

Growing to Maturity:

The Message of Colossians" #14

**"Living Out the Gospel:
Facing the World"**

Col. 4:2-6

--CEFC 10/18/20; 6/8/03

Topic: Evangelism, Prayer

William Temple, the former Archbishop of Canterbury,

once said that "The church is the only society in the world

that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members."

I don't know if that's entirely true,

but the Archbishop does make an important point.

As those who have embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ—

as those who been forgiven and given new life in Christ—

and are now empowered by the Spirit to become more like Christ—

if we are to conformed to his image,

putting on his character,

then we must share his love and compassion for the world around us.

For Jesus didn't come just to enjoy sweet fellowship

with the faithful within Israel.

No, he came to seek and to save the lost.

Jesus compared himself to a good shepherd

who left his ninety-nine sheep

to go in search of the one that had strayed away.

He was the good physician who came not those who were well,

but to heal the sick,

Jesus spent time with those that the religious people had rejected--

the corrupt tax-collectors,

the promiscuous prostitutes.

And when he had risen from the grave,

Jesus commissioned his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations.

He told them,

“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you;

and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,

and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8)

You see, this saving work of God to reach out to the whole world

has been his purpose from the beginning.

And this is going to be an important theme for us the next two weeks.

When God first called Abraham,

he promised him that he would make him into a great nation.

“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3).

God's design is to create a world-wide people for himself--

and the vision of the book of Revelation is that one day

there would be a great multitude that no one could count,

from every nation, tribe, people and language,

standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb in worship (7:9).

As the Apostle to the Gentiles,

this, of course, was Paul's passion.

Already during his lifetime, he had seen the gospel begin this world-wide sweep.

He could say, with some exaggeration, back in Colossians 1 that

**"the gospel is bearing fruit and growing
throughout the whole world, . . ." (1:6).**

And as he draws his letter to these Colossian Christians to a close,

Paul wants to remind them of this evangelistic purpose.

This is what the gospel is about.

Jesus, the Son of God, has come into the world to redeem a people for himself--

he died and was raised to new life at the right hand of the Father,

where he is now seated as Lord of all.

And he will come again in glory to receive us to himself.

We have seen the immeasurable beauty in the ugliness of a Roman cross,

we have tasted his love through the Spirit of adoption

that now dwells in our hearts.

In the gospel, we now have an eternal hope, an imperishable inheritance—

we have a source of joy in the glory of God

with which nothing in his world can begin to compare.

We now have the privilege and responsibility to share that joy--

to make that gospel message known to all.

We are to be heralds of that good news.

We are co-workers with God in bringing reconciliation
to those who are without God and without hope in the world.

So after focusing on living out the gospel in our homes in 3:18-4:1,
in 4:2 Paul now shifts his attention outward, to the world around us.

We can't stay in our little holy huddle,
simply enjoying the warm fellowship of our Christian friends.
No, if we are to become like Christ and to live out the gospel,
we are called to serve the world.

This morning in our passage
Paul turns our sights away our own family
and urges us to look to those "**outside**", as he calls them.

Here Paul encourages us to respond in three ways.

I. The first thing we are to do is to **pray**.

Col. 4:2—"Devote yourselves to prayer,
being watchful and thankful."

I find it encouraging here to see that the Apostle Paul—

that great missionary-evangelist of the early church--

Paul feels it necessary to ask these young believers to pray for him--

v.3--"**pray for us, 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."

Paul knew that engaging the world with the gospel was not easy.

Proclaiming this wonderful mystery of God's work in the world

that has now been made known in Christ—

telling people about Jesus may encounter opposition.

It got Paul put in jail.

In some places today, it can still get you put in jail.

But here in America we are free to share our faith.

All that might happen to you is being labeled

a fundamentalist, homophobic, intolerant bigot.

What is that compared to being crucified.

Paul needed prayer so that he would have the courage

to bear the same reproach that Jesus bore,

and that he wouldn't be like Peter who denied Jesus,

but would speak of Jesus clearly and boldly.

I know I need that divine power also—we all do.

So we need to pray for each other./

And Paul knew that if this message of the gospel was to have success

and bring new life

then it would only be result of the powerful work of God's grace in human hearts.

That's why he solicits their prayer.

Evangelism is not a matter of the right technique,

or the right words,

or the right presentation.

It is a matter of God's power, opening the doors of human hearts
to receive his love in Christ.

That's why we need to pray.

And as I think of the challenge

of making an impact with the gospel in our community,

and with our own family, friends, and neighbors,

then we need to pray.

We need to pray for an open door--

how are we going to reach out to those in our community?

What vehicle can we use to draw them to Christ?

