

“Doorways of Divine Opportunity”

Colossians 4:2-6

July 3, 2022

I am deeply thankful to be a citizen of the United States of America. I consider it a divine blessing that should not be taken for granted to live in a land of many, many freedoms. Our nation is not without its flaws, nor should its freedoms be taken for granted. In my younger days I had the opportunity to travel to 14 other countries, many of them beautiful and all of them with precious people, yet I always returned to the US with deeper gratitude for my homeland. It seemed to me in those days that our great country was nearly invincible.

Yet today our hearts weigh heavily as we look around us and behold a lack of gratitude, a lack of godliness growing exponentially, a lack of civility that has overrun politics, and a lack of earnest discourse in pursuit of truth and true justice. These are too often replaced with angry shouting, name-calling, slander, intimidation, and even violent rioting.

The temperature is high over a multitude of highly flammable issues that are stressing our nation. Not that long ago you could raise another person’s blood pressure by just saying the word “covid.” But now covid may not even make the list of the top 10 combustible issues like abortion, inflation, immigration, guns, violence, cops, racism, gender, courts, and wokism.

Christians are not immune to the passions that surround these kinds of issues in our country—nor am I suggesting that we should be. Much of what is happening should be deeply concerning to us and at times even invoke a sense of righteous indignation. Yet I believe Colossians 4 is a wise warning to guard ourselves against the spirit of the age when it comes to *how* we engage these issues. This is a time of incredible opportunity for us to not only be a people of unwavering hope and lovers of truth, it is an opportunity for us to champion the gospel of Jesus Christ, not only by our message but also by our method. We must be known for our reasoning, wise conduct, and our grace-influenced speech. We can love people who hate us and appeal to the Power superior to politics by our prayers.

This is our day of opportunity to pray, live, and speak on behalf of Christ who transforms lives from the inside out through the gospel. When

Colossians 4 says, “devote yourselves to prayer...so that God will open a door for the word...conduct yourself with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity...[and] let your speech always be with grace...so that you will know how to respond to each person,” this is God’s word for this very hour. A call to stand distinctively like Christ and for Christ. This is neither the time to hunker down in survival mode, nor to bitterly rage like the world, but to seize divine opportunities in our daily relationships to model and message God’s grace to others.

The encouraging news of today’s passage is that...

We have the privilege of walking through doorways of divine opportunity to advance the gospel of grace in tumultuous times.

Paul writes these words from prison to encourage the Colossians and us with 3 ways to strengthen our witness for Christ in a godless world—through our prayers, our conduct, and our words.

1. **We must pray for God to do His supernatural work of opening doors for the gospel** (Colossians 4:2-4).

[vs. 2-4] I often say to those who gather in the prayer room before the service on Sunday morning, “*This* is the work of ministry!” Not to diminish the importance of studying to preach or our team preparing to lead worship, but to say that none of our preparations make a lasting impact apart from the Spirit’s work through us—it is God who must work in and through us! And so prayer is of utmost importance, which is certainly the message Paul is communicating in [vs. 2].

Paul begins with a general yet strong call to a life of total devotion to prayer. I’m not talking about praying in the formal sense 24 hours a day, but rather bathing all of life in prayer. Every Christian must give serious consideration to the vital role of prayer in his/her life. Apart from a vital life of prayer, God will not have a vital place of supremacy in your life because prayer is your access to God. Prayer is the lifeline of a genuine relationship with God. We have over a thousand pages of instructive history and clear teaching in the Bible, but it will be of little benefit to you if you don’t walk in an intimate relationship with God through prayer. How else do you experience the

Spirit's power to apply the transforming truth of God's word to your heart and life?

Imagine going a whole week or even an hour hearing every word your spouse says to you but never responding with a single word. We would call that relationship *cold*.

We must be "devoted to prayer" or "continue steadfastly in prayer" (ESV). The word carries the idea of perseverance (to constantly attend to). We are to pray with unceasing diligence. It's noteworthy that this word is used 6 times in reference to prayer in the NT.

- Acts 1:14 (early church) – "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer."
- Acts 2:42 (early church) – "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, the breaking of bread, and to prayer."
- Acts 6:4 – The apostles said, "we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word."
- Romans 12:12 – "Rejoice in hope, persevere in tribulation, be devoted to prayer."
- Eph 6:18 – "Pray at all times in the Spirit."

Well, how do we live this kind of devoted life of unceasing prayer? Two ways: 1) being mindful of your union with Christ and His constant presence with you so that you think in conversation with Him; 2) having moments in your day set apart for focused prayer, praying for particular people in your life, God's provision for your needs, and His work in your own heart, etc. And don't forget to pray through what you are reading in the Bible.

