That opportunity wouldn’t have been there unless he had been arrested. We read in Acts 24 that Paul is presented before Felix, the civil magistrate. And what does Paul do when he stands before Felix? He tells him about the resurrection. And then Paul goes and stands before Herod Agrippa, and there again, he tells Herod Agrippa about his testimony, conversion on the Damascus Road. And then—I love this—you can turn there with me to Philippians. Just go back one book. Paul speaks even about his impact upon the Roman soldiers, some of whom were chained to him.

He says in verse 12 of Philippians 1: *“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”* Imagine that. The gospel’s going to be advanced when the world is trying to silence the greatest apostle that has ever lived? Yeah, Paul says, verse 13: *“So that it has become known.”* What has become known? The gospel *“has become known throughout,”* watch this, *“the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.”* Paul says, *“I have told everyone about Christ—the prisoners, the soldiers chained to me, even those from Caesar’s own household,”* because we read later in Philippians chapter 4, Paul says in verse 22: *“All the saints greet you [Philippians], especially those of Caesar’s household.”* What! Paul was incarcerated by Rome in Rome, and yet he knew some of Caesar’s own household, perhaps family members, or perhaps those like the staff at the Whitehouse. They don’t live there, but they work there all the time. Maybe these were workers there. Paul had an impact on them. As a matter of fact, this is no slight thing. This was a major thing. If you turn with me to Acts 28, Paul gives a summary of these doors open to him. In other words, the prayers of the Colossians were answered. They listened to Paul and they were answered.

Acts 28:28, Paul says, *“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles.”* And he says there, *“He lived there,”* speaking about Paul, Luke does, *“He lived there two whole years at his own expense.”* This is his house arrest. *“And welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness*

*and without hindrance.*” Why was there no hindrance? Because Paul was in prayer about this, the Colossians were in prayer about this, the Philippians were in prayer about this, that God would open not the prison doors but that God would open doors for the gospel, for Paul, ministry opportunities. *“Proclaiming,”* notice that, *“the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Paul was proclaiming that Christ was King, wasn’t he? Notice back in verse 3 what he calls it. He says, *“Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ. The mystery of Christ.”* Back in chapter 1 and verse 27, Paul said to them, *“God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery.”* What is the mystery? *“Which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”* That was the mystery. Another aspect of that ministry was the fact, Paul says in verse 25 of chapter 1, he *“Became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to [him], to make the word of God fully known.”* That is, *“the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.”*

So what was concealed in the Old Testament and now revealed in the New Testament by Christ, that was not only the establishment of Christ’s kingdom, Christ ruling as King, but it also had to do with this. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. or he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.”* He’s talking about Jews and gentiles coming into the church, becoming one with Christ. That was the mystery. So every gentile Paul encountered he spoke about the mystery of the gospel, the joining of Jew and gentile together in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. This is so amazing to me because we read in Acts chapter 12 that the angel actually opened the prison doors for Peter and Paul’s release so that they could continue preaching the gospel, but here the prison doors were shut, and yet God opened other doors for Paul to proclaim the kingdom of God, effective doors where even those in Caesar’s own household were converting to Christ. I mean, the gospel spread like wildfire. This mystery that was hidden became known to the world. Paul says in Ephesians 3:

*Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. So I ask you [Paul says] not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.*

In other words, don’t worry about me, don’t worry about my suffering. Look at what God is doing in the world. When John Bunyan was arrested for preaching, the great Puritan, he promised that if they released him, he said, “If I am out of this prison today, I will preach the gospel again tomorrow, by the help of God.” They said, “No, you don’t understand, if you promise not to preach it, we’ll let you go.” He said, “No, you don’t understand. You release me, I promise I’m going to preach it again, again, and again.” Now, this is Paul prioritizing these sort of opportunities for himself, but by implication, he wanted the Colossians also to prioritize the opportunities that God could create for them. Notice again verse 3, the language is, *“At the same time pray also for us.”* Now, what is the implication of that? Well, it’s that Paul wanted the Colossians to pray for themselves. In other words, he’s saying, “Don’t just pray for us that God would open to us a door

for the Word, that God would open to us a means by which we can declare the mystery of Christ.” No, he says, “*At the same time pray also for us.*” In other words, pray for yourselves.