We need to pray for an open door as a church.

We need to pray for the ministry of International Friends,

we need to pray for the work of YoungLives,

we need to pray for our involvement with ACCA,

we need to pray for the Good News Club,

we need to pray for a church planting opportunity.

And we need to pray for each other

as each one of us seeks an open door for this message

in the lives of people we know

who don't know the joy

of experiencing the love of God in Jesus Christ.

And as I mentioned earlier,

we will have an opportunity to pray together (at least virtually)

next Sunday evening at 6:00—
we will make this our prayer for each other.

And how are we to pray?

Paul says first that our prayer is to be “**devoted**”—
we are to “**be devoted to prayer.**”

That word has the sense of being persistent in something,
continuously faithful to it,
busily engaged in it.
It includes the notion of not giving up or growing weary.

It's a word you might use of a devoted sports fan--
you know the kind I'm thinking about!

They proudly display the jersey of their team,
they root for them fervently,
and they stay with the team through thick and thin.

Paul gives us the example of Epaphras in the closing section of this letter—

4:12—“**Epaphras . . . is always wrestling in prayer for you,
that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.**”

Be devoted to prayer, Paul says.

So we need to pray when we gather for worship,
we need to pray in our Sunday School classes,
we need to pray in our community groups,
we need to pray when the elders gather for prayer

at 8:00 each Sunday morning,
we need to pray in special gatherings
called especially for the purpose of prayer./

But you say, we've done that.

Well, we just need to do it again and again.

We can't give up.

You know that parable Jesus told about that persistent widow
who had been wrongly treated
who kept pestering that unjust judge
until he finally got fed up and gave her justice.

Luke tells us that **“Jesus told his disciples that parable
to show them that they should always pray and not give up”** (Lk. 18:1).

In other words, that we should be **“devoted to prayer.”**

And if Jesus tells us to do something—it's a good thing!

It brings honor to God, and it is for our good.

So let this word from God encourage you to pray!

But this devotion to prayer means more than just having prayer meetings,

it means being people of prayer--

that is, people who recognize their constant need

of God's grace and power in their lives.

Prayer is a way of recognizing the presence of God,

it is a way of "practicing the presence of God"

in the world and in our lives,

And we need to find ways to do that every day.

We need to pray for one another—

Susan is very good at this—

During a conversation, she will stop and say,

“Can we stop and pray about that right now.”

Have you ever had one of those days when you perhaps pray in the morning

and then get to the end of the day

and realized you hadn't thought of the Lord one time all day.

I have--and I'm a pastor!

Every day we wake up and all the demands and pressures of the day

can start flooding into your head.

I've tried to begin each day as I wake up, before I get out of bed, by praying—

“Lord, this is the day you have given me.

Help me to be faithful to you.”

Maybe you can do something that might help to remind you

to think of God's presence in your life,

Christian music on the radio,

or a Bible verse on your bathroom mirror,

or memorizing a Scripture passage in the car--

just taking a deep breath and whispering a short prayer

before you enter the door at work--

maybe you've got something that works for you—

I know someone who programmed his phone

to give him a notification once every hour
to remind him to turn his thoughts toward God.

But whatever it is, we need to pray,
for nothing will more anger the forces of evil in this world
than our calling upon the Lord of glory.

We are to be devoted to prayer.

Then Paul says our prayer must be "**watchful**."

The word just means to "stay awake," or to "be alert."

Jesus told his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed
to "**Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation**" (Matt. 26:41).

Beware of spiritual drowsiness or apathy.

We are to be on our guard against the subtle attacks of the devil--

You know—the way he turns our good desire for holiness in our lives
into self-righteousness,
or he make us proud of our attempts at humility.

We are to be vigilant with our eyes,
watching out for what we look at,
turning from temptations in many forms they take—
the temptation of lust, greed, coveteousness, or whatever. /

But the "**watching**" here could also refer to the answers to our prayer.

We need to be alert to the ways God is at work in the world.

Some people call these "God-sightings."

Have you ever had those?

When you say, "Wow! I prayed, and then did you see what God did?"

Some people call them co-incidences--

we know better.

We need to be watchful,

for when we pray for God to open doors,

are our eyes open to see ones he opens?

I was thinking of this with regard to a fence I built on a part of our yard in our old house.

Susan had me build a gate for this fence which swings closed--

but I hadn't yet put a latch on it.

It was interesting to see how our dog Kali reacted to this gate.

Because it looked closed to her,

she stood on outside of the gate, barking,

wanting desperately to get in where we were.

Only after a great deal of coaxing by us,

did she come to discover that all she had to do to open that gate

was give it a little nudge with her nose.

