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Pray That God Will Open a Door for the Word

Scripture: Colossians 4:2-4

Sermon Series: *Colossians*

Topic: Prayer



Colossians 4:2-4 (ESV)

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

Introduction

As we approach these words (4:2-4), Paul is drawing his letter to the Colossian Christians to a close. He's offering some final instructions. On his mind has been glorifying Jesus in everything you do. We see this back in 3:17.

Colossians 3:17

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.

The notion of glorifying Jesus in everything then led him to give instruction, in 3:18 - 4:1, concerning how to order your home-life so that Jesus is glorified. Now, in 4:2-4, he offers instruction on how to order your prayer-life so that Jesus will be glorified. He has two arenas in mind; prayer related to yourself (v.2) and prayer related to others and the spreading of the gospel (v.3-4).

Prayer related to Self

First, let's look at 4:2 and the prayer related to yourself.

Colossians 4:2

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

Continue Steadfastly in Prayer

Paul assumes his readers pray. They are followers of Jesus. They are the children of God. It is unthinkable that they would not pray, so Paul offers them direction in how to pray. He calls the Colossians Christians to "**continue steadfastly in prayer**." 'Continue steadfastly' translates one word in Greek (προσκαρτερέω, *proskartereite*) and it means "to continue to do something with intense effort ...despite difficulty; to devote oneself to; to keep on; to persist in."¹

Despite the fact that prayer may be difficult at times, persisting in it may be challenging, and it will require the exertion of effort, we are called to make prayer part of the normal pattern of our daily lives. Prayer should not be a mere occasional pastime if we happen to have a few extra minutes in our schedule that we were not otherwise expecting to be free. We are not being called to an occasional pastime, but to a consistent pattern. Christians are to be devoted to prayer. In the same way that spouses are to be devoted to one another whether life is dull or delightful, so Christians are to be devoted to prayer whether it be difficult or easy. No matter the circumstances of life, Christians are to be devoted to prayer.

¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 662.

The NASB translates this phrase as, “Devote yourselves to prayer...” We find this word used in the opening chapters of the book of Acts.

Acts 1:14

All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

Acts 2:42

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

The earliest Christians were devoted to prayer. Similarly, Paul is instructing the Colossian Christians—and by extension all Christians, including us today—to be devoted to prayer, even though it is not easy to pray. To be devoted to someone means that you are delightfully and persistently near them. This is what he is calling us to in prayer. We are to be happily committed to persistent prayer. *Christians should be people who are regularly and habitually drawing near to God, through the name of Jesus, in prayer during all seasons of life.*

What is Prayer?

The first question is what is prayer? The Greek word (προσευχή *proseuché*) means, “to speak to or to make requests of God.”² John Bunyan’s (1628-1688) definition, which he penned in 1662, is,

Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart and soul to God, through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as God has promised, or according to his Word, for the good of the church, with submission in faith to the will of God.³

In other words, the Colossian Christians were to persistently pour out their heart and soul to God in the regular offering of their requests to Him. “The Colossian Christians are to persevere in petitionary prayer.”⁴ In its simplest meaning, prayer is talking to God. Communion with God is then waiting in faith and expectantly listening for His answer.

Paul is in the final years of his life. He has learned how precious prayer is. Talking with the Lord is an immense privilege. *Just as no human relationship can grow without communication, so your relationship with the God will not grow without communicating with Him.* Consider for a moment how often Jesus was found alone, out in some remote or quiet place, in prayer with

² Ibid., 408.

³ John Bunyan, *Prayer* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2005) p. 13. This definition first appeared in 1662 in his, “A Discourse Touching Prayer.”

⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 44, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 237.

His Father.⁵ Prayer is necessary for a vital spiritual life. Luke tells us that Jesus once told a particular parable the whole point of which was to teach them *"that they ought always to pray and not lose heart."*⁶ If prayer was so essential for the spiritual life of Jesus, who is the Son of God, then how can we think that for us it is optional? **Prayer is not optional.** Prayer (and communion with God) is to our spiritual life what oxygen is to our physical life. We can't live without it.

Thus, Paul instructs the Colossian Christians to *"continue steadfastly in prayer."* He offers similar instructions at the conclusion of his other epistles as well. Near the end of his letter to the Ephesians, he wrote, *"Pray at all times."*⁷ In the conclusion of his first letter to the Thessalonians he wrote, *"Pray without ceasing."*⁸ Here, in his letter to the Colossians, he does the same.

