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Colossians 4:2-6

27th Message

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WATCHFUL PRAYER AND FAITHFUL WITNESS

*SERIES: THE CHRIST FORMED CHURCH:
LIVING RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIPS #11*

Our studies in the book of Colossians are winding down and will come to an end next week. But let me remind you of some of the themes we have encountered:

Rescued from Darkness – Through Christ God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son. We must never lose sight of this truth.

Supremacy and Centrality of Christ – All the fullness of God dwells in Christ. Christ is supreme, having primacy in the current creation and in the new creation. Christ is central; he is all and is in all. Christ is the mystery of God and in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge dwell. He is the hope of glory. The cross has accomplished everything we need for salvation, and Christ is all we need to grow into maturity.

False Spirituality – However, there are false teachings that promise spiritual wisdom and knowledge and promote practices that lead to a higher spiritual life. Even though they sound convincing these teachings are totally ineffective for true spiritual growth. They dilute the centrality of Christ. These teachings mislead us into thinking that something other than Christ is needed for our spiritual life. We must resist these teachings and practices. This is why Paul talks so much about Christ in this letter.

Resurrection Life – We have been completely united with Christ – into his death, burial, and resurrection. We have been raised with Christ and our life is hid with Christ in God. The old self, the false self, is gone and we have already put on the new self, the true self that is hidden in Christ. But we are not complete. We continue to grow to maturity in Christ, to be formed into Christ. We set our minds on things above, not on earthly things. In whatever we do, we do all in the name of the Lord Jesus and bring resurrection life into every sphere of our daily living – home, work, church, and play.

Our text this morning is the last exhortative section of the letter before Paul turns to final matters. Marc Jacobson touched on parts of the text last week, but it is so beautiful that I cannot resist putting it before us again. In 4:2-6 we encounter two important aspects of resurrection life: prayer and witness. Paul writes:

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak. Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so

that you will know how you should respond to each person (Col 4:2-6).

Let me make some observations of the text. I have used the NAS95 version so that you can see these observations more clearly. There are two explicit commands: devote yourselves to prayer and conduct yourself (walk) with wisdom. There is also an implicit command: let your speech or word always be with grace.

There are three little prepositional phrases that catch our attention: with thanksgiving, with wisdom, and with grace. The same preposition is used in each case. Pray with thanksgiving, walk with wisdom, and speak with grace. These phrases alone are worth a great deal of reflection.

The text begins with a focus on prayer and moves into mission, both global and local, for Paul in Rome and the Colossians in Colossae. The same idea is expressed in conclusion to Paul's request and in how he wants the Colossians to speak to outsiders: to speak as one ought to speak so that the words spoken are effective to bring others to faith. A little Greek word is used in both clauses to convey this goal.

Watchful Prayer

The first command addresses prayer. Paul gives exhortations to pray in several of his letters (Rom. 12:12; Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; 1 Thess. 5:17; 1 Tim. 2:1). Here he notes three characteristics of prayer in general.

First, prayer requires diligence, perseverance, and endurance – devote yourselves to prayer. This word “devote” came to be used of a boat that always stands ready for someone or an activity that one was devoted to or busily engaged in. The idea suggests determination with a resolve not to give up or grow weary. We find examples of this in the parable of the man who came pounding on the door of his neighbor in the middle of the night (Luke 11:5-13) and the widow who would not relent in her request for justice before the judge (Luke 18:1-8). Prayer is a constant and consistent part of the spiritual life, but it isn't easy. There is the tendency to lose focus, get distracted, or forget about our dependency on God. How often do we say, “I should pray about this,” but then just get busy and forget about it? Or we sit down to pray and the phone rings. Instead of ignoring the call we pick up the phone. An hour later we have forgotten all about our desire to pray. One has to be intentional, active, and persistent.

