

## **Colossians: To Everyone Christ Preeminent**

**Colossians 4:2-6**

By [Wiley Lowry](#)

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Well if you have your Bibles we can turn together to Colossians chapter 4. We'll be in verses 2 through 6 tonight. This is the last section of the body of this letter to the Colossians before we get to some personal remarks from Paul next week. I had a member of the church, Vic Clark, told me once of his nephew who works for Rolex and he was chosen to be involved in this elite school training program for Rolex and he went through this coursework to learn all about the watch and how it worked and all the parts and pieces. And he said at the very end of this course, this school, he was handed a box and in the box were all the parts of a Rolex and so his job, to pass the school and to get a job with Rolex, was to put all the pieces together and make it into an actual, working watch.

### **The Message to the Colossians**

Well it's been three months that we've been working through Colossians. We've taken it apart into many different sections. It may be hard to recognize the whole from where we've started so I wanted to just, before we start this passage or read this passage, go back and recap a little bit of Paul's thought just so we can see the whole message that he's presenting to us in this book. If you remember back to chapter 1, I'm sure you do, verses 15 and following, Paul says that Christ is the firstborn of all creation and He's the firstborn from the dead. He says, "that in everything He might be preeminent." And he goes on and he says, "And as you have received Christ so walk in Him. Don't be taken away by these philosophies and empty deceit of the false teachers. Don't be distracted by those. But set your mind on things that are above where Christ is and walk in holiness, grow in faithfulness, be fruitful." And so he gets to this section in chapter 3 where we've been before and he talks about how that applies to the fellowship within the body of Christ itself. So we're to teach and to admonish one another and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs together. So that's fellowship within the body.

And then two weeks ago when Ralph was with us he then focuses on really domestic relationships, so relationships in the household - husbands, wives,

parents, children, servants. And now he's going one step further outside this sphere of influence and he's going to deal with a Christian's engagement with those outside the church, with the secular world and culture. And that's a relevant topic for us to consider, isn't it? Our culture is becoming increasingly more secular. We're undergoing what many call a moral revolution. And so what is to be a Christian's response to that type of culture? How are we to engage unbelievers and those who hold opposing viewpoints, maybe even hostile worldviews to those of our own? Well, Colossians chapter 4 verses 2 through 6 tell us and our aim is to be to make Christ preeminent to everyone. So with that in mind, let's pray and then we'll read this passage.

*Father, we do thank You for this Word and we thank You for how Your Word delves into every area of our lives and presents Your grace and how we need to rest and cling to it in everything that we do. Help us to apply that to our lives this evening as we seek to worship You and be a faithful witness to You to the world around us. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.*

Colossians 4:2. It says:

“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, and 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.

Conduct yourselves wisely 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.”

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God endures forever.

Just to outline the passage quickly. Verse 2 we see continual prayer. And then secondly we see clear proclamation, verses 3 and 4. And then lastly we'll see consistent practice in verses 5 and 6.

## **I. Continual Prayer**

So in verse 2, continual prayer. Paul is urging his readers to commit to a habit of prayer. The words we have here translated, “continue steadfastly.” Other places you may read it, it's “devote yourselves to prayer.” Paul's message here is completely consistent with his overall message to the Colossians. What better way to express the Lordship of Christ, what better way to express the preeminence of Christ than to faithfully come before Him in prayer, submitting to Him and seeking His will. What better way to pursue the things that are above where Christ is than to go before Him, devote oneself in prayer and to give Him thanks and to seek His favor and His blessing. This is consistent with Paul's

message and the early church was characterized by its prayer. If you remember in Acts chapter 1, the disciples had gathered together, Christ ascended into heaven, they went back to Jerusalem and Acts chapter 1 tells us that “with one accord they were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers.” And then we’ll go on into chapter 2 of Acts. At verse 42 it tells us about after the Spirit had been poured out on the believers and we see this rapid growth of the church that - what was the church doing? The church, it says, “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship and to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” The early church was committed to this way of life, a way of prayer. And Paul Himself, earlier in this letter in chapter 1, he talks about how he himself had prayed for this church and he details the way that he prayed for them. And so now he’s coming to them and he’s urging them to “continue steadfastly in prayer.”

