

“Miscellaneous Commands”

Colossians 4:2-6 (ESV)

2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. 3 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— 4 that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

5 Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Saying “Goodbye” isn’t easy. Different cultures handle it in different ways, but in the end, it is always hard to say goodbye. One of the things that is similar between Japanese culture and the culture in the state of Georgia is that you have to say goodbye several times and even then, you just keep on talking. It seems like no one wants to be the first person to walk away. Of course, this is not always the case, but it usually happens when you are talking with dear friends.

In the book of Colossians, the Apostle Paul (AP) seems to be having a difficult time saying goodbye. Even though the letter to the Colossian church is relatively short, he has covered a lot of ground. However, from the beginning of the letter, one thing has been clear. AP wants the Christians in the church in Colossae to grow into mature believers. He has presented to them the supreme Lordship of Jesus over creation and over the church. He has demonstrated that Christians are in Christ and that he is in them.

Paul has shown that there will continue to be challenges in the Christian life. He has given a plan for how to resist the temptation to adopt false teaching, and he has even given some specific instruction on how to apply all that he has said to everyday life. In this closing section of the letter to the Colossians, AP gives four more instructions to the church. These instructions fit into the framework of desiring mature Christians in the church. As we seek to put all that we have learned about Christ, the church, and the Christian life into practice, let’s put these instructions into practice. As we do, these things will help direct us towards a healthy spiritual life—in other words, towards a living, vibrant spiritual life.

The first command that AP gives is “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” In another place Paul said that Christians should “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). It seems to be a matter of great importance that Christians continue to pray, but why would that be? We all believe that God knows the beginning from the end, and that God’s will shall be accomplished. So why would prayer be such an important thing—much less praying without ceasing or praying continually? Without going too far into the details of prayer, I think we can say a few things about prayer.

First, prayer is an expression of our great need of the Lord. The standard set for us by the psalmists should be enough for us to say that when God’s people need his help, they call out to him. So even if

everything will work out exactly the way that God wants it to, our prayers are important because we really need God's help. Prayer is the expression of that need. Secondly, I think that we can say that prayer is more than asking God for a bunch of things. Of course, prayer can be us presenting our needs to God and asking for him to meet our needs. We have plenty of examples of that kind of prayer in the Bible. However, prayer is more than asking for our needs to be met.

Prayer is often a time of reflection on the work of God in our lives. AP mentions that in verse 2 when he says that we should be praying with "thankfulness." I am sure of one thing: pleading with God for your needs is a legitimate kind of prayer, but it is a lonely and often desperate kind of prayer. You will not be able to "continue steadfastly" in prayer if all you ever do is ask God to help you with this need or that need. On the other hand, recalling the great works of God on your behalf and the ways that God has worked in other people's lives will lift your prayers into a new place.

Another thing that we can say about prayer is that it flows naturally into worship. Perhaps the greatest use of prayer is calling out to God in praise. There is not much difference between singing praise to God and praising God in prayer. A good many of our worship songs are prayers. Yet another godly use of prayer is that of confession. We call out to the Triune God asking for mercy, pardon, and restoration through the perfect righteousness of Christ Jesus, our Lord. I am sure we could say more things about prayer, but there are two other elements of Paul's command in Colossians 4:2 that I would like to call your attention to.

First, he says that the church should continue steadfastly in prayer. The word translated "continue steadfastly" means obstinately or preserving. The Japanese text uses a negative *たゆみなく* to say without flagging or stopping. The question is—why should the church continue so doggedly with prayer? I don't think this is an exhaustive answer, but, essentially, we are called to give such attention to prayer because prayer is our link by the Holy Spirit to God. In all the things we have already said about prayer, we have been saying that prayer is our link to God. Whether in praise or supplication, we are connected to God through the Holy Spirit.