Second, prayer is to be accompanied by a sense of alertness or watchfulness. This word is used of being watchful for the Lord's return and the Lord's instructions to the disciples when he prayed in the garden. The opposite of being watchful is sleeping, not being awake. Peter uses this word when he urges believers to

be alert because the devil is prowling around like a lion seeking someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8). The idea is to pay attention to what the Lord is doing. The children of light are to be awake while the world sleeps in darkness.

Third, prayer is to be accompanied with an attitude of thanksgiving or gratitude. Paul has used this word already four times in his letter (Col. 1:3, 1:12, 2:7, 3:17). This is how Paul prayed in chapter 1 (1:3). Prayer and thanksgiving are never dissociated from each other. We pray out of a grateful heart, reminding ourselves of all the blessings we have received from God, especially for what he has done for us in Christ.

I know I have a lot to learn about prayer but one of the things that I am growing in is this idea of being alert and watchful. Last week two women in our body asked if they could pray for a painful back that has bothered me for some time. Of course I was delighted. After talking for a bit we entered a time of prayer. During the prayer I heard the words “heal all pain.” Suddenly I was on the alert. Then I heard the words “God, you know the source of the pain.” Then I heard “heal the memory.” Suddenly I knew that these women were praying for something other than my back. These women didn’t know it but they were praying for a deep pain in my life. We had a sweet time together. The amazing thing is that, that very night God answered the prayer for my deeper pain.

Certainly prayer involves talking to God and voicing our petitions to him. But much of prayer is listening, being still in the presence of God, and simply wasting time with Jesus. Prayer is listening in an attentive way, discerning the movements of God in our life, where he is working, where we are resisting. Prayer is opening our eyes to what God is doing behind the scenes that is playing out in our life, giving over our will to God, letting go of our grasping after results and resting in his divine providence.

“Men and women of persistent prayer are those who are constantly on the alert, alive to the will of God and the need of the world, and ready to give an account of themselves and their stewardship.”¹

Witness in Rome

Paul follows his general exhortation to pray with a specific request for himself and those who are with him. The request was for an open door to speak the word, the mystery of Christ, and to make it clear, or reveal, how he should speak so that people would respond to the gospel message.

Paul knew his own need for strength and wisdom and often asked for intercession in his letters (Rom. 15:30-32; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 6:19; Phil. 1:19; Col. 4:3; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1; Phlm. 22). We find the same pattern of general exhortation to pray followed by a request for the apostle at the end of Ephesians. (6:18-20).

A door is a metaphor for an entrance, a metaphor for going where you want. Paul desires an open door for the word of God to enter the heart (1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12), probably for those who frequented the lodgings where he lived or those of the imperial tribunal before whom Paul would appear.

The mystery of Christ refers to God’s plan of salvation centered in Christ, especially in regard to Gentiles who could now have

access to God without becoming a Jew. Paul was charged with making known the hidden wisdom of God (1 Cor. 2:7).

Paul’s stewardship of the mystery of God was costly. He was bound in chains. However, Paul did not see this as a hindrance or an impediment for the gospel (Phil. 1:12-18). His single focus of sharing the gospel continued as long as he had life. This is a great reminder to us that though we might not be where we want to be, God can still use us for the advancement of his kingdom. We don’t need perfect circumstances in order to be a faithful steward.

What is so interesting to me is the fact that Paul never visited Colossae but the Colossians and Paul were bound together in the advance of God’s kingdom. Marc Jacobson talked about this verse last week, so I will not dwell on it, but let me just remind you that Paul is an example of how every church is to be involved in the global advance of the gospel. We pray for those in far away lands who have been set apart for proclaiming the word of God. We pray for missionaries, for open doors, for how to speak the truth. This is an essential element of living resurrection lives.

Michael Green writes: “God’s church exists not for itself but for the benefit of those who are not yet members ... [and] the church which lives for itself will be sure to die by itself. The church is not a religious club and it does not have a secular mission. Instead, it is a worshipping and sending community.”²

Witness in Colossae

In verses five and six Paul now turns from his ministry of the gospel in Rome and extends this same ministry to the Colossian believers in Colossae. Mission is to be understood both globally and locally. Paul directs the Colossians to take care with both their actions and their words so that their witness to Christ will be effective.

