

Sermon, Bethel Christian Fellowship, Sunday, 15-May-2011

Col. 4:2-4: Devoted prayer, devoted to the gospel

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door 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.

When Christ becomes our master, grace and the gospel start to manifest themselves in what we say. For example, earlier in this epistle (Col. 3:8-9) Paul tells us that we are to put off all anger, wrath, slander, lying, and filthy language. These are all things which pour out of our mouths. In short, as James emphasizes in his letter, we are to tame our tongues! Why? Because, as Paul tells us in Col. 3:10, we have “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” We are to look like Christ. And was it possible to think of our Savior as descending into slander? Lying? Using filthy language? It is impossible to even think that. In the same way, since we have taken on his nature now, we too are to put off these things.

In the verses before us this morning, Paul directs our attention to three specifics about how we are to use our speech. He tells that:

1. Steadfast prayer is the duty of the Christian. In particular,
2. we are to pray for those who proclaim the gospel, so that
3. they may exercise their duty effectively, that is, that they may be given opportunities to proclaim the mystery of Christ as they ought

So let us turn to these in order. So, first, Paul tells us in verse 2 that

1. Steadfast prayer the duty of the Christian (v. 2)

We all lag in spiritual maturity with regard to prayer. Someone once said, “if we are not much in prayer, we are not much of a believer.” If we do not practice prayer, we are practical atheists: we pay lip service to thinking rightly about God, but we never speak with him. Just try this with your own spouse: think nice thoughts about her, but never tell her. Let me know how that works out.

So prayer is our conversation with God, and this conversation goes both ways. We lift our mind and hearts and voices to him, and he responds, if we will open our eyes to see.

Now, having a conversation is not the same as calling the pizza dude to have a pie delivered. How often do our prayers sound as if we were talking to the pizza dude?

“God, I have this list of things I want you to fix. And fix them in the next half an hour, because I want them nice and hot and fixed really soon. Oh, and by the way, I’m only going to tell you this once. You are God, after all, so don’t make me bother to take the time and trouble to repeat my request.”

Is that what our prayer is like? But this is not remotely like how Paul tells us to pray in verse 2.

First, he tells us to continue steadfastly in prayer. As the NIV phrases it, we are to *devote* ourselves to prayer. Our prayer is to continue, it is to be something which we are in the habit of offering up, not something we do only in an emergency. And it is to be steadfast, which means to be unshaken and immovable in faith and resolution. In other words, as Paul tells us in Romans 12:12, we are to “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be *constant* in prayer.”

Do you remember the parable which Christ told of the persistent widow and the unjust judge? It is found in Luke 18:1-8. There was, Jesus tells us, “in a certain city a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.” He refused justice to a widow, but she would not give up, and kept coming back to him over and over again. After a while the unjust judge finally gave up. “Though I neither fear God nor respect man,” he says, “yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.”

Luke tells us that the point of this parable is that we “ought always to pray and not lose heart.” God wants us to come back to him in prayer, diligently, repeatedly.

The *second* thing Paul says in verse 2 is that we are to be *watchful* in our praying.

Bishop John Davenant was one of the English delegates to the Synod of Dort in 1618-19. He wrote an excellent exposition of Colossians in which he explains our watchfulness as alertness, as vigilance of mind. He says:

Now I say that the mind is vigilant or watchful, when no ways asleep in sin and worldly things, but always lively expects the day of death and the coming of Christ, and tastes beforehand, as it were, future glory in hope and a sure faith.

[Davenant here is alluding to Paul’s discussion of the “mystery of Christ” in Col. 1:26-27, to which I will return again in a few minutes.]

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He who keeps his mind prepared in this manner, he lives in perpetual watchfulness; he who neglects this vigilance of mind, he, although he may pass days and nights in prayer, is, notwithstanding, judged to sleep. [John Davenant, *An exposition of the epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians*, trans. Josiah Allport, vol. 2 (London 1832), pp. 233-234.]

