

Sunday, November 14, 2021

Devoted to Prayer

(Message 11; Series: *Extreme Discipleship: Living into our Mission*)
(Colossians 4:2-6)

Scripture

² Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. ³ And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. ⁴ Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. ⁵ Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. ⁶ Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (Colossians 4:2-6)

Message

There is a famous picture from the 1960's of President John F. Kennedy sitting at the Resolute desk in the Oval Office taken in 1963. There is nothing unusual about that. Every president has had countless photographs taken at the desk which was made from oak timbers taken from the British Arctic exploration ship Resolute and given to Queen Victoria in 1880.

The photograph is all the more poignant because Kennedy would be assassinated within weeks of the picture being taken while on a trip to Dallas. The part of the picture that draws at our heart strings is the inclusion of the president's young son, John Jr. who had crawled into the footwell and is peering through the opened "secret" panel while his father works. John Jr. is the only child born to a sitting president in the last one hundred and forty years. **(Pic)**

The photograph underscores the tragically short time John Jr. had with his father. John F. Kennedy was assassinated just three days before John Jr.'s third birthday. It captures a fleeting moment of loving intimacy and access that is not just the privilege of presidential offspring. We cherish those memories in our own families. And those who follow Jesus have a similar access to their Father and to His throne room.

Paul is now drawing his letter to a close. We're in the fourth and final chapter. He has led the Colossian Church on a breath taking, cosmic voyage of **extreme discipleship** into the *missio dei*, the **mission** of God, covering everything from Christ's eternal identity and global mission to the very practical need for kindness and grace in all our relationships.

Final words are important words – sometimes considered the most important words. We listen to them carefully; we cherish them. In the verses we read today, Paul underscores the fellowship, the *koinonia*, the **intimacy** we have with Christ and one another and reminds us – we're here to **invite** the **world** to be part of the family, to experience the intimacy we have with the Father and the Son, to sit with us at the Table, and to join us on Christ's mission. It is wonderful to sit together under the teaching of God's Word and experience the transformation of Christ's Spirit, but we can never forget, we are here for them. We are called to **serve**. It requires **staying close** to the Father.

Again, Paul breaks things down nicely for us into three points: the priority of prayer, praying for proclaimers, and proclaiming the Gospel.

The Priority of Prayer (4:2)

Paul opened this letter saying he prayed for his brothers and sisters in Colossae: he was thankful for their faith (**1:3-8**) and he had been interceding for their spiritual growth and maturity (**1:9-14**). Now at the end, he returns to prayer, not primarily to give his letter symmetry, but to remind his readers of the privilege of prayer. Since we can't see or touch the Father, the Catechism reminds us that **prayer** is (the) primary way we express our gratitude (**Q/A 116**). In prayer, we can speak directly to God and trust he hears both our gratitude and our groans (**Romans 8:26-27**). Prayer is an extra-ordinary opportunity to sit at the feet of Jesus in throne room of the universe.

So Paul urges the Colossians to "*devote yourselves to prayer being watchful and thankful*" (**4:2**). It is a straightforward statement. Sadly, it is an invitation many? most? believers have not fully embraced. We know it was one of the four marks and essential building blocks of the early church along with the apostles teaching, fellowship and the breaking of bread (cf. **Acts 2:42**).

But prayer is **hard work**. It is the work of discipleship; it is a spiritual discipline. In **1:29**, Paul noted how he **strenuously contended** (in prayer) for the Church and Kingdom with all the energy Christ so powerfully worked in him. This is the language of sweat and toil. It is "work" that often finds its place low on our list of priorities.

People generally have sufficient time for what they think is important. If we want to get to the football game, we're willing to give up an entire Saturday; if

we want a garden, we put in the time tilling, planting, weeding, and harvesting; if we want to go hunting, it takes precedence over whatever other responsibilities are on our calendar. We **make time**. If we really want to spend time with God, if we really wanted to express our gratitude, if we were really committed to being “devoted,” we would find the time. Very little of value occurs in life without some **effort**, without some prioritizing, without some **sacrificing** of other things we might also enjoy. Paul says this is of paramount importance.