This prayerful watching is so fundamental and foundational to God using you in a way you never thought He could use you as you witness to unbelievers, but you have to be a person of prayer. It requires perseverance. It requires priority. It also requires, number three, a certain precision. Notice verse 4. Paul says, I want you to also pray “*that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.*” Paul wanted precision in oration. In other words, he didn’t just want the doors of opportunity opened. He desired that his words might actually get through the doorway and be imbedded in the hearts of the hearers by the power of the Holy Spirit. He says, “*That I may make it clear,*” make it as *phaneroō*. It literally means “manifest.” Paul wanted his oration, he wanted his voice, he wanted his words to be the right words for the right opportunity.

I’ve lived long enough to know this: when God’s message is proclaimed in a bad way, it can do more harm than good. Paul is saying, “Look, I want the right words to make the right impact.” “*...that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak.*” Not only precision in his oration, but precision in his obligation: “*...how I ought to speak.*” Do you see that? There was an oughtness to Paul’s ministry. What did he say in 1 Corinthians 9:16? “*For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for*” what? “*boasting. For necessity,*” Paul says, “*is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*” So, Paul is saying, “Look, I want you to pray that I would be precise with my words, that I would be so precise with this task, that I’m so compelled that I can’t keep my mouth shut.” That’s what Paul is saying, and how was Paul to speak? Well, first of all, he was to speak clearly, right? He says in verse 4, “*That I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak.*” But as we give the gospel, we must not only speak the gospel clearly, we must also speak it boldly. Paul told the Ephesians: “*[Pray] for me that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.*” It’s going to require stepping out of our comfort zone. We must speak clearly the gospel. We must speak the gospel boldly. We must also speak it graciously. Notice verse 6. Paul says, “*Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt.*” And we must always speak the gospel not only clearly, and boldly, and graciously, but also wisely. Back up in verse 5: “*Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.*” Paul puts together for us essentially what it means to be an effective witness for Christ, and he’s not just talking about what we say. He’s also talking about how we live, which we’ll get to that later tonight.

John MacArthur points out three kinds of popular evangelism that violates Paul’s instructions as to how we ought to declare the gospel. First is what he calls experience-driven evangelism. You know what experience-driven evangelism is? It’s a person telling someone their feelings. It’s a person telling someone their testimony instead of doctrinal truth, and it causes many to have an emotional response instead of a doctrinal response—false believers, because everything’s about the emotions, the experience, experience-driven evangelism. Secondly, MacArthur refers to a faulty sort of evangelism as ego-centered evangelism. This is sort of the self-centered gospel, offering comfort of life, happiness, freedom to be the best you, and found in slogans like, “God loves you and has a great plan for your life.” Statements that are meaningless apart from the gospel. I was watching a false teacher on TV yesterday. Those guys could sell ice to eskimos, and the fact is they have a spiritual gift, but it’s not a spiritual gift from heaven; it’s a spiritual gift from hell. It’s ego-centered evangelism. Have you noticed that? All the personalities of the health, wealth,

prosperity gospel, it’s all about them. It’s all about their clothing, it’s all about who they are, it’s all about their spirituality, their experiences, their visions, how God spoke to them. That’s not evangelism; that’s satanic.

Then MacArthur says there is expedience evangelism. That’s use of manipulation, high-pressure tactics. It’s like when I was a kid. You’d sing forty-five verses as “Just as I Am” every single Sunday. Paul is asking the church, and this is what you really need to see this morning, that as a congregation you have a responsibility to be prayerfully watchful about opportunities in your own context, in your own church, concerning your own pastor. He is a man of clay. He is a man of dust. He is a man of sin. And if it isn’t for the grace of God, all preachers would fail in the ministry. Paul is saying it begins with the preaching of the Word, something that is so devalued today in the church, so undermined. Everything else is more important than preaching. The music is more important. The announcements are more important. Everything’s more important. Paul is saying, “Look, you must pray that God would open doors for me, that God would open doors for your pastor, Epaphras, that God would open gospel ministry doors and that these men would be faithful to walk through them.” What did Paul tell Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:5? He said, “*Do the work of...*” What? “*Do the work of an evangelist.*” You know, that sort of responsibility I wear on my shoulders every day of my life.

