

Prayer and Evangelism (Colossians 4:2-6)

Big Idea: Speak to God about people, and speak to people about God.

We started a church in Liberty Village over 9 years ago. The reason we started is not just because we wanted another church in town. The reason we started this church is because we needed an outpost of heaven in one of the fastest growing communities in Toronto.

We're pretty simple. We want to be a church that's built around three things:

- gospel – what Jesus Christ has done for us in turning sinners into saints, choosing us, adopting us, setting us free, and also fixing the world. We want to focus on this message and make it central to everything we do.
- community – the gospel creates a community that loves one another, focuses on Christ, and serves the Lord. We want to create a super-tight community centered in the gospel that loves one another and serves the Lord together.
- mission – the gospel creates a community that faithfully shares the gospel out of love for God and neighbor

That's it. That's what we want to do as a church. It doesn't really get more complicated than that. It's glorious. God is with us to help make it happen. He's given us everything we need to be a church that's built around gospel, community, and mission.

If I'm honest, today's focus – mission or evangelism – may be the hardest of the three. It is so easy to become an inward-focused church that loves the gospel and loves each other but ignores the world around us. We're terrified of telling other people about Jesus. We don't even know how to start.

But we can't ignore mission. I love what Matthew Kruse writes in his book *What Church Can Be*: "Every church needs to look in the mirror and ask, 'Are we built to love and gospel outsiders together?'...We exist – not exclusively, but pronouncedly – to help outsiders become insiders."

That's why we're here: to be a community obsessed with the gospel and on mission in Liberty Village and beyond.

The question is: how? Today's passage is going to tell us.

Paul is writing to the church in Colossae, a very syncretistic city. Because it was on a trade route, it was full of different religious influences. In other words, Christians were in the minority, and there were many competing worldviews and religious systems.

Paul has just finished talking about how the gospel affects many of our different relationships. In the passage we just read, he begins to talk about how to relate to outsiders, how to be on mission. He teaches us two actions that we need to take. Neither of them are extraordinary. Both of them are actions that every single one of us can take.

Here's the first.

Talk to God About People (4:2-4)

Verses 2 and 4 say:

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.

This is so important. Our mission to the world begins here. If we want the good news of Jesus to spread in Liberty Village and beyond, then it begins with talking to God about people. We think that mission begins with our action. It doesn't. It begins with our prayer.

This is a lot harder than it sounds! I think all of us realize how hard prayer is. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said, "Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer." This may be one of the reasons why sharing the gospel is hard: because we don't begin with this necessary first step.

How to Pray

And so Paul tells us not just to pray. But then he tells us a couple of characteristics that should mark our prayer: alertness and thanksgiving.

Alertness – "continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it..." When we visited the White House earlier this year, we saw snipers on the roof. They are part of the Secret Service Counter Assault Team. The Secret Service says that the snipers on the roof are the best in the world and must qualify every month hitting targets accurately at 1,000 yards. They are on a state of alert. That's kind of the image Paul gives us here.

Why should we work at being alert? Because we need to understand the times we live in. We need to know be aware of ultimate reality – that Jesus is coming back again, that the spiritual world is real, and that so much is at stake. We also need to be

alert to the power of prayer. Begin by staying alert. Don't fall asleep spiritually. Stay aware of what's really going on.

Thanksgiving – He also says that we should pray with thanksgiving. We need this because if we're only alert but not thankful, we may start to get jittery. The cost of being in this spiritual battle will become too intense. Thanksgiving will lighten the load. It will help us to remember all that God has done for us already as we continue to pray for those around us.

I like how Piper puts it:

Watchfulness and vigilance might signify a lot of nail biting and perspiration and heart thumping. But this would be a big mistake. Sometimes our hearts do thump and the hands get clammy, but that is not supposed to be the normal feeling of the Christian soldier.

What we are supposed to feel normally is a sense that the command headquarters in heaven is in control, progress is being made on all the strategic fronts, the battle is the Lord's, the decisive engagements of Christ and Satan in the wilderness and in Gethsemane and on the cross and at the empty tomb have all been won by Christ, and he is leading his church in triumph to a great day of worldwide consummation...