### **The Priority of Prayer**

And that’s a necessary exhortation for us too, isn’t it? Because how often does prayer tend to get pushed to the margins of our life? How often in our daily affairs, in our gatherings together, prayer can maybe be tacked on at the end or maybe at the beginning as a way to get started or as a way to dismiss someone at the end? Or how often does prayer get neglected for more pressing concerns? Maybe the busyness of the day or the tyranny of the urgent, and we find ourselves saying we have no time to pray. And yet it’s interesting, isn’t it, that in this passage where Paul later on he goes on and says that we’re to make the best use of time - what’s he saying to us to do? To commit to prayer; that prayer is indispensable. We are to devote ourselves to it. And even in these brief few words, “Continue steadfastly in prayer,” there’s a tremendous blessing in there because if Paul is able to command us to be continually in prayer, what does that imply? It implies that God continually gives us access to Him, that He continually hears our prayers. It’s a tremendous privilege and blessing that we can come to Him freely and openly and consistently, bringing our requests before Him. Think about those accounts in the Bible where men and women have gone before earthly kings and sought their favor, made requests to them. You think about Esther. Remember Esther when she went before King Ahasuerus and she really risked her life, she put her life on the line, boldly approaching him trying to seek his favor? Or Nehemiah. You remember Nehemiah when he goes to Artaxerxes and he’s nervous, he’s hesitant, he doesn’t know if he’s out of line to approach the king this boldly. Even Paul in Acts chapter 23, Paul’s coming before King Agrippa and it talks about all this pomp and this show and circumstance that surrounds King Agrippa and Paul has to be permitted to speak. He has to be given permission to come before the king and to speak to him. And yet before the King of kings and the Lord of lords, we’ve been granted full access to approach Him boldly and openly and consistently. It’s amazing. It’s an amazing privilege to the believer.

And remember too that this passage, when he says, “Continue steadfastly in

prayer," if we were to look at the Greek it's in the "y'all" tense. Ok? So he's saying, "Y'all continue steadfastly in prayer." Okay? So there's an application to us even in this room, commending to us the practice, the commitment to gather together and to pray for the church, to pray for our engagement and involvement with non-Christians, with the secular world around us. It is an important aspect of church life - it's to be gathered together and to give a priority to the commitment to pray.

### **Pray being Watchful**

And how are we to pray? Look at what Paul says. He says, "being watchful in it with thanksgiving." We're to pray by being watchful and by being thankful. Again, in just a few words, Paul, he really identifies two major errors that Christians can fall into and he prescribes the way to deal with those errors. One of the errors would be that we are prone to assimilate into the ways of those around us. C. S. Lewis has said that oftentimes men and women feel that they're beginning to make their way in the world when actually the world is making its way in them. We're prone to assimilate to those around us. We become numb to temptations, desensitized to sin, and to the sins that are at work in us and around us. We become lured by temporal desires. We let our guard down to false teachers, to heresies, or even worse we want to hear things that sound good, that may have a little nugget of the truth that sounds good to us and we're lured away by those things. And what does Paul say? He says, "Watch. Watch. Be watchful in prayer. Examine your hearts. Examine your motives. Examine your decisions. Examine your surroundings. Examine the messages you hear, the images you watch, the words that you say. Watch. Pray being watchful." That's his message to us. In order to prevent assimilating into the world around us is to watch.

There was, in 1662, the Puritan pastors in England were ejected from their pastorates. They did not agree to sign the Act of Uniformity, to go along with certain decrees of the queen, and so they were removed from their pulpits. They lost their congregations; their congregations lost them. They lost their liveliness, their way of supporting themselves, their means. And there's a little book in the Puritan Paperbacks that's, *Sermons of the Great Ejection*. So they're the last sermons that these men preached in their pulpits. And in the sermon on Thomas Watson, one of the Puritan men, he said these words. He said, "If it were the last word I should speak, it would be this word I should speak, it would be this word - watch." The last word he would leave with his congregation as he left them and didn't know what was to come of that church, he says, "Watch." We're to watch. Paul says to watch in order to prevent being assimilated into the culture around us.