One example to which Davenant refers is found in Mark 13. In a passage which Harold Camping of Family Radio apparently has never read, Mark 13:32-27, Christ says that no one knows the day of his return except the Father -- not even the Son. Jesus goes on to call us to the vigilance of mind described by Davenant. Christ says

32 “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. **33** Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. **34** It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

35 “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. **36** If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. **37** What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

Similarly, Paul directs the Thessalonians, in 1 Thess. 5:6, to “not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober.”

So in prayer we are to be diligent and steadfast, and also watchful, vigilant in mind. Finally, Paul tells us in verse 2 that we are to be *thankful*.

How can the believer presume to present a request to God for something *now* if he or she is not thankful for what they have received from the hand of God *before*?

Therefore, Paul tells us in Phil. 4:6-7: Do not worry about anything, but in *everything* by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

That is what we want, what we need -- if we are diligent, and watchful, and thankful, then we will find that, even in the midst of our many difficulties, we will have the peace of God in our hearts and in our minds. That is the peace that absolutely nothing in the world can give.

So, having instructed us that as Christians we are to pray devotedly, steadfastly, watchfully, and thankfully, Paul continues in verse 3 by telling us that,

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2. In particular, we are to pray for ministers (v. 3a)

When I was appointed an elder in this fellowship in 2004, one of those who participated was the late Kevin Rhodes, at that time the pastor of Grace Church in Clifton, NJ. Before my appointment, I was interviewed by Pastor Ron and Pastor Kevin and a couple of the other elders of Grace Church to determine my fitness for the position, following Paul's injunction in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 that those who are to be elders must meet certain qualifications.

At that interview, Pastor Kevin took me aside and told me this: as an elder you have a particular responsibility -- but it is one you share with everyone in your congregation. One of your most important responsibilities, he said, is to support and encourage, but, above all, to *pray* for the man who shepherds your flock, which in the case of Bethel is of course Pastor Ron. And this is what Paul is telling all of us here in verse 3.

He says to the Colossians that they are to "pray for us also." Paul is asking for prayer for himself and his companions, so it is worth spending a minute on his circumstances as he wrote these words.

When this letter was written he was in prison in Rome. Indeed, as he mentions at the end of this verse, he was literally in chains, chained to a soldier. So how was he spending his time while in prison? Playing checkers? Well, no. We do not have to wonder what he was doing; we are told explicitly by Luke in the last verse of Acts. In Acts 28:31, Luke tells us that while in Rome Paul was "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."

So Paul wasn't playing checkers -- he was preaching with great boldness. And what was the result of his proclamation? Well, the letter to the Philippians was also written during his imprisonment in Rome. And in the concluding greetings of that letter, he writes "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household." Did you catch who is sending greetings to the church at Phillipi? Greetings were being sent some saints in Rome who were part of Caesar's household -- they served the emperor Nero. How do you suppose some of those who were imprisoning Paul came to be saints? This can only have come about because Paul boldly proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught them, even while in his chains, about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Is this what you and I are doing? In whatever circumstances we find ourselves, no matter how constrained they may appear to be on the surface, do we proclaim the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ? And do we pray for those who are specially charged with that proclamation, that they may be bold and without hindrance?

For this is exactly what Paul is asking us to do back in verse 3. As the Colossians were, first of all, in their steadfast, watchful, and thankful prayer, to pray for Paul and those with him, so we, like them steadfast, watchful, and thankful, are above all to pray for all those charged with the proclamation of the gospel. Notice that to pray for those who proclaim the gospel is to be thankful ourselves -- for do not we, each of us, owe our salvation to some person who came to us and proclaimed Christ?

There are examples of Paul asking for the prayers of the saints in other letters as well. In 2 Cor. 1:11 Paul asked the Corinthian church to “join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.” In other words, Paul expected to receive a blessing from the prayers of many people, and he expected that many others would give thanks for the blessings Paul was receiving. And we know from our passage in Colossians that one of the blessings bestowed on Paul was the blessing of proclaiming the gospel and bringing many to Jesus Christ.

