

## **Series Colossians**

### **This Message Focusing on Non-Believers**

#### **Scripture Colossians 4:2-6**

Beginning in chapter 3 Paul provided practical instructions to his readers. He was greatly concerned that believers would act in Christ-like ways among themselves in the context of both the Church and the home.

The verses in today's reading relate to the personal devotional lives of believers and their behavior toward non-Christians. These instructions will be beneficial to us for as long as we have life.

#### **Read Colossians 4:2-6**

One commentator stated that these verses touch on "the two extremes of life: the quiet practice of prayer, and the busy life of the market place and the street; the private life of prayer blended with public action."

Scripture makes clear that believers have the responsibility to make the truth of the gospel known to those who do not yet have a relationship with Christ. In previous verses in this letter, Paul emphasized relationships among the community of believers and in the home. Previous instructions were focused on Christ-like virtues which, if practiced by believers, would set them apart as radical and distinctive. By their actions they would be a testimony to their non-believing neighbors and friends.

However, Paul wanted his readers to be more than passive witnesses. He wanted them to take the gospel message to sinners, and to proclaim to them the benefits which are available in Christ. In order to accomplish this, Paul gave two kinds of instructions: speaking to God about people and speaking to people about God. Prayer and proclamation. Those are the themes of our reading.

Paul wanted his readers to understand that effective evangelism begins with prayer. He wanted them to "devote themselves to prayer." Some translations use the words "be diligent;" others "continue steadfastly." All of these words indicate that prayer must be a priority for believers.

Paul also used two other words to enhance the importance of prayer. “Be watchful” is a term meaning to “always be spiritually alert” — to be alert to opportunities to witness to others, and alert to temptations which might lead the believer down paths of spiritual danger. Believers were not to be careless, casual, and thoughtless about spiritual conditions. The final word is “be thankful.” This means that the believer must declare appreciation to God for what He has done. Our enthusiasm for prayer will be higher when we have a genuine appreciation for the salvation God has provided to us and the benefits and promises He has extended to us.

Prayer is an acknowledgement of dependence on God. When we pray, it is a request that the power and authority of the sovereign God might be released through our physical bodies. There is a Biblical principle which states that God’s work must be done God’s way. Humans cannot do God’s work, but we can make ourselves available so that God can work through us. Paul wanted his readers to understand the importance of prayer, to understand how prayer works, and to have an intensity about their prayer efforts.

Paul stated his personal prayer goals for the Colossians in the first chapter of the letter. He wrote: “Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. We pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.” Paul wanted his readers to be godly in their conduct and to be strong effective witnesses.

In verse 3 Paul gave an example of the kind of evangelistic prayers he wanted his readers to pray. Paul was in prison in Rome when this letter was written, but this did not limit his desire for opportunities to preach the gospel. He wanted God to “open a door for his message.” He wanted opportunities to “proclaim,” to literally “make clear,” “the mystery of Christ.” Paul was obligated to proclaim “the Word of God in its fullness.” He had been commissioned to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of the indwelling Christ (*Colossians 1:26; 2:2*).

Paul wanted all believers to be in prayer for unreached people and for those who took God's good news to them. The salvation made possible by Jesus Christ was a fact of history, and the spoken declaration of that salvation was the responsibility of those who had been called of God. It is by human speech that divine truth is revealed. The Colossians had learned and responded to the truth through the preaching of Epaphras. Now, wrote Paul, it was time for them to be as concerned for non-believers as Epaphras and Paul had been for them.

In verses 5 and 6 Paul made two appeals. One had to do with the way believers were to approach individuals who were outside the church fellowship, and the other with the way they were to speak.

Wise behavior implied that believers were to be polite and respectful to outsiders. They were not to do anything to alienate and "push away" their unsaved neighbors and acquaintances. Believers were to conduct themselves in such a way that the pagan community would have a favorable impression of them. A Christ-life lifestyle would go a long way toward attracting, impressing, and convicting non-Christians. Actions validate beliefs, so believers can enhance or cast doubt on the reality of God by the way they act. The best opportunity non-believers have to see the reality of Christ is through the behavior of Christ's followers.