Application

Prayer is vitally important for spiritual life of the Christian. Hearing Paul command you to pray should land on you as no more of a burden than me commanding you, "Breathe." Prayer should be as natural to the Christian as breathing is to the living. Paul is not instructing us to quit our job, sell all our stuff, climb the highest mountain, and sit there all day praying. Paul is saying, something like, "Since you are His child, He has poured out His Spirit within you. God is with you everywhere you go. So talk to Him at all times. Be mindful of Him."

Pray to Him while you're working. Ask Him, 'Father, what should I say to John, he never does his work and always wants me to do,' or 'Father, help me complete this project,' or 'Father, grant me the give of creativity to make this project come in under budget,' or 'Father, I have to call this client and give her the bad news and I know she will not take it well, so will You please give me gracious, but truthful words,' or 'Father, how on earth can we construct what this person needs? I don't see how this can happen. Will you give me wisdom?' or 'Father, is this a wise investment? I don't know the future, but you do. Give me insight. Help me think. Show me the facts and data that I need to give good advice,' or 'Father, this patient is very sick and I want to help her get well. What medicine can I prescribe or what surgery can we do to take away her pain?'"

Since God's Spirit dwells within you, He goes with you to work everyday, therefore, in your Spirit, talk to Him throughout the course of your work day. *Continue steadfastly in prayer.*

⁵ Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; Matt. 14:23.

⁶ Luke 18:1. For the whole parable see Luke 18:1-8.

⁷ Eph. 6:18.

⁸ 1 Thes. 5:17.

Pray Watchfully & Thankfully

In the next phrase, Paul modifies the kind of prayer he is instructing them to pray.

Colossians 4:2

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being **watchful** in it with **thanksgiving**.

He describes the prayer he wants them to pray as being both *watchful* and *thankful*. Not only are believers to pray petitionary prayers but we are also to remain watchful and thankful as we pray. We'll look at each term separately.

Be Watchful In Prayer

First, Paul states that Christians are to *be watchful in prayer*. You may recall that Jesus, while in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion, commanded His disciples to do the same, to both watch and pray.

Mark 14:34

And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch."

Mark 14:37-38

³⁷ And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? ³⁸ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

The most significant observation from this passage is that watching and praying are two different things. Watching is different from praying and praying is different from watching. At the moment of the most significant trial of His life, Jesus wanted his disciples to do both. Jesus commanded Peter, James, and John to both *watch* and *pray*.⁹ Similarly, Paul offers nearly identical instruction.

The word 'watchful' (Col. 4:2) literally means "to keep awake,"¹⁰ or "to be in continuous readiness and alertness, to be vigilant."¹¹ Paul only uses this word five times. Twice it's translated "watchful" (I Cor. 16:13; Col. 4:2), twice "awake" (1 Thes. 5:6, 10), and once "alert" (Acts 20:31). Paul is commanding a kind of spiritual acuity. The minimum we say is that you should stay awake when you're praying and not fall asleep, but this seems almost too obvious to even mention.

⁹ Mk. 14:38; cf. 14:33, 34.

¹⁰ *ESV Study Bible*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008) footnote 1 at Mark 14:34.

¹¹ Louw and Nida, 332.

Outside of the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus uses the word seven other times in the gospels¹² and each time it refers to being alert and ready for His second coming and the day of Judgment. Perhaps, Paul has something like that in mind here. He is commending prayer, but he is also commanding a spiritual attentiveness to accompany it. It's as if he is saying, remain in prayer at all times, but while praying don't be so caught up in offering your requests that you fail to miss what God is doing around you. Pay attention to the movement of God. Yes, offer your requests to God, but keep awake to what He is doing, for you may need to change the way you pray.

We can tend to pray in a particular direction because we think we know best how a situation should play out, but God may have a very different plan in mind. ***Being watchful in prayer means being attentive the movement of His Holy Spirit.*** When Peter rebuked Jesus for warning them that in Jerusalem He would be mistreated, abused, crucified, and then resurrected, Peter was quite convinced that he knew that abuse and death for Jesus was not part of God's plan. Jesus stunned him into silence when said, *"Get behind me Satan! You are a hinderance to me. You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."*¹³ Jesus' mistreatment and death was part of God's plan to accomplish our salvation.¹⁴

If we are being called to pray continually, then we don't want to pray in a way that would be a hinderance to the plans of God. So, as you pray keep alert. Do not allow your desire to assert your own wishes to God to be prioritized over the prayer that says, ***"Not my will, but yours be done."*** It's not wrong to pray, "This is my will," but we need to make room and time in our prayers for, "What I want most is Your will. So show me what Your will is. Make it clear to me what you want me to do and then I'll do it."

