

## Praying with Purpose Colossians 4:2-18

### Introduction

**Personal Letter:** This is God's Word but it is a **letter** written from a real person (Paul), under the inspiration of the HS, to real people. These are not **abstract instructions** but **real-world guidance**. Today we'll look at the last chapter of Colossians, focusing mainly on the instruction in vv. 2-6.

- These 5 verses are built around 2 commands (imperative phrases): **continuously pray** (τῇ προσευχῇ προσκαρτερεῖτε) and **walk in wisdom** (ἐν σοφίᾳ περιπατεῖτε).

**All You Have to Do is Ask:** To plant a church I had to raise a lot of money. Early on I realized a key biblical principle that also relates to fundraising: "You have not because you ask not" (Jas 4:2). And the principle extends far beyond. **There are so many things we miss out on simply because we do not ask.**

- Dog goes missing but you're too apathetic, embarrassed, or busy to hang up lost dog posters. Someone is waiting for you to ask.

<sup>2</sup> Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. <sup>3</sup> 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— <sup>4</sup> that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. <sup>5</sup> Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. <sup>6</sup> Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. <sup>7</sup> *Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord.* <sup>8</sup> *I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts,* <sup>9</sup> *and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.* <sup>10</sup> *Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him),* <sup>11</sup> *and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.* <sup>12</sup> *Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.* <sup>13</sup> *For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.* <sup>14</sup> *Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.* <sup>15</sup> *Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.* <sup>16</sup> *And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.* <sup>17</sup> *And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord."* <sup>18</sup> *I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1 2</sup> Τῇ προσευχῇ προσκαρτερεῖτε, γρηγοροῦντες ἐν αὐτῇ ἐν εὐχαριστίᾳ, <sup>3</sup> προσευχόμενοι ἅμα καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν, ἵνα ὁ θεὸς ἀνοίξῃ ἡμῖν θύραν τοῦ λόγου λαλῆσαι τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ, δι' ὃ καὶ δέδεμαι, <sup>4</sup> ἵνα φανερώσω αὐτὸ ὡς δεῖ με λαλῆσαι. <sup>5</sup> Ἐν σοφίᾳ περιπατεῖτε πρὸς τοὺς ἔξω τὸν καιρὸν ἐξαγοραζόμενοι. <sup>6</sup> ὁ λόγος ὑμῶν πάντοτε ἐν χάριτι, ἅλατι ἡρτυμένος, εἰδέναι πῶς δεῖ ὑμᾶς ἐνὶ ἐκάστῳ ἀποκρίνεσθαι. <sup>7</sup> *Τὰ κατ' ἐμὲ πάντα γνωρίσει ὑμῖν Τυχικός ὁ ἀγαπητὸς ἀδελφὸς καὶ πιστὸς διάκονος καὶ σύνδουλος ἐν κυρίῳ,* <sup>8</sup> *ὃν ἔπεμψα πρὸς ὑμᾶς εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο, ἵνα γνῶτε τὰ*

## 1. Pray for Opportunities (vv. 2-4)

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

**Prayer:** Paul's tells this beloved church to continue in (to) prayer (τῇ προσευχῇ).

- Prayer is communication with God, it is talking to God, going to him with our needs.
- “Prayer is pouring out our hearts to God in praise, petition, confession of sin, and thanksgiving” (New City Catechism).
  - Prayer, at its core, is an **exercise in dependence**. I need God.
  - As a result, prayer is not some extra thing for varsity Christians, but foundational for any of us who claim the name of Christ. Prayer is not what you graduate to but what you start at. Prayer is not what you do when you exhausted every other strategy. **Prayer is our first option, not our last resort**. Prayer is not what we do when we've tried everything else, prayer is what we do before we do anything else.

**Devote:** Continue steadfastly or “devote yourselves” to prayer (προσκαρτερεῖτε). Paul is saying that it's going to require some **effort**, implying that we must persevere in prayer despite the **difficulty**.

- Grace does not create passive bystanders but active participants. “The gospel is against earning, not effort.” We don't earn salvation, but we do strive for godliness. The salvation of God empowers us to strive toward godliness. “Grace-driven effort.”
- The hardest things I've ever done are the things worth doing (e.g., church planting, foster care, marriage, PhD). What was the key to finishing you PhD, “too dumb to quit” (e.g., continue steadfastly).
- All of us are devoted to something. We save our money, schedule our time, prioritize our thoughts toward something we love. **What are you devoted to? Is it Christ?**

**Watchful:** Not only does he say “devote yourself” to it but [be] watchful in it. Be ready, don't be caught off guard.<sup>2</sup> “Remain here and keep watch... Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Mark 14:34, 38). “Vigilant prayer