Along those lines, AP says that we should continue praying unceasingly with watchfulness. The spiritual forces around us are at war. We are engaged in defending ourselves and the church against false teaching and ungodliness. Our enemies are not flesh and blood. They are spiritual enemies. As such, our weapons are spiritual weapons. Watchful prayer is prayer that has two things going on at the same time. First, it is prayer that remembers all that God has promised to do. Second, it is prayer that knows what is going on in the world around us. I am not necessarily thinking about world events (the Colossians did not have news or the internet to keep up with world events), but rather to pray about things that are important for the spiritual life and maturity of the church. In other words, watchful prayer is prayer that is full of wisdom and hope.

AP's second instruction follows closely on the first. He says, "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." Continuing the theme of prayer, but this time the prayer is not for the church. It is prayer for the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

AP is writing this letter from prison, and yet his goals have not changed. He wants to make Christ known to the world. He is encouraging the church to pray for the word to be free even if he is not free.

There is profound faith on display here, but also humility. I do not doubt that the Colossian church started praying for Paul to be released from prison, but his desire whether in chains or not was to speak clearly the mystery of Christ. There is a direct link between the praying for the expanse of the Kingdom of God and spiritual growth. **A Christian whose faith is growing in knowledge of Jesus wants other people to know Jesus too. Paul's desire for the word of Christ to be clearly proclaimed, even if he is suffering, reflects a life that has been truly changed by Christ.** The prayers of the Colossians are useful in God's plan to bring about God's own will, but it also recalls the need for the gospel to be clearly proclaimed in all places. Paul wants people to pray for him but praying for Paul will also motivate the Colossians to pray for themselves these same things.

Paul says that he wants to preach the mystery of Christ, that he wants to speak it with clarity, "which is how I ought to speak." I think this is always a struggle for us. We want to tell other people about our Lord, but we do not want to face any problems for believing in Jesus. Paul, who is currently in prison for preaching Christ, wants boldness to speak the gospel with more clarity, because it is the way he should speak. We should also be clear with the gospel. When the door is open for you to speak the gospel, do not use generic language or bland expressions. Tell people the truth about Jesus. You should make it a matter of prayer. Pray that missionaries, pastors, Bible teachers, etc. are bold with their presentation of the gospel. It starts with you wanting to see the gospel make a difference in other places among other people. And after you have prayed for others, you will likely find that that desire is coming into your own life. Ask the Lord to send workers out into the world and to bring many people to faith in his Son.

The next command that AP gives is to "walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time." In this verse "walk" means how we live our lives. So, the meaning of the verse is to be careful how you live and interact with non-Christians. The inclusion of the phrase "making best use of the time" implies that life has a purpose and so does our way of living before those who are not Christians. I do not know what kinds of situations Paul has in mind as he warns the Colossians to walk wisely, but we can imagine that he is thinking of the kinds of things that show a person's character. These things include business dealings, community involvement, and disposition toward other people. As you know, changing your religion is not an easy thing. The people around you and your acquaintances will remember the things you did and said before becoming a Christian. So, Paul's advice is to be wise in the way that we live and interact with those people. To be specific, I try not to tell non-Christian people about grievances I have with other Christians. Telling non-Christians that Christians still struggle with sin does not seem like a big controversy at first but sharing your personal frustrations with other Christians can serve as an excuse for a non-Christian to refuse to come to church or hear the gospel. We need to be careful to work diligently and faithfully in our jobs. However, because we are working for the Lord and not for man (or money), our work ethic should also be watched.

Moreover, Christians should not live in ways that are identical to non-Christians, but they should also not cause offense by not being kind and gentle to those around us. We ought to be the most honest, faithful employees that we can be. We need to be faithful neighbors that lend a helping hand when people are in need around us. And we should have joy in our everyday lives. Note, however, the call to wisdom. Individual Christians are not being called to lift this entire weight of responsibility by themselves. The life of the body—the church—is also being commanded here to walk wisely. The church is called to engage in the world in the same godly ways as individual Christians do.

Another side of living wise lives before unbelievers is spending our time on things that really matter. Paul says, “making the best use of the time.” We can take for granted that he means the time we have on earth. We can add a bit of nuance to this interpretation by saying that AP is also implying that the return of Jesus is imminent. Well, in the time that we have left, we ought to use it to its maximum effect. What does that mean? We could interpret it in at least a couple of different ways. I know of a faithful Christian who says that Christians should be very efficient workers. However, I view this as living with different values.