Pray When You Don't Know How You Ought to Pray

Furthermore, we need to be willing to pray something like, "Father, I don't know how to pray. I don't know for what you want me to pray. Please show me how to pray and for what to pray, today, in this moment." Remember the admonition of Paul,

Romans 8:26

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

We elders discussed this very issue yesterday in our half-day retreat. We yearn to make more room in our time together—i.e. during corporate services—for this kind of open-handed prayer. Before God, we acknowledge the ease with which we can assume that we know exactly how we ought to pray. Paul reminds us that we do not. We very often "we do not know how

¹² Mt. 24:42-43; 25:13; 26:40-41; Mk. 13:34, 35, 37; Lk. 12:37.

¹³ Mt. 16:23.

¹⁴ Acts 2:23; 4:28.

we ought to pray.” Therefore, we yearn for the Holy Spirit of God to come in power and lead us, even to direct us how we ought to pray.

How might He do that? Maybe we should very frequently begin our times of prayer with a question like, “Father, for what do you want me to pray?” Then be watchful. Wait. Stay awake. Sit in silence. Keep alert. Pause, and expectantly wait and allow Him to lead you. Pay attention to what comes to mind. What person does God bring to mind? What issue immediately pops into your thinking? Perhaps whatever comes immediately into your mind is what the Lord would have you pray for.

If it seems odd, then ask the Lord to confirm it. Ask Him, “Father, is this what you want me to pray for?” Be watchful. Be attentive. Test it. Pay attention to burdens and “groanings that are too deep for words.” Allow the Spirit of God to lead you by “speaking” to you through groanings too deep for words. We elders are asking ourselves how we can make room for this kind of prayer in our time together. Pray with us in this direction.

As you pray, **be watchful in it**. Perhaps God will redirect your prayers. Don’t fall sleep droning on forever about what you want. Make time in your prayers for saying, “Father, I surrender my will to Yours. I trust that Your will is better, so if I’m praying in a way that is a hinderance to your plans, then redirect me to pray in accordance with Your will.” May all of us be more keenly alert to the leading of God’s Holy Spirit in directing us to pray and to watch.

24 Hour Prayer Watch

There is an excellent opportunity for you to practice this kind of praying this weekend. This Friday from 5pm to Saturday at 5pm we will be hosting a 24 hour prayer watch. It is our desire that 24 hours of consecutive prayer take place in this building. In our weekly e-News last Friday a link was included for you to sign up. Please do.

Be Thankful

Second, Paul instructs Christians that as they pray they are to pray **with thanksgiving**.

Colossians 4:2 (ESV)

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with **thanksgiving**.

Thanksgiving is hugely on Paul’s mind. He uses the word seven times in this letter alone.¹⁵ When your prayers are not turning out the way you want them to, it’s hard to keep the right attitude, which is one of humble gratitude. Praying with thanksgiving will keep you focused on all the gracious ways in which God has already worked. When your prayers are not being answered in the present the way that you desire, then praying with thanksgiving will remind

¹⁵ Col. 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 16, 17; 4:2.

you of the many prayers He's answered in the past. Thanksgiving will remind you of God's grace and His power. David said it best in Psalm 50.

Psalm 50:14

Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving;

Psalm 50:23

The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me;

Make thanksgiving as regular part of your persistent prayer life. Pray persistently. Continue steadfastly in it. Be watchful when you pray. Allow the Holy Spirit to lead your times in prayer. And make sure that thanksgiving is always included in your prayers.

Prayer Related to Others

The second unit of thought is directed toward prayer for others. We see this in verses 3-4.

Colossians 4:3-4

³ 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— ⁴ that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

Paul still has prayer on his mind, but this time he wants the Colossian Christians to pray outwardly, primarily focused toward him and his associates, whom we will look at more specifically in two weeks next weeks. However, to put some flesh on it, the "us" refers to Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus who is called Justus, Epaphras, Luke, and Demus.¹⁶ Paul is asking for essentially two things; 1) that a door for the word would be opened up, and 2) that when that door is opened, Paul would be able to speak the word clearly, "which is how he ought to speak."

That God May Open a Door for the Word

The effectiveness of the proclamation of the word is predicated upon the prior activity of God. If God does not open a door for the word, then the word will not be truly heard—i.e. received and cherished, even if it is loudly proclaimed. As Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians,

1 Corinthians 2:14

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

¹⁶ See Col. 4:7-14.