Do you think we're like that sometimes?

Everybody around us seems closed to the message.

"Oh Lord, give us an open door for the gospel," we bark.

But the Lord just wants us to start giving a nudge on a few doors

and discover that there is nothing to keep us from walking in.

Our problem is that we just don't try.

I think that the people and the churches that are most successful in evangelism

are the ones that keep trying--
they don't give up when something doesn't work
or someone doesn't seem interested.

They try something else, or they go to someone else.

They pray, and they expect God to open doors,
so they start pushing to see which one he has opened.

We need to be watchful for the ways God is answering our prayer.

And when we do see God at work,
we need to be thankful, Paul says.

Here he gives us a three-fold cycle--
we pray, then we watch for God to answer those prayers,
and then we thank him when he does;
which then encourages us to pray some more.¹

This is the way that God gets the glory
for what he causes to happen in the world.

Have you seen that cycle at work in your life?

Perhaps you should remember what you pray for.

Maybe you should keep a journal of your praying.

Maybe you should be more intent on watching for answers.

And don't forget to thank the Lord when he does,

¹ So Wright.

for he is good. /

This is how we should pray--

with devotion and diligence,

with watchful alertness,

and with joyful thanksgiving.

All of this is a working out of the gospel of God's grace

which affirms that God is on our side,

and that before we pray, Christ himself is already praying for us,

and that God is active and alive in his world,

working ultimately for his glory.

That's what energizes our prayer.

But prayer is not all we are to do.

II. In our response to outsiders Paul urges us, secondly,

to consider our behavior--how we act.

v.5--"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders;

make the most of every opportunity."

We need to walk in wisdom because it can be a very hostile world--

Paul knew that full well.

He knew that people were always looking for some excuse--anything,

for which to criticize Christians and to defame the gospel--

and that's still true today.

Did you notice the public glee that greets any story

of some Christian celebrity who gets caught in some sinful conduct.

Sadly, that happens too often.

Paul writes to Titus--

we must live in such a way that **"those who oppose you may be ashamed
because they have nothing bad to say about us"** (2:8).

Live wisely to protect the reputation of the gospel,

but more positively when we live in wisdom,

we are living in Christ, who is wisdom.

And when we live in Christ, we can draw attention to the beauty of his way of life.

Paul writes in Phil. 2:14,15--

"Do everything without complaining or arguing,

so that you may become blameless and pure,

children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation,

in which *you shine like stars in the universe*"

The darker the world, the more brightly we can shine.

Or Peter urges wives married to non-Christians

to live in such a way that **"they may be won over without words**

by the behavior of their wives," (1Pet. 3:1).

Living according to God's wisdom is an attractive thing.

In our behavior toward those outside the faith we are to live wisely,

and, Paul says, we are to seize the opportunity.

The old King James translated this, "redeem the time,"

or the ESV has "making the best use of the time"

but that gives the impression that

Paul was just concerned about time management.

The word for time here is not just chronological time,

but "a special time"—an opportunity.

and the word "seize" here comes from the marketplace--

it suggests the action of a shopper

who has just come across an incredible bargain--

her or she will "snap it up."

You seize the moment,

taking advantage of every opportunity,

knowing that bargain might not be there for long.

Are you that kind of a shopper

when it comes to making an impact for the gospel

in the lives of people that the Lord brings in your path?

Do you recognize those "divine appointments" when God puts you in a place

to interact with someone, perhaps unexpectedly--

on an airplane, in the supermarket, at school,

walking in your neighborhood,

or maybe someone you've known for a long time,

who suddenly opens up, and shares something from their heart?

Perhaps God gives you an opportunity to serve someone,

to express concern and compassion,

to meet a need.

And opportunities can come in all kinds of packages--

Paul understood his own imprisonment

as an opportunity for the gospel--

he got to tell his guards about Christ!

Are you eager to seize the opportunity whatever it may be?

Are you ready to snap up the chance to make an impact for the gospel?

Though Peter does speak of wives winning their husbands *without a word*,

that is not the norm.

I don't think there are many of us who live such holy lives

that people are going to look at us

and be immediately convicted of their sin

and turn to the Lord in repentance and faith.

It doesn't work that way.

Our behavior may provide the music of the gospel,

but to be a song, our evangelism still needs some lyrics—

in the form of **words**.

So Paul moves to a third response to those outside--

and this involves our **speech**--what we say.

v.6--"**Let your conversation be always full of grace,**"

Paul has already told us that we shouldn't allow the way we act

to contradict the message that we proclaim.

Here he is saying that that applies to the way we speak also.