But again, notice carefully, Paul is not laying down the law here. There isn't a list of rules or regulations by which we can measure commitment. Paul knows prayerfulness can't be legislated; it can only be a response of God's grace growing in our life. Disciples of Jesus long to spend **time** with God because of what God has done for them. The word “**devote**” Paul uses here suggests a sincere passion and deliberate purpose – which, periodically are at odds with each other. Our prayer life often gets interrupted by things we are passionate about and/or are deeply committed to.

Some get up early for prayer because there are fewer distractions; some find evenings more conducive for an uninterrupted prayer time. What matters, Paul says, is that we are devoted to spending time in prayer – it must be a regular priority in our day and in our spiritual life. It must be a priority in our faith communities. Prayers change lives for eternity. Walter Wink, a New Testament theologian, says, “History belongs to the intercessors.”

Paul urges us to “**be watchful**.” Jesus called on his disciples to “*keep watch*” for his return because we don't know when it will come (**Matthew 25:13**). Jesus further challenged his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane to “*watch and pray*” so we will not fall into temptation (**Matthew 26:41**). We are to make matters of the world, matters of the Church and our faith community, and matters of our heart part of our prayer. The invitation here underscores a sense of urgency and significance to our praying.

Paul also urges us to “**be thankful**.” Paul has underscored thankfulness consistently throughout his letter to Colossae. Grace, which Paul has talked about at length, and gratitude are “**siblings**” - they have the same roots in English and in the Greek. This should come as no surprise. How can a recipient of divine grace not be profoundly grateful? They can't. That means an “ungrateful Christian” is an oxymoron. A **grateful** believer is a **mature** believer. Ask a follower of Jesus how grateful they are, and you'll discover their spiritual maturity.

In **Colossians 4:3**, Paul asks that we pray for the spread of the **Gospel** message; that we ask God to open doors (opportunities) to present the Good News, that we ask God to prepare the hearts of those who will hear the

message so they will be receptive. Campus Crusade for Christ, now just known as Cru, has long said, *“Before you talk to people about God, talk to God about people.”*

Every follower of Jesus should have a prayer list of three to five (or more) people they are actively, i.e., daily, praying will come to Jesus. We should be praying for people we care about – family, extended family, neighbors, co-workers, and others. We need to lift them before the throne daily and ask God to draw them to himself.

Do you want the people you care about to know Christ, to become part of his family, to participate in the “inheritance” Paul talks about? It is very important that we are talking to God about them. God, through Christ’s Spirit, is the only one who can convict them, convert them, and change their life. God alone is sovereign. So if you really care about someone’s eternity, start on your knees.

Praying for Preachers (4:3b-4)

In the first chapter of Colossians, Paul noted his “partnership” with the Colossian believers by sharing what he was praying for them. Now he asks them to pray for him, for his ministry, and for his mission. Our intercessory prayers reveal a great deal about our priorities. Paul makes a surprising comment and a specific request.

Paul notes that he is in prison. Learning a well-respected pastor has been incarcerated several times would no doubt raise considerable questions in people’s minds. (I assume if Covenant’s search team noticed several prison stints on an applicant’s resume, the applicant would go to the bottom of the pile - if not into the circular file). Surely this is some mistake? Paul? Why would an ambassador of Christ be in jail? What did he do that put him in prison – obviously it must have been something terrible. People don’t just get thrown into prison for no reason, right? And what does that mean for us?

We know from the rest of the New Testament that Paul’s **incarceration** and **suffering** were the result of his politically incorrect ministry of preaching Christ. Proclaiming Christ was **Lord** put Paul in direct conflict with Caesar’s claim to be **lord**. Proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus boldly and clearly can be **hazardous** to one’s health. Paul is “in chains” as he writes this letter - but he strategically says nothing about it until the fourth chapter and then he only mentions it as a prayer request. And even then, not what he asks for.

If I was imprisoned, my request would be, “Pray that I get out of jail, a.s.a.p.” Paul asks that we pray that *“God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ” (4:3)*.

Maybe that is Paul’s way of asking for prayers that his cell door would suddenly spring open. That happened to Peter when he was in prison (**Acts**

12:5-10). It happened to Paul and Silas when they were in prison in Philippi (**Acts 16:25-28**). God did it once. God did it twice. How about a third time! God can...he is sovereign.