### **Pray being Thankful**

But what else does Paul say? He says we're to be thankful. You know on the

opposite extreme of being assimilated into the culture around us is to disengage and cloister ourselves so that we're not influenced or impacted in any way by non-Christians. We become bitter and discouraged. You know, we hear the messages of talk radio shows and new programs. You know you've heard the phrase, "No news is good news." But the phrase about talk radio is that "Good news is no news." So what we hear on the messages on TV and the radio is bad news because good news is no news. And we hear these things, we take them in; we become bitter and discouraged. We grumble and we wish for the good old days. And yet if we're stuck in the past we're missing what's going on now. We're not really engaging the challenges that are around us. We're not seeing the blessings that God is doing now, the opportunities that are available now, the way God is working in the present. And so what Paul says is to be thankful. This has been a theme that's emphasized throughout his letter - be thankful.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of thanksgiving in Paul's teaching and writing. You know Ralph was with us a couple of weeks ago and he made the point about how the indicative always precedes the imperative, that what God has done in Christ for us always precedes and is the foundation for what we do for Christ. One writer says that "Thanksgiving is the bridge. It's the bridge between theology and ethics." So the thing that takes us from our theology and the things that we learn from the Bible and takes us to the ethics to what we do is thanksgiving; it's gratitude. That's what takes us from theology to ethics. And that writer says this. He says, "In thanksgiving we remember God's mighty acts as we look forward to the continued manifestations of His own faithfulness. So as we see what God has done in the past, His faithfulness to us, His goodness to us, and we express gratitude to Him for those things, then we're encouraged to face the challenges that are at hand or in the future. Knowing that He is faithful, He is good, and He will work all things together for our good. It's thankfulness that helps us engage those challenges. And so Paul first says, pray, being watchful and being thankful.

## **II. Clear Proclamation**

And now he makes a specific request. Look at verse 3. 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." So in order for Christians to engage non-Christians, for the church to engage the world, the Gospel must go out. The mystery of Christ must be spread. And so Paul asks that a door would be opened for the Word to go out and that as it goes out it would go out clearly. I think that's a helpful piece of Paul's instruction of this letter. He's been warning us about outsiders, about false teachers. He's been saying, "Watch out for them." He's even told us about how he's been mistreated and confined and he's been in conflict. And so you could tend to get the notion that maybe outsiders are bad, that those outside the church are our enemies. And yet what Paul is saying is that we're not to view them as the enemy, we're not to take an

“us versus them” mentality. And that’s a temptation for all of us. We’re confronted by people who don’t believe the Gospel, we’re confronted by people who do things that dishonor God, some of the popular things in press today are written by the new atheists, the aggressive atheist. I read about a billboard that’s been placed around in several cities around us by The American Atheist Convention and it has a picture of a little girl and she’s writing a letter and next to the picture it says, “Dear Santa, all I want for Christmas this year is to skip church. I’m too old for fairy tales.” And it’s advertising The American Atheist Convention in 2015. And it makes us mad. It makes us jealous for Christ’s honor. And yet, what Paul’s reminder to us is so helpful is that they are not the enemy. We’re not engaging them in order to win an argument or even to get our own way. But we’re engaging them, those outside of the church, in order to spread the Gospel, that there would be an open door for the Word and the mystery of Christ to spread and for His kingdom to advance.

And there are actually a couple of ways that Paul, you know Paul talks about how that even happens in challenging circumstances. Look at what he says. “On account for which I am in prison.” He’s in prison for the Gospel. I think there’s a couple of ways that we could point out how Paul is in prison for the Gospel. Most obviously he was in prison for preaching the Gospel. He had preached the Gospel and the Jews had risen up against him and said he was rejecting the Law and he was defiling the temple and he was bringing in Gentiles to the temple so he was arrested and he was sent ultimately to Rome. But there’s another way in which Paul was arrested, he was bound, not because of preaching the Gospel but in order to preach the Gospel. If we look in Acts chapter 23 in that same situation, this is in fact talking about Paul’s Roman imprisonment. In that same situation he was held in the barracks and the Lord appeared to him and he said this. He said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.” You see, the Gospel has him bound but he’s also bound in order to preach the Gospel, that he would be taken to Rome in order to spread the Gospel in that city. So Paul’s bound for two different reasons on account of the Gospel.

