

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

Minister Rev Ken McIntosh 13th June 2021

Colossians 4:2-6 Acting wisely towards the outsider.

In our passage this morning, Paul is reminding the Colossians about their responsibility to make Christ known to a lost world. The Christian is to be *salt* in the moral decay of society and *light* in the world's spiritual darkness. We are to live lives that point others to Jesus Christ. And these verses today bring to an end a section in the letter that began in 3:12 where Paul is reminding the church how their new life in Christ should affect all other relationships. This includes our relationships within the church of God (3:12-17), relationships within the home (3:18-21) and relationships within the work place (3:22-4:1). Our relationship with Jesus Christ should affect all other relationships in life – for the better. [Read 3:17.](#)

And now in these verses this morning the apostle Paul is reminding the believers how they are to relate to those who do not yet know Christ as Lord and Saviour. Reading between the lines, the trouble within the church at Colosse caused by the strange new teaching had made the church inward looking. And all trouble tends to do that. Whether it's trouble within our own life or trouble within the church - such things tend to make us forget our responsibility to make the gospel of Jesus Christ known to a lost world. We get introspective and self-absorbed with our problem. And we forget God's calling to be ambassadors for Christ. But in these verses today Paul is reminding us of that responsibility.

So first he calls us to **disciplined prayer** (2). [Read verse 2.](#) Another translation puts it, "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving". In many ways our relationship with 'outsiders' and our effectiveness as witnesses begins with prayer. Probably, when God established the church in Colosse through Epaphras, the believers there delighted to come together in prayer. They knew the Lord Jesus as their Saviour and God as their Father. But it would seem that the church had now lapsed in their praying. Again, this was probably caused by the new teaching that had crept in and the subsequent divisions within the fellowship.

But Paul calls the church back to prayer. [Read verse 2 again.](#) A word to us? I mean, how would you describe your prayer life last week? It's interesting that in a few verses time, Paul will tell the church in Colosse of Epaphras' praying for them. [Read 4:12, 13.](#) The gospel had first come to Colosse and the neighbouring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis through Epaphras. He was a member of the Colossian church. And he was with Paul in Rome at that time. But how was Epaphras spending his time? Paul tells us he was working hard wrestling for the church in prayer. Epaphras knew that things were not well within the church at Colosse. Eyes had been taken of the Lord Jesus. And so this is a picture of their founder devoting himself, literally *agonising* for them in prayer.

And now Paul is calling them to *devote themselves to prayer*. It's a lifestyle isn't it. The phrase reminds us of that description of the early church, in the days when the Lord was pleased to add so many to their number. And Dr Luke tells us how the church was devoted to four things. [Read Acts 2:42-47.](#) It's a lovely description of the early church. And at the centre of their life together was prayer.

But the new teaching that had gained ground in Colosse had taken the edge off the church's prayer life. And Paul is calling them back to it. [Read verse 2 again.](#) The word *watchful* reminds us of the Lord Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. That night especially, the Lord was watchful in prayer. He was aware of the situation. He knew what was at stake. Do we? The word describes the alertness of any soldier in a

battle. He or she is spiritually watchful. There is danger all around. But there is also great opportunity. “Watch and pray” Jesus told his disciples.

Then there is *thankfulness* in prayer. We have seen how Christian thankfulness is a little theme in this letter. The troubles within the church caused by the new teaching had made the Colossians forget to be thankful. They have forgotten the gospel – to some extent. But Paul calls them back to thankfulness. [Read 3:15-17](#). And now this - [read 4:2](#). Yes, it’s a call to be thankful for God’s blessings in general. But it’s particularly a call to remember the gospel and to be thankful for that.

Remember what God has done for you. Remember his Son who was sent to die for you on a cross. Remember how God drew you to himself and revealed the way of salvation to you. Remember all the ways he has kept you. Remember the new life, the eternal life you have in his Son. You have been delivered from darkness and brought into the kingdom of light. Your life is now hidden with Christ in God. He is your life and he will return for you. Be thankful. Are we?