Making the best use of our time should have more to do with obeying the commands of God and prioritizing heavenly things than getting lots of tasks done. In other words, when you are planning your life, don't undervalue godly things for “productive things.” For example, giving all the Lord's Day to Christian worship and rest may seem like a “waste” from a productivity perspective, but you are just prioritizing different things. Joining with God's people in worship is a precious gift. If the people around you wonder why you are wasting your day, you can gently tell them that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God.

You must see that the days that we are living in are full of temptations and are evil. We read that exact description of our world in Ephesians 5:15-16. It says, “15Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.” We are not to walk through life copying what we see in other men and women. The pursuit of pleasure is ruining our world and making people miserable. My encouragement for you is to examine yourselves. What are you spending your time on these days? If someone watched your life for a week, would they be able to tell that you are a Christian who is making the best use of your time?

The last instruction that Paul gives in this section is, “6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” I think that without much interpretation you get the idea of what Paul is talking about. I want to return in a moment to what salt and graciousness have to do with one another, but the overall meaning is plain. Do not use your words to hurt other people, but rather to gently recommend grace and forgiveness to those around you. The other underlying issue with this verse comes at the end. Paul says, “so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”

Paul has asked for the Colossians to pray for him that he would be bold with the gospel, but now he is telling the Colossians to be gracious and answer people in different ways. Or at least that is how I take the “you will know how you ought to answer each person.” How can we be clear with the gospel message while graciously and wisely answering each person? Right away, I think we can separate these ideas from one another, because they are not necessarily talking about the same thing. You can be clear with the gospel and gracious in your speech at the same time. They are not enemies. A gentle answer can turn away wrath, but a gentle answer does not mean deceit.

The connection between gracious speech and salty flavor comes back to our minds at this point. We have all had foods that were under-seasoned and, because of that, unpalatable. You do not want to eat foods that have been under-seasoned. A little salt goes a long way to make even badly-cooked food delicious. Likewise with our speech, a little kindness or a little humility makes even criticism much easier to receive. To put it another way, they make children's medicines sweet, almost candy-like (even though it still doesn't taste amazing) so that it will be easier to swallow. They put some adult medicines into smooth gel capsules because they are much easier to swallow. The healthful medicines should be

received with thankfulness because of their benefits, but the taste would keep people from taking it. With just a little bit of help, the medicines can be taken, and their benefits brought to the body. Our speech needs to follow this same kind of pattern. Whether inside or outside of the body of believers, we should strive to bring healing, peace, encouragement, and joy to one another.

A few warnings about gracious speech: try to focus on things that really matter when offering criticism. If we allow our personal preferences to dominate our criticism of other people, then we will likely lose our audience—no matter how graciously you speak. Also try to think about how your words will be received by the other person. Kindly intentioned words can go quickly astray into rudeness when we do not consider the other person's point of view. You never know how much effort a person has put into overcoming a sin without asking about it, and assuming that the person is doing nothing might lead to hurt feelings and increased guilt.

Whether we are talking about gracious speech, living wisely, praying for the work of the Lord around the world, or praying without ceasing, the Lord is trying to guide us toward spiritual maturity. A deep, spiritual life has its roots in the Word of Christ, and its eyes set on things in heaven where Christ is seated. The desire Paul had for the Colossians Church is the same one he would have for OIC. He would want this church to submit to the head of the church and Lord of creation—our Lord Jesus. He would want this church to know the gospel of grace—the marvelous grace of God given through the sacrifice of Jesus which is received by faith in Jesus. He would want the people of this church to set their eyes on heavenly things and to put off all the earthly sinful things of our former lives. In other words, we are being called alongside the church throughout all time to a life of faith in the Lord Jesus and to grow in that faith.

My prayer for this body of believers is that you hold fast to your hope in Christ. That you do not grow weary in living for the Lord. As you try to keep your hope up and stick to one another in unity, follow Paul's instructions in Colossians 4:2-6. Pray without ceasing, pray for the growth of the Kingdom of God, live wisely, and speak graciously.