

Christianity in Action

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[0:00] So let's read Colossians 4 verses 2 through 6.

! Colossians 4 verses 2 through 6! And they say, Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us that God may open the door for us 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.

So in these verses, Paul continues the discussion of the new man in Christ that he began all the way back in verse 5 of chapter 3. If you remember, in verses 5 through 17 of chapter 3, he discussed the personal characteristics of the new man.

And then in verses 18 of chapter 3 all the way to chapter 4, verse 1, he discussed the home and work life of the new man. And in this passage, he broadens the scope of his discussion to include interaction with unbelievers.

[1:27] So we're going to break tonight's passage into three sections. The first section covers verses 2 through 4, and Paul urges his readers to be praying.

So praying is the first section on your handout. We'll take these three verses one at a time. So look at verse 2 again. Paul wrote there, Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

So the first thing we should notice is that 4:2 certainly is a call to pray, and it's a serious call to pray. It's a call to follow the example of Paul himself.

Remember all the way back at the beginning of the letter, he talked about his praying for the Colossians. Now he's calling the Colossians to pray. And the power of this call to prayer comes from its context in the letter as a whole, not just from the words here in verse 2.

It's not an isolated rule or command, because like all that we heard through chapter 3 of the letter, the call to pray comes as part of an exposition of the life of Christ Jesus.

[2:32] Remember that Paul's theme is, As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

That's all the way back to chapter 2, verses 6 and 7. And our Lord Jesus Christ is the one through whom and for whom all things have been made, and by his death on the cross, God has reconciled all things to him.

We saw that back in verses 15 through 20 of chapter 1. We also know that through Christ, God is bringing the universe back together again. He's making order out of the chaos.

He's making peace out of the hostility. We saw that in chapter 2, verse 15. He's also making reconciliation out of alienation, and that came from verse 20 of chapter 1.

And Christ among the nations is the hope of glory, and we saw that in verse 27 of chapter 1. So Paul prayed not simply as a spiritual exercise or discipline, and certainly not in order to move an inactive God into action.

[3:38] Paul prayed because of the extraordinary work that God had done, and the work that he knew that God was still doing. So the call to pray in 4:2 comes to us because of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and because he's turning hostility to grace and peace, and he's turning chaos to order, and he's turning alienation to reconciliation, not just among the nations and the other peoples, but he's doing that in the lives of each of us as his followers.

Praying is a characteristic of the reordered life, and the new life in union with Christ in his death and resurrection has been Paul's subject all the way since the first verse of chapter 3.

This life is a stark contrast to the chaos that he talked about in verses 5 through 8 of chapter 3. We know that prayer and peace with God go together.

God's enemies don't pray, but the reconciled do pray, and the alienated do not. So Paul tells his readers to continue steadfastly in prayer.

And continue steadfastly means to be courageously persistent, or to hold fast and not let go. Other English translations there say devote yourselves to prayer.

[4:52] Do some of you have a translation that says devote yourselves to prayer there in that verse? Well, when we look at it as devote yourselves to prayer, similar expressions are found a number of times in the New Testament.

It's what the apostles did in Acts 6.4. Acts 6.4 says they devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. The 3,000 who received the Word on the day of Pentecost devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.

That's in Acts 2.42. And it's what Jesus' disciples were doing immediately after his ascension as they waited in Jerusalem. Acts 1.14 says they were devoting themselves to prayer.

So without question, Paul certainly calls for a commitment to praying. But there's also a sense of privilege here, too. When you know and understand the grace of God in Jesus Christ, praying is what you should want to do.

And it's what we should be privileged to do. When we're conscious of what God has done and is doing, we're going to pray. And that's precisely what we heard Paul doing at the beginning of this letter.

[6:04] Remember, Paul said, We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints.

And then he went on to say, And so from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will. And that comes from chapter 1, verse 3, and also verse 9.

Now he's asking his readers to do the same. And Paul says that when we pray, we're to be watchful. And in its most basic sense, watchful there means to stay awake and not to fall asleep during prayer.

But Paul's thought is broader than that. It's broader than physical alertness. He also means that believers should look for those things about which they ought to be praying. Sometimes we can easily get caught up into praying vague general prayers that are difficult for God to answer because they don't ask for anything very specific.

To be devoted to prayer requires something specific to pray for and we'll never persistently pray for something that we're not concerned about. And to be concerned, we need to be alert for specific needs.

[7:16] If Paul had stopped writing with verse 3 when he says being watchful in it, we might get a very different idea of why and how we should pray. We know that prayer is serious business.