But that doesn't seem to be Paul's top priority. His focus seems to be on **proclaiming Jesus** – either from outside the prison walls or from inside the walls. His location doesn't seem to matter; what matters is that the world must know about Jesus, about his crucifixion and resurrection, about the Good News that is available to people, sinners, who are far from God.

But Paul knows his words alone are ineffective and feeble without the empowering work of God's Spirit. Only **God** can bring the message to life in the hearts of people in ways that transform their lives. That is why prayer is so urgent and essential in evangelism, in the spread of the Gospel, in harvesting the lost and in bringing in the Kingdom.

Paul also wants prayers that the message will be proclaimed clearly. (In **Ephesians 6:19-20**, Paul requests prayer that the message will be preached boldly and fearlessly). Paul isn't just talking about his clear delivery; he is asking that the message may be clearly received.

There are a lot of pastors, preachers, who continue to proclaim the Gospel and, yet see **few results** for their efforts. People are not coming to Jesus; believers are not growing in their faith; their church is not growing. And all too commonly, the pastor is blamed. That is unfortunate, because according to Paul here, some (much?) of the responsibility lies with the congregation and their **lack of intercession**.

If you want your pastor to be a better preacher, pray for your pastor. If you want your pastor to be more effective, pray for your pastor. A preacher proclaims the power of God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit through the power of our prayers. Preaching is not just an **individual** pastor's responsibility; it is the **corporate** responsibility of the whole body of Christ. We should be praying for our pastors when they preach the gospel. We are in this together.

The Search Team has been encouraging us to pray for our next pastor; that is, they're specifically asking us to pray about getting our next pastor. We should all be doing that. But Paul is talking about the next step: when we get our next pastor, Paul reminds us to continue to pray for our pastor – especially when the pastor is preaching the Gospel.

It is important for us to pray for the people who are serving and proclaiming the message of Jesus' Christ, whoever they are and wherever they are.

Proclaiming Grace (4:5-6)

In **Colossians 4:3**, Paul defines the “**message**” that is to be proclaimed as “*the mystery of Christ*” (a reference back to **1:27** and **2:1-4**). When we considered those earlier texts, we noted that what God had kept secret for generations – His Word and Wisdom - was now on full, public display in Jesus. The mystery of Christ was “*Christ in me the hope of glory.*”

Paul asks for prayers to proclaim the Gospel clearly. That is, to proclaim it so the listener can understand it. As followers of Jesus, our mission is to “make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything [Jesus] commanded.” We need to proclaim it **clearly, simply, accurately, and **powerfully**.**

We use a lot of “churchese” in our “inhouse” conversations. But when we’re talking with “outsiders” they don’t know what we mean when we talk about “being born again,” “justification,” “vicarious atonement,” or “the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ on the cross.” They are all great words – but they don’t communicate well with people who don’t understand them. Too often believers, especially in North America, have spent all their time among believers so they no longer know how to talk with the world.

Someone once said to a pastor friend, “I just don’t like the four spiritual laws.” He replied, “When I go fishing, I don’t like worms either. But the worms are for the fish, not for me...”

If our mission is to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ to a lost world, we need to communicate it well. The Gospel is a message that grabs people’s hearts because it is **true** and because God’s **Spirit** is at **work** in people’s hearts and lives.

From the **message, Paul turns his attention to the **messenger**: “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders, make the most of every opportunity” (4:5)**

Scripture says the Gospel will appeal to some and others will see it as foolishness. That is the nature of the Gospel. But all too often, people push the message of Christ **aside** because of the messenger. Some Christians can be obnoxious, overbearing, and unrelenting. Christians can be hypocritical, lack integrity, be negative and uncaring. Sometimes the messenger “proclaims” the message of grace with so little grace that it falls on deaf ears.

A young man, who came to Christ through his girlfriend, told their pastor, “*First I fell in love with her and then I fell in love with Christ.*” That is what a good messenger is supposed to do – model the message. As Christian messengers, the world needs to “*fall in love with us*” - with our compassion,

our gentleness, and our graciousness. Then they will listen to what we have to say and **fall in love** with Jesus – because they’ve seen him in us. We need to be **sensitive** to the circumstances and concerns of those we are seeking to reach. The message is in the **hands** of the messenger.