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περὶ ἡμῶν καὶ παρακαλέσῃ τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν, <sup>9</sup> σὺν Ὀνησίμῳ τῷ πιστῷ καὶ ἀγαπητῷ ἀδελφῷ, ὅς ἐστιν ἐξ ὑμῶν· πάντα ὑμῖν γνωρίσουσιν τὰ ὧδε. <sup>10</sup> Ἀσπάζεται ὑμᾶς Ἀρίσταρχος ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου καὶ Μάρκος ὁ ἀνεψιὸς Βαρναβᾶ (περὶ οὗ ἐλάβετε ἐντολὰς, ἐὰν ἔλθῃ πρὸς ὑμᾶς, δεξασθε αὐτόν) <sup>11</sup> καὶ Ἰησοῦς ὁ λεγόμενος Ἰουῖτος, οἱ ὄντες ἐκ περιτομῆς, οὗτοι μόνον συνεργοὶ εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ, οἵτινες ἐγενήθησάν μοι παρηγορία. <sup>12</sup> ἀσπάζεται ὑμᾶς Ἐπαφρᾶς ὁ ἐξ ὑμῶν, δοῦλος Χριστοῦ [Ἰησοῦ], πάντοτε ἀγωνιζόμενος ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν ἐν ταῖς προσευχαῖς, ἵνα σταθῆτε τέλειοι καὶ πεπληροφορημένοι ἐν παντὶ θελήματι τοῦ θεοῦ. <sup>13</sup> μαρτυρῶ γὰρ αὐτῷ ὅτι ἔχει πολὺν πόνον ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν καὶ τῶν ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ καὶ τῶν ἐν Ἰεραπόλει. <sup>14</sup> ἀσπάζεται ὑμᾶς Λουκάς ὁ ἰατρός ὁ ἀγαπητὸς καὶ Δημᾶς. <sup>15</sup> Ἀσπάσασθε τοὺς ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ ἀδελφοὺς καὶ Νύμφαν καὶ τὴν κατ' οἶκον αὐτῆς ἐκκλησίαν. <sup>16</sup> καὶ ὅταν ἀναγνωσθῇ παρ' ὑμῖν ἡ ἐπιστολή, ποιήσατε ἵνα καὶ ἐν τῇ Λαοδικέῳ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἀναγνωσθῇ, καὶ τὴν ἐκ Λαοδικείας ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀναγνώτε. <sup>17</sup> καὶ εἶπατε Ἀρχίππῳ, Βλέπε τὴν διακονίαν ἣν παρέλαβες ἐν κυρίῳ, ἵνα αὐτὴν πληροῖς. <sup>18</sup> Ὁ ἀσπασμὸς τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ Παύλου. μνημονεύετέ μου τῶν δεσμῶν. ἡ χάρις μεθ' ὑμῶν.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Thes 5:4-6

provides the spiritual fortitude to face down temptation” (Garland). How often is our prayer only reactive and never proactive?

- Spiritual discipline (invitation not obligation). When you have that heart attack, it’s too late. You should’ve prioritized fitness prior. E.g., studying for the test, cardio for the game.
- Would any area of your life suffer if you prayed more?

**Magic Bullet?:** <sup>7</sup> “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened (Matt 7:7-8) Just because you pray, doesn’t mean God is going to give you what you ask for. Prayer is not a vending machine for God’s blessing, but an opportunity to align our desires with his plan. <sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matt 6:33).

1. We don’t pray to get what we want, because getting what we want, if it’s not what God wants, will leave us just as empty as before. We pray so our hearts will be aligned with God’s desires, we will learn to seek his righteousness, and in seeking his kingdom we find the treasure our hearts were longing for all along. The **paradox** is this, by seeking God first, all of the things we worry about are taken care of. Either God gives us what we seek or he shows us something better to seek!

Why might God not answer your prayer the way you want (adapted Greig)? **The 9 “C’s” of Unanswered Prayer.**

1. **Common Sense:** Am I asking God to do something stupid, meaningless, or illogical?
2. **Contradiction:** Are my prayers likely to conflict with those of someone else?
3. **Comfort:** Life is tough, am I expecting God to spare me from discomfort?
4. **Covenant:** Does my prayer reflect God’s character, His promises in the Bible, and Christian doctrine?
5. **Compromise:** Is it possible that God has something even better for me and I’m asking for second best?
6. **Conceited:** Is my prayer essentially just self-seeking, self-centered, or plain selfish?
7. **Control:** Am I trying to exercise ungodly power or influence over another person’s life?
8. **Confidence:** Do I really have faith that God can do this?
9. **Consistency:** Do I want it enough to keep praying, to persevere in asking?