Without the prior work of the Spirit of God, you can preach the word all you want, but no one will believe it. However, when the Spirit of God opens a door for the word, and opens the spiritually dead human heart—which is unable to understand the gospel and see it as the greatest treasure, then the gospel suddenly makes sense and the person will receive, as good news, what Jesus has done. One example of this is Lydia, whom Paul met just outside Philippi on his second missionary journey.

Acts 16:14

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

This woman was already a “worshiper of God,” but she was not yet a believer in Jesus until “the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.” This is what we as Christians should regularly pray for, an open door to share the word, for without the help of the Holy Spirit our efforts will be in vain. *We need to be instruments in the hand of God to help move people from being believers in God to being believers in Jesus.*

Merely believing in God will not get you into heaven. You must be a believer in Jesus.¹⁷ People from nearly every religion believe in God and some with no religion believe in some “higher power.” That generic belief does nothing to take away your sin. Only Jesus can do that, therefore, we must help people become believers in Jesus and we by ourselves will never convince anyone to open their heart to Jesus. Only God can do that, therefore we must pray to Him to open a door for us to speak the word.

An Open Door or Closed Door for the Word

Do you mean to say that there might be a time when it is God’s will for us not to speak the word? Yes. There’s no better illustration of this in the Bible than the paragraph that immediately precedes the story of Lydia.

Acts 16:6-10

⁶ And they¹⁸ went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. ⁸ So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

¹⁷ See Acts 4:12.

¹⁸ Paul and Silas (Acts 15:40) and Timothy (16:1-3).

God did not, at that time, open a door for the word in Asia, nor in Bithynia, but instead the Lord did open a door for them to go to Macedonia. Sometimes the Holy Spirit of Jesus does not open a door for the Word and sometimes He does. Christians need to be in continual prayer for the discernment to know when to speak and when not to speak. [We have a few people with us this morning who had planned to be in Haiti this week. However, due to political unrest and rioting, the door for them to go to Haiti was closed.]

When one door closes, typically another opens. Paul didn't suddenly become paralyzed and stop preaching the word. He simply sought the Lord for the next place he was to go. He didn't view the closed door to Asia as God telling him to stop preaching. He simply sought a new place to go preach. Christians are commanded by Jesus to go into all nations¹⁹ to take the word and make disciples. This command has not expired and we are not exempt from obeying it simply because a door closes. Closed doors are the Lord's means of directing us to the open door through which He wants us to do. Don't despise closed doors or be paralyzed by them. Be energized by them and keep seeking His will. He will direct you.

To Declare the Mystery of Christ

There is part of verse four which Paul says is worth going to prison for in order to proclaim it.

Colossians 4:3-4

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—⁴ that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

Paul commands, *"Pray for an open door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ..."*. What is this "mystery of Christ," which was so important to Paul that he was willing to go to prison for it? Paul first mentioned this mystery back in 1:27.

Colossians 1:25-27

²⁵ ... I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you²⁰, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

God gave Paul a particular ministry which was expressed primarily among the Gentiles. Paul's preaching of the gospel was primarily among Gentiles, not Jews. He began preaching the gospel of Jesus among the Jews, but for the most part they rejected the gospel and so he

¹⁹ Matthew 28:18-20.

²⁰ The Gentile Christians at Colossae.

turned and began preaching to Gentiles. Everyone knew that the Jews were God's chosen people, but through Paul God revealed that through faith in Christ, Gentiles too could be included in God's redemptive plan for the world.²¹ Jesus opened up the way of communing with God, not just for Jews but for Gentiles also. The mystery that was partially hidden in times past was that God's covenant, particular love extends beyond the borders of Israel, out into all the world. At the end of time, Jesus will send out his angels to gather the elect from the four corners of the earth²², "*people from every tribe, nation, and every language.*"²³

Paul wrote these wonderful words to Gentiles, "...*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*" The Gospel of Jesus is that His death and resurrection secured access to God the Father for anyone who would believe in Him and put their faith in Him, whether Jew or Gentile. This is the good news that the whole world needs to hear. If you will draw near to God through Jesus, then He will throw open His arms and receive you even if everyone else in your life has rejected you. It does not matter who you are, whether Jew or Gentile, if you put your faith in Jesus, then Jesus will put His Spirit in you.

²¹ See Eph. 3:6.

²² Mark 13:27.

²³ Rev. 5:9.