Paul concludes this section saying, *“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (4:6).*

The word “conversation” is a great word. Conversations, until recently, were primarily in person, face to face. They happen at work, over the backyard fence or hedge, or while standing in line at the store. Paul didn’t envision a major marketing campaign using billboards, television advertising, sky writing or slick evangelism programs. Paul isn’t promoting that everyone preaches on their street corner. The word Paul uses is “conversation.” Conversation implies a dialogue and mutual interest. Paul envisioned a believer sharing the Good News with their family, friends and neighbors through **everyday conversations**, or as one teacher put it, one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

We need to get as **comfortable** talking about Jesus as we are our family, our job, or our favorite sports team.

“As we go into all the world to preach the Gospel” (Mark 16:15, cf. Matthew 28:19f), Paul reminds us to “make the most of every opportunity.” The Greek is best translated, *“As you are going...”* That is, in your business, on the golf course, among your neighbors, interacting with a waiter or waitress, in the classroom, wherever you are, as you go, preach, teach, share, and converse about the gospel. In other words, be constantly looking for the opportunities to talk about Jesus.

The Greek here literally means, *“to buy back the time.”* That means, *“watch and don’t duck.”* People come to Jesus when God provides an opportunity, and we see it, and don’t duck our responsibility. Some churches have well-developed and funded evangelism programs. But if we would just follow Paul’s encouragement, we wouldn’t need one. All that is needed is believers who watch and **don’t duck**, that is, **believers** who are **faithful**.

D.L. Moody told of a wealthy man who loved Christ but who struggled to speak clearly about Him. Each night that Moody was in town preaching, this man would hire a horse drawn cab and have the driver take him to Moody’s meetings. Once there, he would pay the driver for two hours and then say to him, “I have now paid you. You go in and listen to Mr. Moody while I stay out here and watch the horses. “

The Gospel has never proclaimed that it didn’t cost the believer something. Throughout Church history, many people have paid the ultimate price so that other people could hear the truth of the Gospel. It is free to the listener. The

gospel is free, you don't have to earn it. But no one ever came to know Christ for free. It cost God his son. And proclaiming the Gospel will cost us **something** too. **Always** has. You want your family, friends, and neighbors to know Christ? Do you want it enough to give of your time, your money, your comfort level, maybe even your life? It will cost us to reach them.

In making the most of every opportunity, Paul encourages our conversations to always be **full of grace**. We need to be sensitive to where people are. When your friend says, "*Are you religious?*" "*Yes, I am religious. I go to church every Sunday. It makes a big difference in my life. Someday I'd like to tell you about it.*"

When your neighbor says, "*I called you the other day and you weren't home. Where were you?*" You can tell them you were at worship or a church meeting (if you were) and then tell them God is really important in your life.

Watch and don't duck. See **how God** opens the door and when **God** opens a door for you, **walk** through it. We need to make sure our conversations about grace are done graciously. The message must be intrinsically contained in the presentation.

We also need, Paul says, to "season our conversation with salt." The phrase, "*seasoned with salt*" seems to be an old Jewish idiom for "keeping things interesting." That is the key; a life changing message shouldn't be **boring**, or **banal**, or predictable. We should be sharing it from our heart, with passion, excitement, and joy. Our body language needs to match our words. We are talking about Jesus as Lord.

Sadly, some Gospel presentations lack **content**. The Gospel is portrayed as sort of a faith in faith or a faith in a nebulous God who loves everybody. You just need to love God; he'll love you back; life will be good. That is not the Gospel. The Gospel is revealed propositional truth. If we take the cross out of the Gospel, it is no longer Gospel. If you take sin out of the Gospel, it is no longer the Good News. If you take commitment out of the Gospel, it is no longer Gospel. If we take grace out of the Gospel, it is no longer Gospel. We are not called to change the Gospel, just present it. The presentation may change, but the Gospel is unchanging propositional truth.

Proclaiming a life transforming Gospel will lead to some life transforming questions. We must take those questions seriously. We need to be ready for anything which is what is behind Paul's head's up for believers to "*know how to answer everyone.*" Sometimes a question may catch us a bit off guard. That's okay. Then we need to discover the answer. And that brings us back to where we started...on our **knees** at the **feet** of our **Father**...

Let us stand for closing prayer.

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