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Colossians #21
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Sermon Summary #21

Cultivating a Culture of Prayer and Evangelism at Bridgeway Colossians 4:2-6

Just a few weeks ago John Piper released his most recent book. The title is, *Why I Love the Apostle Paul: 30 Reasons*. John says several things in the book about the suffering Paul endured and how through it all he remained steadfast and unwavering in his proclamation of the gospel and his loyalty to Jesus. I agree with John. I love the apostle Paul for precisely this same reason. To see him grow ever more bold in his preaching of the gospel at the same time his suffering intensified is incredibly encouraging.

It is encouraging because I've never suffered like Paul, and I doubt if many of you have either. As you may recall, Paul didn't like drawing attention to himself unless the spiritual welfare of his people was at stake, and that is precisely the case in 2 Corinthians. The church in Corinth had bought into the lies of certain false teachers who were insisting that Paul wasn't a genuine apostle: he was an impostor. When Paul finally overcame his reluctance to talk about himself, he listed his qualifications to be an apostle of Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, he said:

“Are they [the false teachers in Corinth] servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:23-28).

When I read that description of his suffering, I can appreciate and understand far better his brief reference here in Colossians 4 to his condition as he wrote this letter to the church in that city. It is, he says, “on account” of his consistent and faithful declaration of “the mystery of Christ” that he is “in prison” (v. 3). At the close of Colossians 4, his final request of the believers in Colossae is that they “remember . . . [his] chains” (Col. 4:18).

Now, it's time for a little confession. I don't know that I could remain steadfast and faithful in those conditions. I hope I could, but without the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit it would be utterly impossible. I tried on several occasions over the past two years to put myself in the place of Andrew Brunson. For 18 months in he was “in chains” in Turkey for the simple and sole reason that he proclaimed “the mystery of Christ.” In fact, Andrew's condition was in some respects worse than Paul's. Every time I prayed for Andrew's release, I would ask myself: “Sam, how would you fare if you were in prison with him? Would you remain faithful to Jesus, or would you compromise just enough to secure your release?” I'm often tormented with the possible answer to that question.

In any case, here is Paul, in chains, in prison, most likely in Rome. We hear no complaints. We hear nothing of the sorts of things that you and I regularly say when circumstances in our lives turn for the worse, things like: “Why is God doing this to me? Doesn't he care? If he really loved me, would I be suffering like this? I don't know if God can be trusted with my life.” Instead, Paul asks that the Colossians pray for him that he might have more and more opportunities to do the very thing that landed him in prison in the first place!

Do you find that as surprising as I do? Do you find yourself wanting to push back against Paul and say, “Hey, fella, ease off a bit. You are chafing under those chains and suffering massively precisely because you preached the mystery of Christ. Don't you think that it would be prudent and far safer if you just shut up for a while, do your time, and secure your release?” I hate to say it, but I think that might have been my advice to the apostle. But that's not what Paul says. He says, “Pray for me that God would give me even more opportunities while I am yet in prison, in chains,

to talk to people about Jesus. In fact, pray that when I do talk to them that I would do so with such clarity and power that they would have no option but to openly reject Jesus or bow their knees in obedience and faith.”

So, as we dig into this short paragraph, I want you to hear not only what Paul says about the importance and urgency of prayer and preaching, but also where he is when he says it. Trust me, if you do that, it will change everything you know and do when it comes to both praying and sharing the gospel of Jesus.

We are first going to look at vv. 2-4 and the six things that stand out most vividly in Paul’s request of them. We’ll then turn to vv. 5-6 and his exhortation regarding how we relate to non-Christians.

Perseverance in Prayer (v. 2a)

If anyone knew how easy it would be to quit praying, it was Paul. If anyone had seemingly justifiable cause to quit praying, it was Paul. But the first thing he says to the Colossians and to us is, don’t quit! Continue steadfastly in prayer (v. 2a).

I understand why some of you have stopped praying. So does Paul. Pastors regularly write to me about the untimely deaths in their churches of faithful men and women. Wives tell me their stories about unfaithful husbands. Men weep over a lost job and prolonged unemployment. Families grieve over a stillborn infant or a rebellious teen-ager.