When Paul says that our praying is to be done with thanksgiving, he means that we should keep our eyes on the victory of God. We do not fight as losers or even as those who are uncertain. We know God will win. And if we have eyes to see, we will recognize the path of his power again and again.

Pray with alertness, and also pray with thanksgiving. That's how we should pray.

What to Pray

What should we pray? Paul says to pray for three things in verses 3 and 4:

- **For those, like Paul, who play a particularly important role in spreading the gospel.** Some of us are gifted evangelists; others of us are just ordinary, evangelistic believers. If you are an ordinary, evangelistic believer, then pray for the gifted evangelists! We all have a role to play, but some have a bigger role. Some are on the frontlines. Pray for them. Pray for those in our church and beyond who are particularly called to proclaim the good news of the gospel.
- **Pray for open doors.** Paul is in prison. He doesn't ask them to pray for open doors for himself. He asks them to pray for open doors for the gospel. He wants gospel opportunities. Pray that God would blow the doors open and give us opportunities to share the gospel in Liberty Village!
- **Pray for clarity.** Paul asks them to pray that he would make it clear as he should, things like who God is, what our problem is, how the Son of God became man and died in the place of sinners, and rose again on the third day and reigns at God's right hand, and calls us all to repentance and faith. None of this is intuitive. Pray, Paul says, that he would make it clear.

We want to be a church that makes a difference in the community. This is where it starts.

I love what John Piper says:

I have often said that one of the reasons we feel so weak in our prayer lives is that we have tried to make a domestic intercom out of a wartime walkie-talkie. Prayer is not designed as an intercom between us and God to serve the do-

mestic comforts of the saints. It's designed as a walkie-talkie for spiritual battlefields. It's the link between active soldiers and their command headquarters, with its unlimited firepower and air cover and strategic wisdom.

If you aren't already doing this, I beg you to start. All of us can do this. Please live a life of continual, ongoing prayer. Pray for your pastors, for our missionaries, and for those of us who have a particular role in proclaiming the gospel. Pray for gospel opportunities. Pray for clarity as we take advantage of those opportunities. Keep a list of people you're praying for.

This is key to our success as a church.

The gospel creates a community, and as that community moves into mission it prays. Talk to God about people.

But here's the other thing Paul says to do:

Talk to People About God (4:5-6)

"Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." (4:5-6)

Paul's asked us to pray for his ministry. Now he writes to the Colossians about their ministry. It's not just Paul's job to spread the gospel; they're called to play a role too.

Two very simple instructions here:

- **Live wisely.** That's what he means when he says "walk in wisdom toward outsiders." The idea is that we will live our lives so differently that people will ask questions. They will see something different about us, that our pri-

orities are different. Live a life that will evoke questions. Use every moment you have to live this way.

- **Speak well.** Be gracious. The content and the way you speak are important. Speak in such a way that people want to hear more. Customize your responses for each person. Listen. Really listen. We don't need to have all the answers. We just need to be ready to speak in a way that adorns the gospel, makes it attractive, and shows love to the people around us.

If I were to summarize all of this in one sentence, I'd say: **Speak to God about people, and speak to people about God.**

Look. I find that this passage really helps me. Evangelism can seem like a scary topic. But all of us can do this. Every single believer can pray. And every single believer can live differently, and look for opportunities to speak graciously.

We are here for a reason. Our church exists to be all about Jesus. And as we focus on Jesus, he will create a community in our church where we really care for each other. And as we pray for the world around us, and live and speak in compelling ways, we will see people come to know Jesus. Let's pray right now for God's help in doing this.

Lord, this is simple, and yet it's not easy. So we need your help. Make us people of prayer. Help us to pray with alertness and thanksgiving for open doors and clarity, particularly for those who are on the frontlines sharing the gospel. And let all of us live wisely and speak well so that people are drawn to you. Draw people to you through us for your glory. We pray all of this in Jesus' name. Amen.