Paul first addresses actions: “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.” Literally Paul says to “walk with wisdom.” The idea of walk means that what we do is important because those who are outside the faith, outsiders, are observing our life. Therefore, we are to walk with awareness of this fact. Wisdom is an important word in Colossians (1:9, 28; 2:3; 3:16). In chapter 1, wisdom has to do with the knowledge of God’s will (1:9) and walking worthily (1:10) and thus is practical and realistic as opposed to the abstract wisdom of the false teachers. To walk with wisdom means to follow the pattern of Christ and live as God intended us to live.

We walk with wisdom and we also walk with purpose, making the most of the opportunity, or literally “redeeming the time.” The word here is a marketplace term and has the idea of buying up or buying back. We are to buy up to the full the opportunities we have to witness through our actions. Christians are not to live haphazard, irresponsible, careless, or thoughtless lives but rather are to snap up every opportunity like a bargain at Macy’s with people outside the faith. We live in such a way that God is not dishonored and that does not prevent people from being saved. We don’t live one way with believers and another way with outsiders. We live alert to the possibilities of making an impact in another’s life. “It remains true that the reputation of the gospel is bound up with the behavior of those who claim to

have experienced its saving power. People who do not read the Bible for themselves or listen to the preaching of the word of God can see the lives of those who do, and can form their judgment accordingly.”³

Not only are our actions important but our words are important as well. We walk with wisdom and we speak with grace. Paul has a great metaphor for what he intends, salty speech. Rather than speaking in unwholesome ways our speech is to be gracious, charming, friendly, inviting, refreshing, witty, interesting, colorful, and winsome. We use our words to draw people to Christ both in manner and in content, not just some of the time but always. “Those who are the salt of the earth may reasonably be expected to have some savor about their language.”⁴

Not only is our speech to be flavorful and tasty, but strategic. We are to know how to answer each one so that it will be appropriate to the hearer. We don’t have a canned speech about Christ, a formula to follow in every opportunity. We don’t pigeonhole people. Rather we listen carefully to both people and to the Spirit so that our words can be effective for the gospel. Just as Jesus promised the disciples, we too can know what to say in each situation (Luke 21:15; Mark 13:11; Matt. 10:11). The danger is that we might win the argument, but lose the person.

“So not only must the addressees’ conversation be opportune as regards the time; it must also be appropriate as regards the person everyone is to be treated as an end in himself and not subjected to a stock harangue.”⁵

My wife and I have a dog, a Labrador retriever, who occasionally has gotten us into some sort of trouble. Ironically, our dog’s name, Lucy, fits very well. When Lucy was young, she had a great deal of energy. So, in order to expend this energy, my wife would walk Lucy around the block without a leash, tossing a ball for Lucy to retrieve. One day a woman came out of a house and lit into my wife for walking our dog off leash. She then proceeded to blame Lucy for leaving messes in her front yard. Because the woman came on so strong, Liz became defensive. She assured her that Lucy was so ball crazy that she would not bother anybody and that she was not the guilty culprit for leaving droppings behind. Liz then threw the ball and continued walking.

When Liz got home God convicted her. She got in her car, drove to the woman’s house, and knocked on the door. The woman answered the door somewhat anxiously. My wife apologized to the woman for her rudeness and told her that she was right, that she should have a leash on the dog. The woman’s eyes filled up with tears. She said that nobody had ever apologized to her in her life. She admitted that she was very aggressive and at times came on too strong. My wife’s eyes also filled up with tears and the two of them fell into a friendly conversation.