If we fail to pray, it's most likely true that we won't receive. We're presumptuous to think that God will do for us apart from prayer what he's promised to do only through prayer.

But we also need to balance this with the equally biblical truth that God is sovereign. Nothing slips through his mind or his fingers. He's going to accomplish all of his purposes.

We know that he works all things according to the counsel of his will. Ephesians 1.11 reminds us of that. So look at the last two words of verse 2.

We're to pray steadfastly. So we're to pray watchfully. And when we do these things, we're to pray steadfastly as well. But finally, the last two words of that verse say, when we do them, we are to pray with thanksgiving.

[8:16] So Paul includes this phrase because he wants to instill confidence in us rather than fear as we pray. It's Paul's way of saying to be faithful and fervent in your prayers, but he also wants us to know this, that God is always and forever on his throne, and the battle in which we fight is ultimately God's on our behalf.

So we should let the gratitude for what God has done and will do permeate all of our prayers. When we do that, we'll never lose hope or fall into despair or live in fear that God has abandoned us in our hour of need.

Sam Storm summarized seven ways that we can pray with thanksgiving, and some of these are really worth hanging on to here. He said, first, pray with gratitude that God is actually there, alive,

alert, and never asleep.

So we don't speak into a vacuum or to a God who's preoccupied with other more important matters. We should always be thankful that God is there, alive, and alert for us. Second, he says that we should pray with gratitude that God not only lives and loves, but actually listens to what we say. Think about what a privilege it is for the God of the universe to actually hear us. Think about this verse. It says, Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.

[9:39] He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you. And that's Isaiah 30, verses 18 and 19. So as we pray, we need to remember that God loves us, and we need to thank him that he loves to listen to us and be gracious as well.

A third way to pray with gratitude is to think about how the God that we pray to is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think.

Remember Ephesians 3, 20 and 21. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.

Amen. A fourth way to pray with gratitude is that we should pray thanking God that he's chosen to include us in the process. God could have ordained that all of his will be accomplished independently of our participation in it, but he didn't.

God chose to have us help him achieve his ultimate ends, and the latter is doing that through our prayers. In other words, God uses our prayers as a means to accomplish the ends that he sets out to achieve.

[11:00] A fifth way to pray with gratitude is that we should pray thanking God for all the ways he is changing us as we pray. Wholehearted and humble intercession transforms the person who prays.

When we do that, our ideas of God are elevated, and our awareness of our dependency upon God is intensified. When we do that, the magnitude of God's power and providence is manifested in ways that we otherwise might never behold.

Our dreams and our hopes and our desires are cleansed and purified as we humbly submit to his will, and we sacrifice our own. A sixth way to pray thanking God is that we should pray thanking God that you are asking him to do graciously in the lives of others as he's already done in yours. In other words, we should continue to pray that he saves other people just like he saved us. And when we realize that God is still saving other people, that should make us thankful as well.

Finally, we should pray with gratitude to God not simply for what he has done, but for what he's going to do in the future. We should thank him in advance for all that he will do in response to our request.

[12:11] And without being sinfully presumptuous, we should pray with expectancy that whatever we ask according to his will, he's going to do. So being watchful is not a matter of being frightened or worried or anxious.

On the contrary, like the whole Christian life, praying is to be energized by thankfulness. So the bottom line is really this. It's hard to be fearful when you're immersed in gratitude.

When we're thankful, it turns the human soul toward heaven and away from itself. Thankfulness by its very nature requires us to fix our focus on that God is, who God is, and what God has done and will do.

So thankful prayer is necessarily God-centered. Have you ever thought about that as a possibility? Whenever we pray for ourselves, we're centered on ourselves. But when we're thankful, then that prayer becomes centered on God.

So let's move on to verses 3 and 4 of chapter 4 now. Paul makes some more specific prayer requests for him and his companion. He says, At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open a door to us 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.

[13:31] When Paul says pray for us, he means at least Timothy and himself, the two senders of the letter. But perhaps he also includes other servants of the gospel that are mentioned in the letter, like Epaphras.

In any case, Paul particularly was requesting prayer for himself. Verse 3 reminds us that Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. You might think he would pray for, or ask people to pray, that he would get out of prison.

But his requests are different than that. First, Paul asked the Colossians to pray that God opens the door for the word. So earlier, Paul spoke of the powerful work that the gospel was accomplishing. And this is what he meant by the word. Remember, all the way back in verse 5 of chapter 1, he called it the word of truth. And then he said that's the gospel.