### **Gospel Opportunities**

There can be open doors for the Gospel even where the doors appear to be closed. Do we have our eyes on the lookout for open doors? Are we looking for ways to share the Gospel, to spread this mystery of Christ even when the doors appear to be closed? What about at work or in your neighborhood when religion is a topic that’s off limits? Or what about in public schools when prayer is eliminating, teaching the Bible is eliminated? And yet there are ways, before and after school, to come in and to teach the Bible and to spread the Gospel, even in places that look difficult and hard, rocky soil. Are we doing those things? Do we have our radars up? Do we have our eyes opened to those things? What about some difficult family members? Are we looking for ways to continue to nurture those relationships and to love them and to pray for them and to share with them

the love of Christ?

Most of the time we interact with other Christians. Most of the time we probably interact with members of this church. And yet I had a missionary to Vietnam share with me one time a helpful advice. He said, "When you wake up in the morning ask God, pray to God to give you an opportunity, to give you an open door to share the Gospel." And he says, "At the end of the day, when it comes time to pray to God, ask Him, 'Show me the opportunity that I missed. Show me where I missed an opportunity to share the Gospel and to be a witness to Christ.'" And he said, "So often it will come to your head. You will see the place where you had an opportunity to be a witness for Christ and you missed it." And as you become sensitive to those opportunities you'll be more encouraged to take advantage of them and to be bold in those opportunities.

### **III. Consistent Practice**

And so here's Paul. He's presenting us with an approach to secular culture, to non-Christians, and he's building this up. He says first, continual prayer, and then clear proclamation of the Gospel. Finally, he talks about consistent practice, verses 5 and 6. Look at that. He says, "Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the best use of time. Let your speak always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." He's commending to them changed lives, consistent practice, godly lives. And he really focuses on two areas, two avenues of those lives. It's a use of time and gracious speech. You see he's saying that the good news about Christ should be commended to those outside the church by the changed lives and the consistent practice of those in the church. Remember the way, if you were to look back in chapter 3, remember the way of life these brothers and sisters had come out of. They came out of a secular way of life in which it talks about sexual immorality and purity, passion, evil desires and covetousness. In chapter 3 verse 7, Paul says, "In these you too once walked when you were living in them." What about the way they talked? Paul says that they came from a way of "malice, slander, obscene talk, lying to one another." Chapter 3 verse 8 he says, "Put them all away." You see, that's the context that they lived in. They were surrounded by that on all sides. And there was a temptation or a tendency for them maybe to revert back to those ways and just to blend in, try to fit in. And what Paul says to them is to talk in wisdom, make good use of your time, and speak graciously to one another.

### **Before the Watching World: The Witness of Godliness**

That would be a compelling demonstration of the Gospel, a compelling demonstration of changed lives in Christ. You know we live in a similar context, don't we/ We live in a context where we have easy access to wasted time, to elicit behaviors, to gossip, to misrepresenting ourselves, all at the push of a

button, all at our fingertips. There's an app for that you could say. And yet, those things can ruin our relationships and spoil our witness of the Gospel. And so what Paul comes in and says in this letter, he says, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." He says, "Whatever you do, in word and deed, to everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him, that in everything Christ may be preeminent." Not only that, "to everyone Christ may be preeminent."

So how are we to engage those in the world? By continual prayer, by a clear proclamation of the Gospel, and a consistent practice of godliness. Those are good things for us to pray for tonight. Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Father, we do thank You for this Your Word. How much we need it. Help us to be on our guard and to be thankful and to walk in Your ways and to grow in our love for You and to love our neighbor and to love them in the way that You have called for us to do. And we pray all these things in Jesus' name, amen.*

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