**Persistence:** The last “c” is largely what Paul is commending here. **Perseverance in prayer.**

- In Matthew 7 Jesus talks about prayer as asking, seeking, and knocking. Notice the escalation? Asking could be in passing. Seeking requires some intentionality. Knocking is a more persistent approach.
- **Persistence is a key element of prayer that we often neglect.**
  - Persistence proves our prayers are not for temporary relief but because of a significant need. This problem is severe enough that we continue to ask day-after-day.
  - Persistence demands patience and waiting and these are often fertile soil for spiritual growth. Our natural inclination is to use God to get what we want rather than love and trust God. Discouragement in prayer can purify our desires so that we learn to seek God’s best for us, which ultimately is him.

- Perhaps God desires to give you exactly what you have asked for, but only in a time and way that can truly **benefit** you instead of **harming** you.
- God often uses waiting to mold and transform our desires, to change how we pray and even what we are praying for so that we gradually come to pray closer to the heart of God's will.

**Thanksgiving:** Such a heart prays to God not with bitterness or anger but with thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is the attitude of trust that fuels our pray. Whatever God gives and whatever God withholds is for our good. **We don't pray with fear, anxiety, or impatience, but thankful trust.**

- This is a theme of Colossians<sup>3</sup>: And be **thankful**. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with **thankfulness** in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving **thanks** to God the Father through him (3:15b-17).

**Intercessory Prayer:** <sup>3</sup> At the same time, pray also for us, Not only does prayer push us to depend on God, but it invites us to depend on other. Paul asks them to **pray for him**. Intercessory prayer is the first step in loving each other.

- "If you're not praying for someone, please don't try to fix them" (McKinley). I can't say I care for you if I won't even carry your needs to God.

We are all needy and needed. **We need each other.** We see this in the last 12 verses of the book. Paul's roll call is a reminder of the many people Paul depends on to carry out his ministry and care for his needs.

- We see two gospel writers (Mark and Luke). We see many people that show up all over the NT (Onesimus, Tychicus, Epaphras, Aristarchus, and Barnabas). They are described as beloved brothers, faithful ministers, fellow servants, fellow prisoners, fellow workers for the kingdom of God, who have comforted Paul.
- The work of God is meant to be accomplished in the power of the Spirit by the body of Christ.

**Opportunity:** 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—

- We pray for gospel opportunities (i.e., open doors). So our **desires** are for what Jesus desires (that the lost would be saved) and our **dependence** is on him. He must open the doors. That is why he says: **When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest"** (Matt 9:36-38).
  - This is why we should never strategize more than we pray. Evangelistic strategy and intentionality are important, but they can never make up for God's power. God opens doors, not our ability. God is active and we need him.
- "Christians don't actually believe in the power of prayer; we believe in the power of God and that is why we pray" (Burk Parsons).

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<sup>3</sup> Col 1:3, 12

**Gospel Clarity:** The goal is not personal advancement but gospel progress. <sup>4</sup> that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

- Clarity is actually harder than confusion. It takes more understanding to teach clearly. When the gospel is fuzzy in our minds and hearts then it will be unclear to those with whom we share (e.g., teaching teenagers; sound smart or understand; for me or them; intent vs. impact).

## 2. Walk in Wisdom (vv. 5-6)

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

**Walk the Walk:** What good is it to pray for opportunities if we waste them when God brings them? **There will be no opportunity unless God gives it and no success unless you take advantage of it.** Prayer is no substitute for obedience.

- That's why Paul says to "walk in wisdom" (εν σοφία περιπατεῖτε). This is one of his favorite words: walk (which is why we've adopted it into our Christian vernacular, i.e., "walk with the Lord").
  - "Might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4).
  - "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7).
  - "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal 5:16).
  - "Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord" (Col 1:10).
  - "As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him" (Col 2:6).
- "Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph 5:2). We talk about "falling in love." I say to couples in pre-marital counseling: falling is an accident, walking is a choice.

**Wisdom:** How should we walk? In wisdom.

- Why do we need wisdom? Because life is complicated, people are complex, and sin creates confusion.
  - There's a huge difference between intelligence and wisdom (e.g., book smart vs. street smart). Some of the least educated people I know are the wisest (and *vice versa*).
  - Our society has told us that intelligence and education are the path to wisdom and success. With enough information, we can "make the world a better place." Information helps us but, if the internet has proven anything, more information does not equate to more wisdom. We are living in the information age but it certainly seems we are more unwise and unwell than (possibly) ever before (we have confused technological advance with wisdom).
- "Knowledge is knowing that Frankenstein is not the monster. Wisdom is knowing that Frankenstein is the monster."
- "Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad."