The gospel was bearing fruit there in Colossae, and indeed in the whole world. And that means that people were coming to faith in Christ Jesus, and all of the good things that were coming of that were because the word was bearing fruit.

[14 : 41] So Paul has urged that the word of Christ dwell among us richly as we teach and admonish one another. And by this word, God was doing his worldwide and creation-wide work of establishing the reconciliation and pacification that has been accomplished through Christ's death.

So this word was advancing through servants of the gospel like Paul. And obviously the work of this word is not something that we humans ourselves can accomplish. God has to open the door for the word if it's going to achieve its purpose.

Doors of opportunity for the word to be proclaimed and doors to human hearts that the word might be received must be opened by God. And this is a reminder of how hard the work of proclaiming Christ really is.

Sometimes we can give the impression that if only we get our strategy right and if only we learn to be relevant or if only we learn to use technology to the fullest or if only we learn the art of contextualization and so forth, then our teaching is going to have an impact on people.

And any kind of time that you do that, you're headed for disillusionment because the doors to this type of word are tightly shut and bolted. The darkness is thick in the world and the only way that the word is going to do its work is if God opens the door for the word.

[16 : 03] So think about this. Could God open a door for the gospel without us praying that he's going to open a door for the gospel? He certainly could. So if God can open a door for the gospel without our help, why do you think Paul urges believers to pray that God will open the door?

Well, maybe Psalm 50 gives us a little bit of an answer to both questions. In Psalm 50, verses 10 through 12, this is God speaking. And he says, So that kind of puts us in a little bit of perspective, doesn't it?

God says, if I were hungry, I wouldn't tell you all that I was hungry. I have anything that I want. So verse 12 makes it clear that God has no need for our help.

But if we skip down a couple of verses in Psalm 50, verses 14 and 15 explain why God wants us to be involved in doing his work. Here are Psalm 50, verses 14 and 15.

They say, Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High, and call upon me in the day of trouble. I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.

[17 : 33] So that last sentence there is key. God says, I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me. God didn't create us because he was needy or lacking something.

We don't supply God with anything. The God who made the world and everything in it doesn't live in temples made by man, and he's not served by human hands. That's a paraphrase of Acts 17, verses 24 and 25.

Instead, God made us so that in our dependence upon him for everything, his glory will be seen and savored. In other words, our need magnifies his supply, and our lack draws attention to his abundance.

So God honors and glorifies himself by overflowing in bountiful blessings to those who otherwise deserve only death. Think about how we get those blessings.

We get those blessings by praying for them. So God suspends his work on our prayers, not because he can't do it alone, but because our prayers highlight our dependence upon his supply.

[18 : 37] We're humbled as being dependent, and he's exalted as being the one who's dependent upon. So going back to our text in Colossians 4.3, Paul wants the Colossians to pray that he uses the open door to declare the mystery of Christ.

Paul typically uses this word mystery when he has in mind a truth formerly hidden, but now made known in Jesus Christ. The mystery of Christ is the revelation of what God has done in and through his Son to make possible the atonement for sin and its forgiveness.

The Word became flesh, and that is now a mystery that's made known for our salvation. The God that was in Christ reconciling the world to himself is a mystery who's now revealed for our justification, and the faith alone in a crucified Messiah is the power of God unto salvation.

That itself is a mystery made known for our welfare. Where Christ is not proclaimed, the gospel is not known. So no matter how psychologically soothing a sermon may be, if the mystery of Christ is not center stage, then that sermon hasn't touched upon the gospel.

It hasn't told the gospel at all. The focus of our message always needs to be Jesus Christ who is risen for the salvation of lost souls. Paul's second request is that the Colossians ask God to enable him to proclaim this mystery with clarity.

[20:13] Verse 4 says, that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak. Pray that God will work in me, says Paul, that I might have the words to speak in the most persuasive manner and at the most appropriate time.

He wants them to ask God to operate in his heart, mind, and soul so that the message will ring true and will reverberate with passion, conviction, and courage. This is not the first time he's made a plea like that.

He made a similar plea to the Roman church. He appealed to them to strive together with him in their prayers to God on his behalf that he might be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea and that his service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.

If someone as learned and well-spoken as the Apostle Paul needed prayers for clarity, we should make the same prayers for everyone preaching and teaching the Bible today.

That includes each of us as we share the gospel with others. We also need to consider the last phrase of verse 3. We skipped over that a minute ago.

[21:20] And that phrase is, on account of which I am in prison. Clearly, he's talking about the gospel there. So the gospel is the reason for Paul's incarceration.