Our message is about the grace of God in Christ,
accepting us in love, just as we are.

Does the way we speak to people reflect that same truth?

Is our conversation about the truth of the gospel
full of the grace of the gospel?

Our tone is not to be condemnatory, or arrogant, or belittling, or sarcastic--
for none of those is consistent with our message.

Peter tells us to speak with gentleness and reverence.

If you find yourself getting in an argument with someone about the gospel
remember that you can win the argument but lose the person.

I was thinking about this in a conversation I had with a person
who was dogmatic in her rejection of people who were dogmatic.

She believed it to be absolutely true that there was no such thing as absolute truth.

She was sure that no one could be sure about anything.

I got very frustrated with her,

and I wanted to ask her, "Are you absolutely sure about that?"

but I had to bite my tongue and remember what Paul says here--

"Let your conversation be always full of grace,"

"Conversation full of grace" communicates that you care about

the person you are talking to--

whether that person be a high-ranking officer

or a cashier at the MacDonald's drive-thru--
each person is significant in God's sight,
each is valuable and loved.

Don't be boorishly self-absorbed in your conversation--

Like the person who said after a while,

"Oh, I'm tired of talking about myself--

you talk about me for a while."

That doesn't communicate grace, but self-centeredness.

Take it as a challenge sometime to keep a conversation focused on the other person.

Seek to know what he is thinking,

what her background is.

I find that every person has a story worth hearing,

if you will show the interest to draw it out.

That's what reflects the love of God.

That's consistent with the message of the gospel.

Then Paul says,

let your conversation be "**seasoned with salt.**"

Salt was used as a preservative, slowing down decay in meat,

and this could mean that our words are to be wholesome and edifying,

building up other people.²

²cf. Eph. 4:29—"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

But salt was also used as a spice, giving flavor to food,
and that may be what Paul is getting at here.

When talking about spiritual matters with people,
our words shouldn't be dull and insipid.

We need to arouse and stimulate interest in Christ, not douse it.

Just think about how conversations work--

Often they are guided by questions.

All you have to do to begin a conversation with someone is to ask a question--

Like, Where are you from?

or What brought you to Northern Virginia?

or What sort of work do you do?

This is an introductory level question that opens the door a bit.

It can develop if you find some connection to something the person has said.

"Oh, you work at the Pentagon,

I know someone who works there."

(well, maybe that's not a good example!)

This level deals with the area of information.

As you get to know a person better,

you might ask a question that gets into a person's beliefs--

Like, "What do you think about . . . "

and maybe you could ask about some topic in the news,

maybe even one that has some moral or spiritual connection,

and most do in some way or other.

And then you might ask a deeper question,
but ask it in a way that isn't too threatening.

I like to use the question,

"Tell me a little bit about your own spiritual journey?"

This can really help you get a feel for the person's understanding of spiritual matters,
and help you to know where to go next.

Or here's another way you might try,

"Do you take your religious beliefs more seriously or less seriously
than when you were younger?"

We want to try to find some way to arouse their curiosity and interest in the gospel.

We need to think along the lines of fishing--

Fishermen use lures that get the attention of the fish they're trying to catch.

Jesus did that sort of thing--

He knew the Samaritan woman at the well wouldn't have a clue

what he was talking about when he spoke of giving her "**living water**,"

but he was seasoning that conversation with salt.

And so with Nicodemus, when he talked about the need to be "**born again**."

Jesus used parables in this way, too.

He would often see who was interested,

before he spoke plainly and openly.

I remember a friend in college who told a fellow student,

"I have something deeply profound I'd like to tell you about sometime,

but I don't think you're ready for it yet."

His friend almost begged him to share the gospel with him!

Sometimes you can stimulate interest by sharing your own story

of the way God changed your life.

But ultimately our goal is to point people to Jesus Christ.

We want to talk about who he is and what he has done.

Point people to the story of his death and resurrection.

Ask them what they think about him.

And at this point you might find that the questions start coming back at you.

Questions like,

"Well, if God is so loving and good, why is there so much evil in the world?"

or "What about all those people in Africa who have never heard of Jesus?"

or "Why do you think you can trust the Bible?"

And so Paul says that our words need to be informed with knowledge--

"Let your conversation be always full of grace,

seasoned with salt,

so that you may know how to answer everyone" (v. 6)

This is where some Christians get intimidated.

"I can't try to share my faith with anyone.

What if they asked me some hard question that I couldn't answer?"

First, you don't need to be able to answer every question,

because not every question can be answered, at least not in this life.

I can't tell someone why God allowed the tragic death of a son or daughter.

I can point them to the love of God as displayed in the cross of Christ,

but I can't answer all their questions.