How could you put this verse into practice this week? What steps could you take to obey this verse of the Bible? [Read verse 2](#). The need for **disciplined prayer**. Then secondly the need to support **gospel proclamation** (3, 4). [Read verses 3, 4](#). Are the Christians in Colosse inward looking and absorbed with their own problems? Have they forgotten their responsibility to be involved in ‘world mission’ – or at least the apostle Paul’s proclamation of the gospel?

Paul asks them to pray for him in his task of proclaiming Christ. [Read verses 3](#). Paul always does this – he asks the churches for their prayers. We might describe him as a *spiritual giant*. And yet he is always humble enough (and wise enough) to ask the churches to support him in prayer. Yes, Paul had a massive intellect and as an apostle he had seen the risen Lord Jesus. And yes, he was Paul ‘the helper’ - always there to give help and advice to the Lord’s people.

And yet Paul knew his own dependence upon God. Paul knew his own weaknesses and the need for guidance because Paul knew that unless the Lord builds the house, those that labour, labour in vain. ‘Not by might or human strength but only by my Spirit’ says the Lord of Hosts. And so the apostle asks for prayer.

Notice the use of ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ in verse 3. Paul believed in *team ministry*. He was never a ‘one man band’. We shall see this very clearly in the final passage next time. And spiritual leadership is always plural in the New Testament. But look again at what Paul specifically asks for. [Read verse 3 again](#). Now why is that such a remarkable verse? It’s remarkable because the apostle Paul was under house arrest at the time! He is a man who cannot go where he pleases. He was confined to a house. But Paul could receive visitors. And this is really what he is asking the Colossians to pray about. He is asking for prayer that the Lord would bring certain people *to him* so that they in turn could hear the gospel from Paul and his companions.

Paul does not see his present restrictions in prison to be a barrier to his gospel proclamation. He certainly does not see his circumstances as a sign to take a break from making Christ known. Paul did not think, “Until I am set free from prison, the Lord must be giving me a holiday from normal labours. This is the Lord’s imposed rest.” Not a bit of it! Paul is trusting the Lord in his present circumstances and believing that the Lord will give him new opportunities to preach the gospel.

And notice of course that Paul does not ask the Colossians to pray that God will set him free. He simply asks for prayer that in his present situation the Lord would open doors for him to proclaim the mystery of Christ.

This word ‘mystery’ as we have noted before was probably a *buzz word* of the ‘new teaching’. But Paul uses it deliberately in describing the gospel. The gospel is *the mystery of Christ*. The ‘mysteries’ associated with many false religions claimed to unlock great spiritual treasure. But in the gospel of Jesus Christ we have the *mystery of mysteries*, and the *treasure of treasures* – the greatest thing that a human mind could ever imagine. God has become a man – like one of us, and dies upon a cross so that we as sinners can be forgiven and reconciled to God and live with him in eternal glory.

What a message! What a gospel! And now even in these very difficult circumstances the apostle Paul is seeking to get the gospel out. And he is asking the Colossians to support him and support world mission. But at the same time Paul is surely challenging them about their own proclamation of the gospel in Colosse. Their circumstances were not nearly as difficult and restrictive as Paul’s. So were *they* seeking to make Christ known in *their* neighbourhood? Were they praying for open doors for their own gospel proclamation – as well as Paul’s?

I wonder what excuses we are making at the moment for not being involved in world mission – or even local mission? We all have restrictions upon us of one sort or another. But we must trust God in these restrictions. He has allowed such things into our lives for a purpose. But in every situation we face we can still make Christ known. And God can open doors of opportunity for us to make the Saviour known. Are we praying for such doors to be opened? God has the key. And we can pray that in his mercy he will open doors, abroad and locally.

And then verse 4. [Read verse 4](#). Paul specifically asks that his proclamation of the gospel would be clear – as it should be. Paul wanted to make this mystery of mysteries as clear and as simple as he could. He did not want to be thought ‘clever’ or ‘eloquent’ or ‘super-spiritual’. He just wanted to be faithful in proclaiming the gospel. He wanted people to understand about the Lord Jesus Christ and what he has done so that God could open people’s hearts to respond to the message.