What makes such incidents especially disturbing is that they all occur notwithstanding persistent and fervent prayer that they not occur. Why is it that a man or woman prays for relief or deliverance or for some essential blessing to alleviate intense aggravation, but hears nothing? In humble faith, with sincerity of heart, not for a moment doubting that God is able both to hear and answer their prayers, they pray. But heaven is silent, or so it seems. I once heard a bad joke along those lines:

“What’s ‘God’?” asked an inquiring soul.

“Oh, well, you know when you close your eyes and ask for something?” his friend responded.

“Yeah.”

“Well, God’s the one who doesn’t answer you.”

It’s a bad joke, but for many people it rings all too true. People in Paul’s day faced the same temptation to quit that we do. But too much was at stake. Though defeated at the cross, Satan is still active. The weakness of the flesh abides. The threat of schism in the body of Christ is ever present. Great opportunities to share the gospel are at every turn. So, don’t quit, says Paul! Continue steadfastly in prayer. Keep watch at all times lest you despair. Be thankful for all God has done and will do in response to your petitions.

Be Watchful in Prayer (v. 2b)

The reason why Paul includes this exhortation to be “watchful” in prayer is because *we are so easily distracted* and so quickly justify turning our attention to something else. Be alert, says Paul, to all the ways that your life and your flesh and Satan himself will do everything possible to get you off track, off focus. The phone rings. You suddenly remember an appointment for which you are already 15 minutes late. A child cries out for attention. There are any number of distractions that can derail your commitment to prayer. Be watchful! Be alert! Stay on course!

Bathe your Prayers in Thanksgiving (v. 2c)

I believe Paul includes this qualifying phrase because he wants to instill confidence in us rather than fear and uncertainty as we pray. It’s his way of saying, “Yes, by all means be faithful and fervent in your prayers. But know this: God is always and ever on his throne. The battle is ultimately his, on your behalf. Let gratitude for what God has already done and will do yet again permeate your petitions. In this way you will never lose hope or fall into despair or live in fear that he has abandoned you in your hour of need.”

But how do we do this? What does it mean to pray “with thanksgiving”? Here are a few thoughts.

First, pray with gratitude that **God is actually there**, alive and alert and never asleep. We do not speak into a vacuum or to a God who is preoccupied with other, allegedly more important matters.

Second, pray with gratitude that God not only lives and loves but also **actually listens** to what we say. He hears us!

Third, pray with gratitude that the God who lives, loves, and listens is also **more than able to do above and beyond all we ask or think** (cf. Ephesians 3:20). I'm so thankful that the God to whom I pray isn't a wimp or a weakling, but an omnipotent and infinitely wise Father who delights in giving good things to those who ask (Luke 11:13).

Fourth, pray thanking God that he has chosen to **include you in the process!** God could have ordained that all his will be accomplished independently of our participation. But he didn't. He has chosen to achieve his ultimate ends through means, the latter being primarily our prayers.

Fifth, pray thanking God for all the ways he is **changing you** as you pray. Wholehearted and humble intercession transforms the intercessor. Our ideas of God are elevated. Our awareness of personal dependency is intensified. The magnitude of God's power and providence is manifest in ways that we otherwise might never behold. Our dreams and hopes and desires are cleansed and purified as we humbly submit to his will and crucify our own.

Sixth, pray thanking God that what you are asking him to graciously do in the lives of others **he has already done in yours!** If we are not grateful for the salvation and healing and mercy granted us, how can we possibly be fervent and diligent in asking that God do the same for others?

Seventh, and finally, pray with gratitude to God not simply for what he has done but **for what he will do**. Thank him in advance for what he will do in response to your requests. Without being triumphalistic or sinfully presumptuous, we should pray with expectancy that whatever we ask, according to his will, God will do. Thank you, Lord!

The bottom line is this. It's hard to be fearful when you are immersed in gratitude. Thankfulness turns the human soul toward heaven and away from self. Thankfulness, by its very nature, requires that we fix our focus on "that" God is, "who" God is, and "what" God has done and will do. Thankful prayer is necessarily theocentric.