Sometimes the best response is simply to show respect for their question,

to express love for the person who asks it,

and to admit your ignorance.

Second, you'd be surprised, but there are really only a small handful of questions

that people usually ask--

There are the questions about how you know God exists,

why you should trust the Bible,

why God allows evil in the world,

and what about those who have never heard of Jesus,

and a few others.

I preached a series on those questions a few years ago that got put together in a book

that you can find on our bookstall in the Narthex—

it's called *7 Pressing Questions*—

Every Christian ought to give some thought to those questions

and how you might respond to them.

If you can think about these basic questions

you can go a long way toward addressing most people's concerns.

**"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you
to give the reason for the hope that you have.**

But do this with gentleness and respect," (1Pet. 3:15)

Be prepared.

You can do it.

We need to know how we ought to answer each person.

Paul gives special emphasis in this verse to **"each person"**³--

because each person is different,

and part of the process of evangelism

is discerning the particular needs of each person.

Often the questions they ask, real as they are, are only a cover for deeper concerns.

I remember talking to someone who was very skeptical about God,

but as I talked to her I realized that her skepticism wasn't just philosophical.

She told me about a difficult childhood

in which she felt unloved and rejected by her parents--

she couldn't trust anyone.

Her questions masked an inner hurt and fear.

More than an answer to her question,

she needed to know that someone cared for her.

That, more than anything else, is what I needed to communicate to her.

That's the way it often is--

³ eJni; eJkavstw/

our words must be reinforced by our behavior.

The virus of the gospel is transmitted personally—
from person to person.

That's why one of our biggest hindrances to evangelism

is that we are afraid simply to be ourselves before other people.

You don't have to adopt a certain outgoing personality that you don't have.

Let God use you as you are.

But don't hide who you are as a Christian, either.

Don't be afraid to bring God into the conversation,

to recognize God's grace in your life,

and to acknowledge areas in which you fail.

The gospel is about forgiveness, isn't it?

It's not about our being perfect.

Be yourself as your self is being transformed by the Spirit of God.

Be yourself as you put on Christ.

I confess, I am not a gifted evangelist.

I feel much more comfortable talking to my Christian friends

about our common faith.

But if I am to be a follower of Christ, I have no choice.

I must care enough about people outside our Christian fellowship

to reach out to them with the good news that God loves them.

My love for the Lord must be manifest in my love for those he loves—

those lost sheep all around us.

He wants them to know his love,

a love they don't deserve, and which I don't deserve either.

It is a love he demonstrated,

sending his Son Jesus Christ into the world to die for our sin,

and he was raised to give us new life.

This is good news--and it is for all people.

We can't keep it to ourselves.

So let us pray diligently,

let us live watchfully,

let us thank God constantly.

Let us live wisely

and let us speak words of grace and truth.

And he will use us to build his kingdom,

so that more and more people will join us in giving praise to God.

There can be no greater purpose than this!

Prayer

Closing Song: Shout to the Norths

Benediction:

Jude 25 “to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.”

Growing to Maturity:

The Message of Colossians" #16

June 8, 2003

"Living Out the Gospel:

Facing the World"

Col. 4:2-6

It can be comfortable to live out your Christian faith in the friendly confines of one's home, but if we are to become like Christ we must do more. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He had compassion on those who were outside the fold of God's people, and so must we.

This morning Paul turns our sights on those outside our family, and urges us to respond in three ways--

I. Our Prayer--

A. Devoted

B. Watchful

C. Thankful

II. Our Behavior--

A. Walk in Wisdom

B. Seizing the Opportunities

III. Our Words--

A. Full of Grace

B. Seasoned with Salt

C. Informed with Knowledge

Growing to Maturity:

The Message of Colossians" #14

Oct. 18, 2020

**"Living Out the Gospel:
Facing the World"**

Col. 4:2-6

- What does it mean to "devote yourself to prayer"? Is it just a matter of how long you spend on your knees? How can you try to "connect with God" during a busy day? What discipline can you establish that might help you recognize your dependence on God's care and direction at every moment?
- How are you "watchful"? What are you watching for? What can help you maintain your vigilance? What have you seen that can encourage you to "stay alert"?
- How can you develop this cycle of prayer, watching for answers to prayer, and then giving thanks to God for those answers? Do you keep some record of what you pray for? Do you tell others what you see God doing?
- What opportunities have you missed to share the love of Christ with someone recently? What opportunities do you have right now?
- How can you make your conversation "full of grace"? What seasons them with salt? Have you ever seen anyone who does this? What knowledge do you need to be able to answer people more effectively? Where can you get it?