The exhortation to "be wise" or "be filled with wisdom," has two sub-points. First, "wise" believers must "make the most of every opportunity" to "proclaim the mystery of Christ." The evangelism of non-believers is not a "take it or leave it" option for believers. Believers have been given a spiritual priority list. They are to pray diligently for the unsaved. They are to be "alert to" and "sensitive to" the needs of others. They must be eager to share their spiritual blessings with others. What all this means is summed up in the simple statement: "make the most of every opportunity."

Not only actions, but speech is important. Paul wanted the conversations of believers to be always full of "grace" and "seasoned with salt." "Grace" in the New Testament refers to God's blessing, favor, and kindness. In a similar way, believers are to be kind and understanding and gracious to non-believers. God's appeal to us was loving and winsome, not combative and argumentative. Loving, winsome, and gracious — that is the style in which we must engage non-believers.

There are several ideas about the meaning of the phrase “seasoned with salt.” It may refer to purity and wholesomeness because salt was used to prevent food from rotting and decaying. Other commentators think that the phrase refers to the fact that people put salt on food to make the food taste better. Whichever meaning in verse 6 is best, the point is that the conversations of believers with non-believers must be done in a positive, interesting, and winsome way.

Verse 5 began with the words “be wise.” The thought is concluded in the last part of verse 6. The complete thought is “be wise in the way you act” and “be wise in the way you talk ... so that you may know how to answer everyone.” We need God’s wisdom in order to properly respond to people when they ask about, or express interest in, our faith. The inquiries of people are incredibly diverse. Some are from sincere seekers of truth. Others have a malicious and belligerent disposition. Wisdom beyond ourselves is needed to “know how to answer everyone.”

In this letter Paul did not directly attack the false teachers. His objective was to present the truth of the fullness of Christ in such a positive way that his readers would recognize for themselves the dangers of being drawn into thinking which would devalue Christ. It is obvious that Paul wanted his readers to be tightly identified with Christ. He knew that “in Christ” they would become radically different people from their pre-conversion days. He knew that a new set of social and spiritual realities would result from their orientation to Christ. Paul wanted his readers to demonstrate the reality of the Christ-life in their actions and speech so that the community of believers would become spiritually mature and so that many unsaved people would be attracted to Christ. I’m sure you recognized the urgency in the words of Paul throughout the letter.

There is another theme which runs throughout the letter which needs to be highlighted before we conclude our study. Paul wanted his readers to be thankful people. He began the letter by thanking God that there was a fellowship of believers in Colosse (*Colossians 1:3*). He wanted the believers to be thankful “to the Father who had qualified them to share in the inheritance of the saints” (*Colossians 1:12*).

In the central part of the letter, in connection with the words of encouragement, “to continue to live in Christ, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith that they had been taught,” the believers were to “overflow with thankfulness” (*Colossians 2:7*). At the end of his plea for the believers to live in “perfect unity,” with the “peace of Christ ruling in their hearts” and “the Word of Christ dwelling in them,” Paul sums up with the statement, “whatever you do, whether in word of deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (*Colossians 3:17*). Even the prayers of the believers were to be offered with thankfulness (*Colossians 4:2*).

Paul wanted his readers to understand so completely what God in Christ had done for them that they would praise Him joyfully without reservation. He wanted them to understand that no other philosophy or religious system had any claims on their lives, and that they should celebrate their new lives in Christ. “They had been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son of God” (*Colossians 1:13*) and had been given fullness in Christ (*Colossians 2:10*). The fact that the believer’s “life is now hidden with Christ in God” (*Colossians 3:3*) and that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (*Colossians 2:3*), is reason to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (*Colossians 3:16*).

Every believer should read this letter frequently. The thoughts and themes are worthy of our careful reflection. The main themes of the letter apply to us just as they did to the believers in Colosse.