

Colossians 4:2-6 – Christ our Message

The vital importance of prayer

The Apostle Paul has been encouraging the Christians at Colossae to go on following Christ wholeheartedly and single-mindedly. Don't let anything distract you or turn you away from him.

Now he concludes his instructions by saying, if you would live the Christian life, and live it in a way that will count for eternity then, "Devote yourselves to prayer". And this is not merely Paul's advice to others, it reflects his own personal practice. We read in Colossians 1:9a

Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you.

And it exemplified by Epaphras, a Christian from Colossae who is with Paul and praying for the folks back home. Paul writes of him:

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. (Colossians 4:12)

Paul viewed prayer as a vitally important element of his own ministry, and he wanted the Colossian Christians to have the same conviction.

The word, "devote" suggests something done habitually and with perseverance. Someone might be asked, "What do you do with yourself now that you are retired?" "Oh," he might reply "I devote myself to golf" meaning that he is often, perhaps daily, to be found on the golf course, practicing his swings and putting, playing the holes, seeking to perfect his game. To devote oneself to something is to give time and attention to it, to be persistent in it and to not give up on it.

In Acts 2:42 we read that the first disciples "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." They were eager to learn how to live the life of a disciple of Christ and they met together daily to do so. Their 'devotion' was evidence of their appetite for these activities – they viewed them as vital to their Christian lives.

Paul urges the Colossian Christians – and he urges us – to devote ourselves to prayer: to have an appetite for prayer; to be found often in prayer. Prayer needs to become a habitual and natural part of our lives.

And we are to be "watchful" in prayer, says Paul.

"Watch" is a military term. It suggests someone on watch, perhaps a watchman on a city wall, looking out for any threats or first signs of an attack. We need to be aware that we live in a war zone. There are forces that oppose Christ and the advance of his kingdom – that will seek to wreck God's work in our lives.

The apostle Peter reminds us, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8). Satan is alert and active, seeking always to trip us up and to destroy our testimony – through resentments, pride, greed, through what we watch on the TV or browse on the internet... Watch over your own life; watch carefully; watch and pray.

Remember Jesus' words to his disciple in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41).

We need to recognise our own frailty: “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” We cannot live as soldiers of Christ in our own power; we need the power of his Spirit within. So we must watch for threats and pray for the help and strength we need to fight against them.

And be watchful of one another – praying for and encouraging one another in the Christian life.

Be watchful in prayer, says Paul, but also be thankful. This has been a continual theme in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. For instance, Paul writes in Colossians 2:6-7 (see also 3:15)

Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness

Isn’t that a wonderfully expressive term? – be “overflowing with thankfulness”, as if you have within you more thankfulness than you can contain. Thankfulness needs to occupy a prominent place in our prayers, recalling all God has done for us in Christ.

In a few minutes we will be celebrating Communion together, or, as it is sometimes known, the Eucharist. The term “Eucharist” is taken from the Greek verb meaning “to give thanks” (εὐχαριστέω). Here we give thanks for the death of Jesus Christ for us and for his risen power, the power by which we live. This thanksgiving is to characterise our prayers and is to overflow from our lives.

“And pray for us too...”

Paul urges the Colossian Christians to pray not only for themselves but also for him.

Paul, you remember, is writing to the Colossians from Prison, uncertain whether he will live or die. If you were in that situation, what might you ask others to pray for you? Perhaps for an open door to our cell?

Not so Paul. Paul wants them to pray

That God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

He wants an open door for the message he has been proclaiming, that it might not be shut in or silenced. What is that message?

Paul describes it as “the mystery of Christ”. This is not because it is something vague and unknown. On the contrary it is something that is now revealed and made clear. Listen to how he describes this “mystery” in Colossians 1:26-27. He says that he preaches,

The mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory

This was a “mystery” because it was not made plain until Christ came. But now God has revealed his purpose to embrace the whole world in Christ. This is the good news that Paul preaches – good news for all. This message may have got Paul in trouble and thrown into prison (see Acts 24:5-7), but he wants to go on proclaiming it clearly – to proclaim that Christ is for us, with us and in us. Christ in us is the hope of glory – the glory that shall fill and transform this world at Christ’s return.

What an extraordinary and remarkable man Paul is! He will not allow anything to shut him up. But Paul wants this same passion to shape the life and activity of the Christians in Colossae – and for it to shape our lives and our activity.

Verses 5-6

Paul urges the Colossian Christians:

Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

“Be wise in the way you act...” Our Christian testimony can easily be undermined by the way we live. We need to be those whose lives are a show-and-tell for the gospel, proclaiming the presence and risen power of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul has told the Colossians,

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience... (Colossians 1:9-11)

To live wisely and well in this world we need be filled with the Spirit of God, filled with the Spirit of Christ. Just as this was Paul’s prayer for the Colossians, so we need to make it a continual part of our prayer for ourselves and for one another.

“Make the most of every opportunity”, says Paul, redeem the time, don’t waste it.

How often do we think afterwards of what we might have said in a particular situation? This need not be a missed opportunity, filling us with regrets. Rather, every such occasion is a learning opportunity that we may learn how to respond well in a similar situation in the future.

Above all, we need to learn from the Lord Jesus. Read the Gospels and see how he made use of every opportunity, with all manner of people, showing and teaching them of the love and concern of his heavenly Father. Jesus made use of every opportunity. Pray that his Spirit make us more like him.

“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt”: Full of grace means that Christians should not be given to aggressive argument – you won’t win people that way. Rather, our speech should be full of winsome and winning words, words that commend Christ to others.

“Seasoned with salt”: leaving something of the savour of Christ with those who hear us and opposing the corrupting influences of this world. One old commentator puts it quaintly like this:

“Christian speech is not to be insipid, far less to be corrupt, but it is to possess that hallowed pungency which shall excite interest in the enquirer, and that preservative flavour which may influence for good the mind and heart of those who ... put questions to [us].” (John Eadie)

What a lovely phrase – our speech should have a “hallowed pungency”.

Paul concludes with the words, “know how to answer everyone”. It’s a very big call. It does not mean that we pretend to have the answers to everyone’s questions – we do not – but we

do need always to be ready to point people to Christ: he is the one who answers the deepest needs of our troubled world.

So to Conclude

Commenting on this passage, James Dunn writes, "Here ... was a church ... expected to hold its own in the social setting of marketplace, baths, and meal table and to win attention by the attractiveness of its life and speech"

How do we measure up in making Christ known – making God's love and grace known through the message of our lips and of our lives?

Here I have to confess to what I find to be one of the greatest challenges for me as a preacher. I find it comparatively easy to stand up here and preach to you about the wonderful love of God in the Lord Jesus Christ and to seek to warm your hearts as Christian men and women with the truths of the gospel. But how much more difficult to tell the world of Christ – family, neighbours and people I meet with socially. I need your prayers. We need to pray for one another.

God gave Jeremiah a word of judgment to proclaim to the Israelites. It got him into a lot of trouble and he would dearly have liked to keep his mouth shut but, he confesses,

If I say, 'I will not mention his word
or speak any more in his name,'
his word is in my heart like a fire,
a fire shut up in my bones.
I am weary of holding it in;
indeed, I cannot. (Jeremiah 20:9)

We have a far more attractive message to proclaim: not one of judgment but of the love of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. That message needs to be a fire in our bones that will not allow us to hold it in. It needs to break out from us and set the world ablaze with the good news of God's love and of his transforming power in the Lord Jesus.

Let's make this our devoted prayer for each other and for ourselves.

Peter Misselbrook, 20/11/2016, Christ Church Downend