In Romans 15:30-32 Paul asked the Romans “to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God’s will I may come to you.” Notice that he asked for *earnest* prayers from the Romans. Earnest prayers are, I think, prayers which are steadfast, watchful, and thankful. And the prayers for which he asked were for his, Paul’s, own ministry, so that he could be effective in Jerusalem and then come to Rome and be effective in proclaiming the gospel among them.

Does this describe us? Are we earnest, steadfast, watchful in praying for Pastor Ron and for all those who proclaim the gospel? Are we thankful when we see those prayers answered, when we see people humbled and then blessed by the good news about Jesus? I pray that you -- and I -- will be steadfast and watchful in our prayers for such things, and oh so thankful when we see those prayers answered by our sovereign God.

But Paul has even more instruction for us. We are not to pray for pastors and teachers in some vague way -- “O God please bless Pastor Ron,” we say, and then tie our shoelaces. No, Paul is quite specific about how we are to pray for them. For he tells us in vv. 3 and 4 that we are to pray “that God may open to us a door 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.”

So the third point I would like to make today is that

3. We are to ask God that pastors and teachers may exercise their duty

effectively, that is, that they may be given opportunities to proclaim the mystery of Christ as they ought (vv. 3-4)

There are three specific things for which we are to pray as we pray for our pastors and ministers. First, we are to pray that God will open doors for them. We are to pray, 2nd, for *what* they will proclaim, that is, the mystery of Christ. And we are to pray, 3rd, for *how* they are to proclaim it, that is, as they ought.

Let us look at each of these briefly.

First, Paul tells us to pray that God may open a door for the word.

Augustine takes “a door for the word” to mean we should ask God to open men’s hearts so that they may come to understand the gospel.

In chapter 40 of his book *On the predestination of the saints* Augustine says:

The beginning of men's faith is God's gift, since the apostle signifies this when, in the Epistle to the Colossians, he says,

(and now Augustine quotes our text today)

Continue in prayer, and watch in the same in giving of thanks. Withal praying also for us that God would open unto us the door of His word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which also I am in bonds, that I may so make it manifest as I ought to speak.

(Augustine continues:)

How is the door of His word opened, except when the sense of the hearer is opened so that he may believe, and, having made a beginning of faith, may admit those things which are declared and reasoned, for the purpose of building up wholesome doctrine, lest, by a heart closed through unbelief, he reject and repel those things which are spoken?

[*St. Augustin's Anti-Pelagian Works*, vol. 5 of *A select library of the Nicene and post-Nicene church fathers* (1st series), translated by Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, revised by Benjamin B. Warfield (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), p. 517.]

In other words, Augustine says that “the door of his word being opened” refers to the

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act of God in opening the minds of unbelievers. Until God performs this mighty act, no person wants to come to know Christ and no person will come to know Christ. But now God opens the door of their minds and hearts to his word, so that now they understand and accept the gospel. So it is important to pray diligently that God will open the minds and hearts of unbelievers, so that the proclamation of the word may be fruitful.

Paul is also saying that when we pray for “a door for the word” opening for Pastor Ron and for other ministers proclaiming the gospel, we are praying that he will find open doors, opportunities, through which he can step. For example, Paul says in 1 Cor. 16:8-9 that “I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.”

Do I do this? Do you do this? Do I pray for the fruitfulness of the proclamation of Christ? Do I support our missionaries not only with the check-book but also with my prayers? Do I pray that Pastor Ron and all other faithful ministers will be given a wide door for effective work? Do I pray that they will be given confidence and strength to confront and overcome the many adversaries of the gospel? May God convict our hearts concerning these things.

Second, we are to pray that they will faithfully proclaim the “mystery of the Christ, for which I am in chains.”