And again, this is something we should all be praying about. Whenever the gospel is proclaimed, pray it would be clear and understood. (Surely there is also a side glance to the teachers of this strange new gospel that had entered the church at Colosse, for probably their message was not at all clear – and deliberately so. They wanted their message to appear ‘spiritual’.)

But the mystery of Christ and the gospel of Christ is on the one hand very simple. The Son of God died on the cross for sinners. Salvation from the wrath to come and eternal life are a gift to all who will repent of their sin and believe in the Saviour and follow him. On the one hand it’s a simple message. (On the other hand it is profound). But we are to pray that whenever the gospel is proclaimed it is made clear and that God would graciously give understanding and conviction to men and women.

One commentator writes, “Too often, preachers and their preaching can be taken for granted. But Paul gives a healthy reminder to us that if we are to see the success of any gospel ministry, it needs the support of the prayers of God’s people.” That is so true. Do we pray for the Lord to bless people and glorify his Son through the proclamation of the gospel?

Disciplined prayer. Gospel proclamation, but then finally in verses 5 and 6 we have **personal witness**. [Read verses 5, 6](#). The Christian is not only to pray for those who preach the gospel, he is to pray for his own personal witness too. And that will happen as he mixes with others in the business of everyday life. The believer will live and speak differently in a way that commends the gospel and the Saviour.

How can we act wisely towards the outsider (that is to say someone who does not yet know the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour)? Well, according to verse 5, we are to understand that every encounter is a God

given opportunity to be his witness in some way. And Paul tells us to make *the most of every opportunity*. The implication is that time is short. And therefore we are to make the best use of time. The clock is ticking in the sense that when the Lord Jesus returns it will be too late for men to be saved. But now is the day of salvation when anyone who turns to the Saviour in repentance and faith will be saved from the coming wrath. Therefore we are all to make the most of every opportunity.

How do you see people? There you are, sitting in a café, drinking coffee. The people pass you by. But how do you see them? Do you see them as people who have souls? As people who are perhaps without Christ and therefore spiritually lost and under the just condemnation of God for their sins? One day, they will stand before the Lord, and he will judge them and condemn them for the way they have lived their lives.

But we have the message of salvation. And this is the day of salvation. And the Saviour has promised that if anyone looks to him and believes in him then they shall be forgiven and have everlasting life. And so that meeting with that other person is to be seen as an opportunity for you to witness *in some way* for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Again it would seem that the Colossians had forgotten this because of their difficulties in church. But as they lived for the Lord Jesus, that relationship with Christ had to be worked out in the way they related to ‘outsiders’.

How can they witness? Paul just mentions our speech in the final verse. [Read verse 6 again](#). A conversation *full of grace* probably refers to the *tone* of our words. In all our speaking we will show something of the kindness and love of God. We will refrain from coarse or vulgar language. We will not come across as being proud or haughty. We will not be judgemental of others. Instead, our words will be humble and yet show something of our thankfulness to God for his blessings to us. We will also show how we trust God in our difficulties and can pray to him.

And then says Paul, our conversation will be *seasoned with salt*. That could refer to our language being preserved from foul words. Or it could refer to our conversation being winsome and attractive – the very opposite of being bland and tasteless. And Paul speaks here about the times that we answer people. That implies of course that sometimes people will ask about the way we live and ask why we believe what we believe. And we need to be ready to give people an answer.

Peter says something similar in his first letter. [Read 1 Peter 3:15](#). Just as the Lord opened doors for Paul in his ministry so can expect that he will graciously open doors for us to give *the reason for the hope we have*. People are without hope in this world. But the Christian has the most wonderful hope. We have a glorious hope because of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we are to pray that the Lord will give us opportunities to share that hope with others.

So we have a responsibility towards outsiders. It’s part of living for the Lord Jesus Christ. We are called to his ambassadors. We have a message which everyone needs to hear – the gospel. And we are to live in such a way that this message is communicated. It begins with prayer. It involves supporting Christian mission and Christian preaching of the gospel. And it involves being a witness ourselves. God has given us the great privilege of being co-workers with him. And we are to be faithful to this calling as we live for Jesus.