In addition to calling for a devoted life of prayer, vs. 2 calls us to "keep alert" in prayer. The term here is used most often in reference to the end times. In other words, don't grow drowsy or distracted by a preoccupation with this world. Have you ever been so preoccupied and focused on what you were doing that you didn't notice someone walk up to you until they startled you? We should not be startled when Jesus comes. Don't get so preoccupied with the present temporary matters of earthly life that you lose sight of the bigger picture of the spiritual world and God's eternal purposes.

"Be devoted to prayer, keeping alert in it *with an attitude of thanksgiving*" (2). All prayer can and should have an overtone of thanksgiving, regardless of how sketchy our present circumstances may be. Why? Because we can look behind us to the cross or forward to heaven and see that we are ultimately secure in this sketchy world.

I remember watching my son and his classmates do the high ropes course. They were walking across beams and the ropes as high as the treetops. Above them was a cable to which they were tethered in case they lost their balance and fell. The only question was, are they tethered to the cable and is that cable securely anchored at each end? That is what the cross behind us and heaven before us do. They anchor our eternal security as we walk the tight rope of life by faith. Knowing the sufficiency of our past redemption and the invincible promise of our eternal reward infuses all of life with thanksgiving. Are you tethered to eternal security through genuine faith in Christ?

The next question is, what do we pray for? Well Paul is going to give the Colossians some specific prayer requests in vs. 3-4, but notice he prefaces those requests by saying, "praying at the same time for us as well..." That is, along with their general prayers, they are to pray some specifics for Paul's ministry. So before we jump into Paul's specific requests, it might be good to ask, what are those general things for which they are to pray? The safest answer is probably *everything*. Yet there is a hint in Colossians that I would hate for us to overlook. Back in chapter 1, Paul wrote out his own prayer for the Colossians. What I simply want to point out to you is that what Paul prayed for the Colossians in chapter one is a blueprint for how he instructs them to live in chapter 4. Let me give you a few examples:

- In 1:9 Paul says, "we have not ceased to pray for you," and in 4:2 he calls the Colossians to be devoted to prayer.
- In 1:9 Paul prays that they will "be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" while in 4:5 he calls them to conduct themselves in wisdom.
- In 1:10 Paul prays that they will "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord" which is also parallel to Paul's instructions in 4:2 to conduct their lives with godly wisdom.

- Both Paul's prayer in chapter 1 and his call for prayer in chapter 4 are marked by thanksgiving.
- Finally, in 1:10 Paul prays that they will "please the Lord in every respect, bearing fruit in every good work" while instructing them in 4:6 to always let their speech be seasons with grace...so they know how to respond to each person or opportunity that God gives them.

I point this out simply to encourage you to use Paul's prayer in chapter 1 as a pattern for how you pray for yourself, your spouse, your children, and others. Along with praying about specific circumstances, we could do no better service to others than praying that they will be *"filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that [they] will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthen with all power, according to his glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light..."* (1:9-12). I would suggest to you that this is the most practical way to pray for others because when God does this internal work of transformation and wisdom on the inside it will impact every decision they make in the details of life.

Now in vss. 3-4 Paul gives specific prayer requests, that God would open a door for the gospel so that He can proclaim Christ to those who haven't heard and that Paul's gospel preaching would be clear. **[3-4]**

This is where all missions and all evangelism begins—with prayer for God to open doors of divine opportunity and to open people's eyes and hearts to the true hope of the gospel. As we devote ourselves to a life of prayer, we must not forget that our primary mission in this world is to appoint others to Jesus Christ as the only hope of eternal life. And the first step is praying for God to do his supernatural work in the hearts of those who need Christ.

So let me ask you, who does God have strategically placed in your life that needs your prayers for God's supernatural work of opening doors to hear the gospel clearly? The first way to strengthen your witness is through a devoted life of prayer. Second...

2. We must wisely conduct our lives to be conducive to gospel opportunities (Col 4:5).

[vs. 5] As we have already seen, the purpose of our life on this earth is not to acclimate to this world but to be alert watching for the return of Christ and helping others be ready for that day by embracing Christ as savior and Lord while there is opportunity. Yet our prayer for God to draw our neighbors and friends to Christ will be stunted if we are living contrary to the ways of Christ. The goal is for our lives to lend credibility to the gospel.

So, if the gospel is a message of hope, our lives should manifest hope. If the gospel is good news of God's grace, then our lives should bleed grace. If the cross bears witness to God's forgiveness and mercy, then that's what we want our lives to emulate. If we have been reconciled to God as a generous, loving Father, then we should imitate our Father with love and generosity.