I'm sure you recall the incident in 2 Chron. 20 where Jehoshaphat and the kingdom of Judah came under siege by the Moabites and Ammonites. After their prayer seeking God's assistance, the prophet Jahaziel came to them with a bizarre word of counsel: "Send out the choir to confront the enemy troops and have them sing these words: 'Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever'" (2 Chron. 20:21).

He instructs them to be thankful on the front end of the battle, before the enemy is ever engaged. On the surface, that doesn't seem very practical. Shouldn't we wait to see if God will really do what we ask and then thank him? Not always. Let the reality of God's steadfast love fill your heart, he told them. Praise him for who he is. Rest peacefully in what he will do. "Stand firm," he said, "hold your position, and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf" (2 Chron. 20:17).

God's Sovereignty in Evangelism (v. 3a)

We all agree that God loves lost souls and wants them to hear the gospel of salvation in his Son. So why does he suspend the opening of an evangelistic door to them on the prayers of the Colossians? "God, why don't you directly open these doors rather than telling Paul to tell us to ask you to do so? What's the point of our asking you to do what you've already revealed is in your heart to accomplish?"

I suspect God's response to me would be: "No, Sam. That's not how I operate. Yes, of course, I could 'just do it' directly and instantaneously, without your involvement or anyone else's. But I prefer to do it when you ask me to. In fact, **in most instances I won't do it unless you ask me to.**"

Here's another question that comes to mind. Why does Paul encourage the Colossians to pray for him? What's the point of his asking them to ask God to open a door for the word? Isn't it enough that he asks God himself? I'm assuming he did, but he evidently believed that it would greatly help his cause if others joined him in beseeching God

for this blessing. Does this imply that God is more inclined to say 'Yes' to our requests if more people are united in asking him for them? That seems odd.

Let's be clear about one thing. I didn't ask these questions because I intend on solving the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. I couldn't solve it even if I wanted to, and how prayer factors into the equation is way beyond my pay grade. Rather, I'm concerned about the nature of prayer. Or, more accurately, I'm concerned about the purpose of prayer. Why has God chosen to incorporate it into the way he governs the world and accomplishes his purposes?

One thing we know: **God loves to be asked**, and there's good reason for it. Consider Psalm 50:12, one of the most sarcastic verses in Scripture. God says to the Israelites: "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine." That is to say, if God were hungry (which, of course, he's not), he doesn't need the Israelites to provide him with a meal. "Every beast of the forest is mine," says the Lord, "[not to mention] the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psalm 50:10).

So, if God doesn't need us or our prayers, why does he create us and then command us to ask him for things? That's a pretty profound question, but it comes with a fairly simple answer.

In Psalm 50:15 God says "When you're in trouble, when you have needs and problems and trials and obstacles to overcome, pray to me and ask that I intervene and make provision. If you do, I'll deliver you. And in your obvious dependence upon me I will be glorified. **We both win. You get delivered. I get glorified.** You receive a blessing. And people and angels and demons see that I'm the all-sufficient supply, the infinitely resourceful God, the One being in the universe who exists to overflow in abundant goodness to weak and needy people like you!

It's amazing how asking a few questions about prayer drives us directly into the reason why God created the universe! God didn't create us because he was needy or lacking in some profound way. We don't supply God with anything. "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:24-25).

So, that being true, why did he make it all? He made it all so that in its (our) utter and absolute dependence on him for everything, his glory as God might be seen and savored. Our need magnifies his supply. Our lack draws attention to his abundance. God glorifies himself by overflowing in bountiful blessings to those who otherwise deserve only death. And how do we get these blessings? By praying for them! **God suspends his work on our prayers not because he can't do it alone but because our prayers highlight our dependence and his supply. We are humbled as dependent and he is exalted as depended upon!**

Not only does he get the glory for being depended upon, but we get the gladness for being dependent! There is no greater joy than getting what God gives (and he is himself, of course, the greatest gift). And there is no greater glory than for God to be giving. Jesus commanded his disciples to pray, and here's why: "Whatever you ask in my name, this will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13). Although there are undoubtedly other reasons why God chose to incorporate our prayers in the accomplishment of his purposes, his glory is preeminent.