In the New Testament, a “mystery” is not something which we do not know and are trying to figure out. Rather, a mystery is some truth which we cannot read off the face of nature or figure out by our reason. It is something which was hidden to us, but which now, in the fullness of time, God has chosen to reveal.

Earlier in Colossians, in Col. 1:26-27 and 2:2-3, Paul spoken of the mystery of Christ which had now been revealed. In the words of the ESV Study Bible,

At the heart of the mystery that God is now revealing through Paul is the amazing hallmark of the new covenant, **Christ in you, the hope of glory**. God himself, in the person of Christ, will be directly and personally present in the lives of his people, and his presence assures them of a future life with him when he returns. Moreover, Christ does not reside only in believing Jews but also in believing Gentiles, so that there is one unified people of God. [ESV Study Bible on Col. 1:26-27.]

N. T. Wright calls this mystery “the secret plan of God for the salvation of the whole world. This secret plan has now been made known in and through Jesus Christ. It is the mystery which consists in Christ -- not merely in him as an individual, but in the wide

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implications of who he is and what he has achieved.” [N. T. Wright, *The epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: an introduction and commentary* (Tyndale New Testament commentaries) (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Eerdmans/Inter-Varsity, 1986), p. 152.]

So are we praying for this? Are we praying that Pastor Ron and other faithful ministers will themselves understand and declare what was formerly secret, but now has been revealed -- that we are not utterly lost in the sin of Adam, but that salvation has been accomplished by Jesus Christ for those who believe?

For preaching this mystery Paul is now in chains. N. T. Wright observes that “a message which challenges the power structures of the present age is always dangerous to proclaim -- which is why Paul is in chains” (p. 152). Are we praying that our ministers will be protected from the dangers of proclaiming the gospel, and, when they are persecuted for so doing, they are given the strength to persevere in that proclamation?

Finally, the *third* thing Paul tells us is that we are to pray that such faithful ministers will make this good news in Christ clear, as they ought.

We are exhorted to pray that they will proclaim the gospel clearly, and suitably. To proclaim the gospel clearly means not to cover over those parts which might be offensive to some, not to hide any part of the doctrine of salvation, but rather to proclaim the whole truth. Thus Paul tells us in Acts 20:26, 27, that he was not responsible for the blood of any of his hearers -- that is to say, for their failure to understand and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ -- “for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.” The *whole* purpose, the whole of the gospel -- nothing must be held back which is important to a person’s salvation.

Again, to proclaim it as it ought to be proclaimed means to speak the truth with discernment to the state of the person being instructed. Paul speaks about this in an interesting passage in 1 Cor. 9:19-23:

I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. **20** To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. **21** To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. **22** To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. **23** I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

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Paul considers the situation of the person who he is seeking to woo to Christ, and takes an approach appropriate for that person.

Yet sometimes difficult things must be said -- either stating Biblical truths which some find offensive, or admonishing a brother or a sister who needs correction. As we know, Paul himself was severe in the case of unrepentant sinners or people who deliberately preached a distorted gospel.

The work of Pastor Ron and of all those who preach the good news is never smooth and easy. Although they must be all things to all people, yet they must speak the truth boldly. Although they must be winsome, they must admonish and correct when appropriate. They need perseverance in suffering and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but above all, as we have learned from our text this morning, they need our fervent prayers.

So my prayer for you, and my prayer for myself as well, is that as we consider these things, we may recall the three instructions Paul has given us today. Let us pray diligently, attentively, persistently, and thankfully. And let us not pray just that our pizza may be delivered pronto quick. Let us pray thoughtfully and repeatedly for those who spread the Good News of Jesus Christ to every tribe and tongue and nation. And let us be constant and attentive in praying that those fervent ministers of the word may find opened hearts and opened opportunities in which to speak the truth of the gospel in the way that they ought.

[Closing prayer]

(Peter Flowers, elder, Thetford Baptist Church, East Thetford, VT)