He's in jail for faithfully and fearlessly proclaiming the mystery of Christ to a lost and dying world. There's an important lesson in that too because God doesn't promise to protect us from painful and unjust experiences if we remain faithful and obedient.

What God does promise is that while we languish in prison, he will never leave us or forsake us. Remember Romans 8, verses 35 through 39.

Paul wrote there, Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

As it is written, For your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

[22:28] For I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

We also need to learn from Paul's reaction to his plight because there's no indication here of self-pity or bitterness or anger with God for having permitted this to occur.

And that's similar to what we see in Philippians. In Philippians 1, verses 12 through 18, he again makes reference to his imprisonment for preaching the gospel. Even there, he looks on his situation as being divinely orchestrated and being set up to let him elevate the gospel into places where it might never have reached otherwise.

Listen to Philippians 1, verses 12 through 18. Paul said, I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel so that it has become known throughout the whole world or throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

So Paul is very clear there, too, that the reason why he's in prison is because he's proclaiming Christ. But in verse 14, he goes on to say, And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

[23:57] Doesn't that kind of strike you as a bit unusual? You would think people might be a little more fearful to speak the word knowing that Paul is in prison, but they're seeing Paul reach out to the Philippians with the gospel and they're becoming more bold themselves.

And he goes on to say in Philippians 1, he says these words in verse 15, Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry and others from goodwill. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.

The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. But then in verse 18, he says, We may never be called to suffer to the extent that Paul did.

However, when we suffer or when we're persecuted to any extent because of Christ, Paul's words here show us the proper response. We should look on our circumstances as a way to proclaim Christ even more.

So now that we've looked at the importance of praying, let's spend some time on the second section of the lesson. In verse 5, Paul reminds us how we should be walking.

[25 : 14] So walking is the second blank in your handout. Verse 5 says, Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.

Outsiders is an interesting term for non-Christians. We've seen all throughout this letter and elsewhere in Paul's writings that believers are in Christ. That means unbelievers, by definition, are outside of Christ.

And so Paul refers to them as outsiders. So that's a whole new distinction of splitting the human race. There are only two types of people in the human race, those who are in Christ and those who are outsiders.

Others. Twice already in this letter, Paul's referred to the Christian life as a walk. In Colossians 1.10, his prayer was that the readers be so filled with the knowledge of God's will that they walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

And then in Colossians 2.6, in the theme section of this letter, he said, As you have received Christ Jesus, the Lord, so walk in Him. The important thing to note here is that the kind of character and conduct that he described in chapter 3 is not suddenly to change as we move outside the Christian fellowship.

[26 : 38] It would be unkind to suggest that compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience be more evidence in the life when we're among believers than they are when we're in another setting.

Unfortunately, though, there are too many occasions when Christian people do display one type of character on Sunday and something quite different when they go to work on Monday or even when they go back home after church.

All that's been said about the Christian life and the Christian walk in this letter should still be on our minds as Paul speaks about how we should conduct ourselves toward the outsiders.

The first specific advice about our conduct toward unbelievers is walk in wisdom toward outsiders. We know that walk refers to our conduct in daily life and the unsaved outsiders watch us Christians and are very critical of us.

That means there must be nothing in our lives that would jeopardize our testimony. When he talks about wisdom, remember that wisdom is applied knowledge.

[27 : 45] It's knowing how to live and how to behave. This letter's already taught us some things about wisdom. We know that wisdom has to do with the knowledge of God's will.

We learn that in verse 1-9. And God's will is to reconcile all things to Christ through Christ's death. And we learn that in verse 20 of chapter 1.

Wisdom also characterizes the teaching and admonishing by which Paul proclaims Christ and by which the word of Christ dwells richly among believers. Paul has said that all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ.

So putting it all together, walk in wisdom means that we're to be careful not to say or do anything that would make it difficult for us to share the gospel. Walking in wisdom also includes doing our work, paying our bills, and keeping our promises.

Our actions toward non-Christians must be controlled and God's grace should always shine through our word and our works. We need to show respect for all of those who are made in the image of God, whether or not they're believers at this point.

[28 : 55] And as we walk in wisdom, we're to be making the best use of the time. The more literal translation of this phrase is to redeem or buy back the time.

It means snapping up every opportunity that comes along. Paul is an example for how to do that. Even though he was a prisoner, he exploited every opportunity to share the gospel message.

Paul's emphasis here is on behavior. He's talking about how we treat people, how we speak to people, and what we do or don't do when we interact with those people.