How do you respond to a sharp or hurtful word or someone cutting in line? What do you say when you are blamed for something either rightly or wrongly? What is the tone in your voice with the clerk at the store or the receptionist at the dentist’s office? We all talk to people all day long and have the ability to be friendly and courteous and inviting. I have a friend who is so friendly that wherever he goes he is greeted by his first name. People take notice of what we say and how we say it.

“Witness comes both through the declaration of the gospel message and through the example of living out the gospel message as a family of faith characterized by humility, purity, accountability, discipline, reconciliation, restoration, and forgiveness (see Matthew 18:1-22).”⁶

Mission and Spiritual Formation

Paul’s stated goal in this letter for every believer is to “present everyone fully mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28 NIV). We have talked a lot about spiritual maturity, being formed in Christ, and living resurrection lives. What Paul is saying about the mission of the gospel, both globally and locally, means that spiritual maturity involves being a faithful witness, having a heart to share the gospel with others. Some times we can be so absorbed in our individual spiritual growth that we lose sight of the bigger picture. Paula Fuller in the book *The Kingdom Life* writes: “Within the Christian church we have tended to define spiritual growth as disengagement from the world rather than engagement with the world.”⁷

She goes on to say: “When we live with an illusion that we don’t have to be engaged in God’s mission to grow to maturity, we believe that we can get everything we need for our spiritual development from our personal relationship with God and other Christians.”⁸

“Spiritual formation is not the end itself but is always pursued through and focused on the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. We are God’s chosen strategy for the world.”⁹

Robert Mulholland writes: “Christian spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.”¹⁰

This is a good word for us. When I became a Christian in the 70’s you could easily talk to people about God. But this isn’t true today. The world has a negative view of Christians and wants to eliminate the mention of God in public venues. To talk about Christ is not politically correct. We might have the tendency to become reluctant to share our beliefs out of fear of the reactions we might receive, to grow passive and simply mind our own business. Paul’s word reminds us to redeem the opportunities that we have, to let the light shine in the darkness.

This past weekend I met a man from Zimbabwe and he shared with me what God is doing in his life. He grew up in a village where there was both animal and human sacrifice to an unknown God. A missionary came to the village and told them they did not need to sacrifice anymore because Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice. The whole village came to Christ.

God called this man to Bible College in Omaha, Nebraska and now he is the pastor of a small church. He began praying for how God wanted to use him in Omaha. One night, God woke him at midnight and told him to get in his car and start driving. Unlike here, the streets are empty at that time of night. He saw a hospital and turned in the parking lot. No one was in sight. Then he saw the red “emergency” sign and started walking to the door. Three young men came out of emergency and he began talking to them. They told him that their father had been in an automobile accident and was in a coma. This man showed compassion to

them and asked them if he could pray for them. He ended up sharing the gospel with them and they accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior. On top of that the father awoke from the coma.

This man told me story after story of walking into hospitals, meeting broken and wounded people, showing compassion, praying, and sharing the gospel. Now he is known as the African chaplain and is training people to be in every hospital in Omaha. He views himself as a missionary to the United States from Zimbabwe.

We live in a world with broken and wounded people all around us. Even though our life might be difficult we know the truth about Jesus and can offer salvation, redemption, and eternal life to others. We can pray for others, alert to what God might be doing. All of us are missionaries wherever we are planted. Perhaps our daily prayer might include gratitude for all the blessings we have in Christ and for God's power to walk with wisdom and speak with grace.

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1984), 172.
2. Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed*, (Paraclete Press, Brewster, Mass, 2004), pg. 232.
3. Bruce, 174.
4. Bruce, 175.
5. Peter O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 243.
6. Paula Fuller, *The Kingdom Life*, Alan Andrews General Editor, (NavPress, Colorado Springs, 2010), pg. 195.
7. Paula Fuller, *The Kingdom Life*, Alan Andrews General Editor, (NavPress, Colorado Springs, 2010), pg. 199.
8. Fuller, 216.
9. Fuller, 195.
10. McKnight, 232.

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