- “[Real] obedience [is] the strength to stand, the willingness to leap, and the sense to know when to do which” (Peterson).
- We need more wisdom and less pundits. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him (Jas 1:5). We need God’s wisdom, not human intelligence.<sup>4</sup>

**Evangelism:** Where do we need wisdom? In our efforts to share the gospel (toward outsiders). If we are going to be **evangelistically effective**, then we need God to open doors and God to give us wisdom in how to walk through them.

- I’ve found that **effective evangelism**: (1) gospel urgency (the problem is sin, the need is the gospel), (2) gospel fluency (the ability to articulate the gospel clearly), and (3) gospel intentionality (planning and trying to reach the lost), and (4) gospel wisdom.

**Redeem the Time:** Making the best use of the time. If we are going to use the opportunities God has given us in the best way possible (e.g., “discern what is best,” Phil 1:10). Wasting time is natural, but God calls us to redeem our time by seeing opportunities for the gospel in the midst of our ordinary lives.

- Ordinary opportunities (e.g., grocery store, coffee shop, water cooler, sports team, coworker, friend, family member, etc.).
- Only one life, ’twill soon be past, / Only what’s done for Christ will last (C. T. Studd).

It takes wisdom because it’s not a program but a personal application. Each of us have different gifts, circumstances, opportunities, and temptations.

- Some of us need to study the Bible more, others need to get outside and talk to somebody. What is medicine for some, is poison for others.
  - We need God to open our eyes. We need humility to be honest with ourselves. We need accountability to help us with our blind spots.

### **Barriers to Evangelism:**

- (1) Apathy (busy, unmotivated, distracted, etc.)
- (2) Fear (reputation, lack of knowledge, confrontation, etc.)
  - Both put us at the center rather than God. Our time, our reputation, our comfort, our schedule, our worries become more important than God’s call.
  - The only solution is a greater love of God, a greater compassion for people, and a greater perspective of eternity.

**Speech:** <sup>6</sup> Let your speech. The context is evangelism, sharing the gospel. So the application is our words/speech. There is a fictitious phrase circulating: “preach the gospel, and if necessary use words.” It is ascribed to Francis of Assisi (he didn’t say it, he wouldn’t say it, and it doesn’t make sense). It would be like saying, give me your phone number and if necessary use digits (it’s necessary).

- Certainly, our lives can undermine our words (so if you say it, you should live it).
- But the gospel is news to be proclaimed. It is a word to be shared. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 1:18-2:5

they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? (Rom 10:14).

**How You Say It:** always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

- **That** you speak the gospel matters. But so does **how** you speak (e.g., street preaching). He describes our gospel conversations as gracious, salty, and wise. What does that mean?
  - **Grace** means filled with kindness, extending compassion, treating others as you want to be treated, assuming the best of them, etc. **Being right is no excuse to be mean.**
  - Seasoned with **salt** does not mean “salty” like we think (e.g., angry, upset) but seasoning. It was often used in ancient literature to describe the flavor of conversation (wit, humor, personality). Each of us has a unique personality that we bring to each conversation. When used for God’s glory that’s a good thing (rather than for ourselves).
  - Having the **wisdom** to know how I ought to speak to a given person in a given conversation.
- In the opening chapter Paul had prayed that the gospel would bear fruit in the church and through the church to the rest of the world. That is our prayer, that the beauty of the gospel would grow deeper in us and wider through us as we share it with others.<sup>5</sup>

**Your Opportunities:** You have a calling, gifts, and opportunities unique to you. There are people who will only hear the gospel if you tell them.

- Are you wasting your opportunities?

## Conclusion

**Funk:** Someone asked how I was doing recently and I had to answer, “I’m in a bit of a funk.” And I’ve thought about that. Why? Dozens of salvations at youth camp, youth retreat, etc. And I’d gotten back into the “normal” routine of church, bogged down by budgets, building challenges, interpersonal drama, and tedious tasks. I’m happy to deal with those things, but that is not my priority.

- I didn’t move my family to Philadelphia and plant a church for those things. I did it because I want to see the lost saved and the dead raised to life. I wanted to be on the frontlines of the gospel advancing into darkness. I’ve been blessed to see these things and I long to see them again and see them more. That’s the point: **pray**. “I don’t need to reinvent the wheel, but I do need to put a new tire on it.”

**Pray:** Our invitation is one to pray. Pray for **gospel opportunities**. Pray for the **gospel wisdom**. Pray for **gospel obedience**. Pray for the lost by name. Pray for our own apathetic and distracted hearts. Go to God and ask him to do in and through us what only he can do, for his glory and the good of our neighbors.

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<sup>5</sup> Col 1:5-6