I know that most of us are more alarmed than elated by the days in which we live. But Christian, *this is a day of opportunity* just as it was in Paul's day. Paul was in prison, the Colossian church was facing the pressure of an unsympathetic world, and Paul's message to them (and us) is, "conduct yourself with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity." If you are on an airplane that begins to go down, putting on your oxygen mask and retreating to the fetal position is not the right thing for the Christian to do, but to raise your voice above the shrieks of terror and declare, "call upon the name of the Lord and you will be saved!" Christian, we were never meant to get out of this world physically alive, but to toss out the life raft of the gospel to as many as possible who are perishing.

So, how do we walk in wisdom toward outsiders so as to make the most of the opportunity? Well, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, which can be summed up in knowing God and honoring His commands (Ps 111:10; Pr 9:10). Conducting ourselves with wisdom means living our lives in harmony with the commandments and character of God. A life of integrity and a diligent work ethic; not rude, stingy, greedy, or selfish. But rather a life that demonstrates the attractive character qualities of Christ within us like being hospitable, cheerful, and winsome, encouraging and building others up, serving others with large-hearted generosity, looking for

opportunities to help and meet needs, being quick to forgive and not being easily offended. And ultimately looking for opportunities to not only imitate Christ, but to also speak of Christ. This leads us to our 3rd way of strengthening our witness for Christ...

3. We must speak under the influence of God's grace in response to each person (Col 4:6).

[vs. 6] I think the best way to understand vs. 6 is for our words to be gracious because they are under the influence of God's grace. Every other time Paul uses the word *grace* in the book of Colossians, it refers to *God's* grace, not mere human graciousness. Yet God's grace in us will produce gracious character, conduct, and speech. So think of it this way. You are owned by grace, filled with God's grace, and stand in His grace for the express purpose of sharing that grace with others. You can literally say to yourself, "my mouth belongs to God and He has ordained this awkward or irritating moment with this indifferent or even rude person so that I can give grace."

"Let your speech always be with grace, *as though seasoned with salt...*" (6). Paul is not talking about salty speech as the term is used today of someone who is angry. He is speaking of speech that is winsome and beneficial. Salt adds good taste and preserves that which would otherwise spoil. Let your speech be as appetizing as possible for the gospel. Speech that is seasoned with grace is not careless, critical, mean-spirited, judgmental, pessimistic, rude, harsh, or demanding. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "**Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear**" (Eph 4:29; cf. Col 4:6). [I encourage us to memorize Eph 4:29 and Col 4:6. How else will we keep this in mind for the multitude of words we speak?].

We will speak with grace when we are conscientiously aware of our indebtedness to God's grace and the other person's need to encounter God's grace through us. This is how vs. 6 tells us to respond to each person: *with grace!* And when you respond to each person *with grace*, you will have credibility when God gives you the opportunity to speak *about* God's grace in Christ.

Wherever God has placed you (in your neighborhood, your workplace, or your family), He has put you there to pray, to conduct yourself, and to speak in such a way that God will open doors, your life will resemble the wise character of Christ, and your speech will bear the influence of God's grace.

As we come to the Lord's table, we come to a table of great opportunity. The power of our witness for Christ is undiluted in a life characterized by purity. The opportunity before us in these moments is to confess and forsake the sins of impurity that diminish the power of God's grace to work through us. In preparation for the Lord's supper, I urge you to invite the Holy Spirit to help you examine your speech, your conduct, and your relationships for any impurity that hinders your prayers. Turn your heart to the grace of God. The body and blood of Christ were given to make you pure and to fill you with the power of God's mighty Spirit!

Communion:

Bread: The bread represents the unleavened life, the sinless life of Christ, that he lived in his physical, earthly body. He conducted Himself with the wisdom in the fear of God toward sinners/outsideers. He walked in the intimate knowledge of His Father and the perfect fear of the Lord so that His life and His death could be a perfect, sinless sacrifice on our behalf. He gave His sinless life to give us forgiveness of sin. [eat]

Cup: Perhaps the most gracious, grace-filled words of all time were spoken over this cup: "*this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.*" (Mt 26:28). [drink]

Jesus lived a life of prayer—unceasing communion with the Father. And perhaps the essence of His prayer life and His love and delight in His Father is summed up in Gethsemane: "Not My will but Yours be done." May this be our prayer as well: "My life is not my own. I have been bought with a price. I am a grace-filled, joy-filled servant of Christ. I will glorify Him with my body (1Cor 6:19-20).