What he's really saying is that that type of conduct matters. Before you start worrying about whether or not you should be sharing the gospel with the person who serves you coffee at the restaurant, consider how you're behaving.

Are you walking in wisdom, the wisdom that comes from knowing Christ as Lord? Are you making the best use of the time? And only when you are walking in wisdom and treating those outsiders like you should, will those outsiders be more willing to listen to your testimony.

[30:03] So, so far, Paul has taught us about praying and walking. In the last section of this passage, verse 6, Paul deals with talking.

So, talking is the last piece in your handout. So, let's see what he's talking about in verse 6. Here is verse 6 again. He says, Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

To speak with grace means to say what is spiritual, wholesome, fitting, kind, sensitive, purposeful, complimentary, gentle, truthful, loving, and thoughtful.

Think about Ephesians 4.29. Paul said there, Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion that it may give grace to those who hear. That's a pretty big challenge, isn't it? When he says, Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths. So, although we're looking at verse 6 as a separate section, verses 5 and 6 really go together.

[31:16] We're to walk in wisdom and we're to speak in grace. So, wisdom is to shape our behavior and grace is to shape our speech. With grace in our hearts and on our lips we'll be faithful witnesses, not judges or prosecuting attorneys to the outsiders that are in the world.

The speech of the new man also must be seasoned with salt. It's not only to be gracious, but also it should have an effect. Think about salt because salt can sting when it's rubbed into a wound, but it also prevents corruption.

Believer's speech should act as a purifying influence, rescuing conversation from the filth that so often engulfs it. Salt also adds flavor and so the speech of the new man should add charm and wit to the conversation.

Back in Leviticus 2.13, salt also was added to the sacrifices, so perhaps Paul also was inferring that we should look on our words as sacrifices offered to God just as our words of praise are spiritual sacrifices.

It would no doubt help us to say the right things in the right manner if we remember that our words are looked upon as sacrifices to God. And Paul goes on to give us the reason why our speech should be seasoned with salt.

[32:39] He says, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. And that's pretty similar to Peter's words in 1 Peter 3.15.

Listen to what Peter said in 1 Peter 3.15. He said, In your hearts, honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect.

Listen to this quote from Dick Lucas. Dick Lucas said, The pressure to raise certain topics and reach certain people can make it difficult to live or talk normally.

In any case, we go to the office to work, not to evangelize. But by being willing and ready to respond, the way is open to a more serene and successful approach to each day's opportunities. It opens the way, too, for a greater dependence upon God's leading as well as for a more relevant and sensitive witness suited to each individual. Remember, when the outsider has chosen the time and the place and the subject, how wonderfully free is the Christian to open his mouth and tell the good news of Jesus.

[33:58] These verses kind of bookend each other because at the beginning of this section, Paul prayed that he would have the right words to speak. Now at the end of the section, he says that the Colossians should pray that they have the right words to answer.

So on one sense, we have the evangelists doing the initial speaking, and then in the other sense, at the end, we have the believers being ready to answer and give their testimony when they're given the opportunity.

So the three sections of this passage go together even more than may first be evident because although only one section mentions speech, all sections actually deal with the form of speech. Prayer is speech to God, and our walk speaks through our actions. We've all heard the saying, actions speak louder than words. The power of speech is a gift from God, and it must be used the way that God intended for it to be used.

In the book of James, the tongue is compared to a bridle and a rudder, a fire and a poisonous animal, and a fruitful tree into a fountain. And these pairs of pictures teach us that the tongue has the power to direct, the power to destroy, and the power to delight.

[35 : 19] The tongue is just a little piece of our bodies, but it can accomplish great things for good or for evil. The Christians' walk and talk must be in harmony with each other.

Nothing will silence the lips like a careless life. But think about it this way in a more positive sense. When character, conduct, and conversation are all working together, it makes for a powerful witness.

Prayer and reflecting on God's word are two of the God-ordained ways for harmonizing our walking and our talking. When we pray like what Paul encouraged us to in this text, and when we talk the talk and walk the walk, we'll find it easier to live out the words of verse 6.

And remember, verse 6, as we close tonight, it said, Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for the reminders of our speech, not just the speech with the words that we say to each other, but the speech to you and the speech that we demonstrate with how we conduct ourselves.

[36 : 29] Help us to better and better live up to the challenge that you have in these verses that we always be a good witness for you among the outsiders, and let us be more sensitive to the opportunities that you open for us to share our faith with those outsiders.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.