One more thing. Earlier I asked why Paul felt it important to enlist the prayers of the Colossians on his behalf. It's not because God is stingy and Paul thought that a multitude of intercessors might have greater success in prevailing on God's otherwise reluctant heart than would he alone. Once again, it's all about God's glory. In 2 Corinthians 1:11 Paul wrote, "You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many."

Note carefully why it's important that the Corinthians pray for him. It is so that "many will give thanks" for the "blessing" that God grants to him in response to their prayers. God's glory is more readily seen and known and savored when "many" rise up in unified gratitude for what he has done than if only one or a few do. **So, when we pray for one another we get gladness in receiving what God gives and God gets glory for giving what we get.**

Before I move on, a brief word is in order regarding the issue of both "open" and "closed" doors (v. 3; see also Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:8-9; 2 Cor. 2:12). The "door", evidently, is closed. This may suggest political opposition, social,

cultural, and educational barriers to sharing the faith, adverse weather that hinders travel, or any number of factors that make evangelism difficult from a human perspective. It may be that Paul is asking God to grant him favor with those who have the authority to give him access to certain arenas of activity or platforms from which he might declare his message. In any case, ***Paul believed that God was sovereign over all such circumstances and that he could remove obstacles and overcome resistance and restrain the enemies of the faith when asked to do so by his people.***

That an Apostle, no less, would ask ordinary Christians like these Colossians to pray for his evangelistic success is stunning. Paul refused to trust in his skill or eloquence or theological knowledge alone. He needed the intercessory support of other believers. It's almost as if he's saying, "I'm helpless if you don't ask God to help me." And it's all the more amazing when we remember that Paul had never met these people!

The Content of our Message: The Mystery of Christ (v. 3b)

And what might Paul or you and I do should the door be opened? We should have one goal, one solitary purpose: to proclaim the mystery of Christ. The word "mystery" doesn't mean what it does in a P. D. James novel or in a Sudoku puzzle. Paul typically uses this word 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 atonement for sin and its forgiveness. That the Word should become flesh (John 1:14) is a mystery now made known for our salvation. That God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19) is a mystery now revealed for our justification. That faith alone in a crucified Messiah is the power of God unto salvation (1 Cor. 1:18) is a mystery now made known for our eternal welfare.

Where Christ is not proclaimed the gospel is not known. No matter how psychologically soothing a sermon may be, if the mystery of Christ is not center stage, the gospel has not been preached. The focus of our message is not self-esteem, social justice, the plight of the poor, or world peace (as important as those issues are in their own right), but Jesus Christ crucified and risen for the salvation of lost souls.

The Clarity of our Message (v. 4)

Finally, and this may well be the strangest thing of all in Paul's request of the Colossians, he asks them to ask God that he might grant Paul clarity in how he should 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. Ask God to operate in my heart and mind and soul so that my message will ring true and will reverberate with passion and conviction and courage."

Stunning, isn't it, that a man of Paul's spiritual caliber and gifting felt so desperately dependent on the prayers of others for his effectiveness in ministry! He made a similar plea to the Roman church, appealing 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" (Rom. 15:30-31).

His request of the Colossians raises an interesting question: What precisely might serve to inhibit or hinder his clarity of speech or prevent him from proclaiming the gospel in the way he desired? It may be that he anticipated trick questions from a hostile crowd and needs the assistance of the Spirit to see through their deception and speak truth into the fog of error. It may be that he sensed the importance of using just the right illustration or parable or analogy to make a point that would penetrate a closed and calloused heart with the truth that brings light and life. Paul, no doubt, felt confused at times and needed the quickening ministry of the Spirit in his mind. "Pray that God would clear my head of intellectual cobwebs and overcome any sluggishness of speech that would be unworthy of the gospel I proclaim. Pray that the Father would fill me with the Spirit of boldness and confidence and drive from me all fear of man and concern for my own reputation or physical safety."