Some of you remember a couple of years ago there was a little girl in our community that was murdered by one of her classmates. And Jeff and I actually met the night that all this broke out, and we were praying for the church, and I remember praying that the Lord would send someone to this family to minister the gospel to them. I didn’t know the family. Next morning, I get up and my phone rings, and it’s the funeral home. And they said, “Pastor Smith, would you be willing to preach the funeral of this little girl?” I said, “Well, that’s what I prayed last night, so how can I pray and then not walk through that door?” And so, I did.

There’s all sorts of opportunities the Lord opens for His people, particularly pastors that He providentially opens doors into the community in unique ways. Paul spoke about this all the time. In Acts 16, he said that he didn’t enter Bithynia because God had closed the door, but where did he go? He went to Macedonia. I’m glad he went to Macedonia. I’m glad he went to Europe. It was in Europe where the Reformation was, right? That’s where all my ancestors were. That’s why I have the gospel. God shut one door; He opened another door. Paul’s not trying to read tea leaves. He’s just asking the Colossians that they would pray for him that God would open any and every door and that Paul would be faithful to walk through those doors. “*Do the work of an evangelist,*” Timothy. “*Do the work of an evangelist.*” What does that require? It requires you being outside of the four walls of the church. That’s what it requires.

A visitor one time went to Metropolitan Tabernacle in London where Spurgeon was the pastor, and this visitor was actually shown the building by Spurgeon himself. Spurgeon’s walking him through, and he said to the man, “Would you like to see the powerhouse of my ministry?” The man said, “Sure,” so Spurgeon took him down these narrow steps down to the basement. He opened a door and he pointed in the room, and he said, “This is where we get our power. While I am upstairs preaching the Word of God, there are hundreds of people in this room praying that the gospel might have an impact on the hearers.” What more needs to be said about Spurgeon’s ministry and how the Lord blessed it? And let me be quick to remind you, Spurgeon was no

spiritual recluse. His people were not hermits trying to escape the world. They established a seminary. They established an orphanage. People knew Spurgeon in the community. As a matter of fact, Spurgeon was known for smoking cigars and without even asking him, he was walking by a store one day, and they had a picture of Spurgeon promoting cigars, saying: “These are the cigars Spurgeon smokes.”

What kind of impact can God have through this church because of prayer? I hope this morning you don’t think prayer is too antiquated. I hope this morning that you don’t think prayer is just something of the past. Prayer is the very first thing Paul says we have a responsibility to engage in. If we want to have an impact at seeing the advancement of the kingdom of God in our own sphere, our own context, our own circumstances, our own time, how will we best use our time? Well, I can think of no better way than to pray. That’s how we use our time.

Father, we thank You for these Scriptures, the powerful truths embedded in the Scriptures, Lord, which remind us of our duties, our responsibilities. Lord, You have called us to be salt and light in the world, and we’re going to talk a little bit more about that tonight from the remainder of our text, but O God, we do pray that You would help us. Help us, dear God, to have a sense of urgency. Create in our hearts a sense of love for the lost, and pray for our church that You might use us, that You might use the people within it, all the gifts that You have given Your people. Father, we pray for the churches even in our community, churches that are preaching the true gospel. We pray that their churches would have an impact, that their people would have an impact in this community. We want to see revival and reformation, and we know that comes only through prayer, the preaching of the gospel. There are so many doors, and we pray that You would open those doors, that You would see fit sovereignly for us to walk through. We will praise You and glorify You for that, for we know that You will do a good thing in and among us. We pray and ask all of these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.