Proclaim the Gospel at all Times, to all People (vv. 5-6)

I'm convinced Paul is talking about evangelistic witness in vv. 5-6. Here's why. First, evangelism is on his mind in vv. 2-4. Second, he wants all of us to be fully equipped to "answer each person," those he calls "outsiders"

(undoubtedly a reference to those outside the church, i.e., non-Christians). And third, the word translated “speech” in v. 5 is the same Greek word used in v. 3 where he asks that God open a door for the “word,” i.e., that he be granted opportunities to preach the “word” of the gospel, the mystery of Christ.

There are five important points in these two verses about sharing our faith with others.

First, we are exhorted to conduct ourselves “*wisely*” toward outsiders. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you” (Matt. 7:6). Wisdom requires that we be discerning as to when we speak and to whom. Sometimes we need to be bold and forthright, while on other occasions, because of the calloused and hostile posture of our audience, we need to keep our mouths shut.

There is another point of emphasis in Paul’s use of the word “wisdom.” “Wisdom is *knowing what to do for the glory of God when the rule book runs out*. It’s knowing how to become all things to all men without compromising holiness and truth. It is creativity and tact and thoughtfulness. It’s having a feel for the moment, and having an eye for what people need and want” (John Piper, “Walk in Wisdom Toward Those Outside,” a sermon on Colossians 4:2-6 at www.desiringgod.org).

Second, we mustn’t lose sight of the urgency of our task. The ESV renders this, “making the best use of the time,” while older translations retain the more literal translation, “redeeming the time” (KJV). Perhaps the best rendering is: “snapping up every opportunity that comes” (O’Brien, 241). Don’t waste any opportunity that comes your way or squander the chance to walk boldly through an open door into the heart of an unbeliever! Every encounter has the potential to be soul-saving. Don’t let fear or hesitation or lack of preparation steal that moment.

Third, our witness must always be “*gracious*” (v. 6), which is to say, as charming as possible without crossing the line into compromise. Be accommodating and kind, says Paul, but not at the expense of truth. In other words, what matters is not simply the content but the manner or spirit in which you speak of Christ to others. *We are to be both “pointed” and “pleasant” in our witness!* Sadly, many embrace one to the exclusion of the other, finding it difficult to hold both in delicate balance. Either they care for nothing but the truth, regardless of how it is conveyed, or they are so afraid of sounding offensive or pushy that they end up diluting the truth and fail to articulate the realities of sin, death, and hell.

Fourth, our proclamation of the “mystery of Christ” must be “*seasoned with salt*” (v. 6). Let there be a pungency to our preaching, a flavor worthy to savor. There’s no virtue in being dull or insipid or lukewarm in the presentation of the gospel. My former professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, Howard Hendricks, was often heard to say: “According to the old adage, you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink. That’s true,” said Hendricks, “but you can feed him salt!” Do you talk of Jesus in a way that makes people’s mouths water? Do your words and manner create the opportunity for a spiritual thirst to emerge?

The psalmist said, “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8)! Do people see and sense the sweetness of the Savior when we speak of him? He is altogether lovely and should not be made known in an unlovely or unappealing manner. Knowing Jesus tastes good! Don’t spoil the flavor by sinful additives and sour dispositions.

Fifth, and finally, we must be diligent to answer “*each person*” (v. 6). He doesn’t mean speak the same way to everyone, but speak appropriately to “each separate person” as he or she has need. We must supply perceptive and discerning answers in accordance with the unique circumstance of each individual. *Not everyone hears the gospel the same way.* Some encounter Christ with probing intellectual objections, while others are struggling with deeply entrenched sinful habits.

Evangelism should never be monolithic, as if one mode or manner of presentation is suitable for all souls. Yes, each is in need of a savior from sin. Of course, there is but one Savior and his name is Jesus. But each person is also at a different stage of life, facing their own unique set of trials and troubles, each with varying degrees of understanding of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished. In sum, be adept to adapt, and pray that the Spirit would awaken their hearts to see and celebrate the mystery of Christ!