

WALKING IN CHRIST TO THE WORLD

SERIES: WALKING IN THE MYSTERY



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Colossians 4:2-6
7th Message
Paul Taylor
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This morning we are continuing in our series in the Book of Colossians. We're getting close to the end: next week we'll finish the book. In review, we started out looking at the grand picture of who Christ is. Then we saw instructions on how we might wrap our lives around Christ. We saw how that affects us as a community: the church. Last week we moved out from these walls into our homes and workplaces. This week we are continuing to move in that direction, but now we see how the apostle Paul says the message of Christ needs to move out into the world.

Through this whole series, we've been talking about walking in Christ. What it looks like to live our lives in him. Today we're taking it to the world. We'll be talking about how we can pray for missionaries, how we interact with outsiders in our own communities, and about why it is so difficult in our culture to even think about evangelism. We've been walking in Christ. Today, we'll be **Walking in Christ to the World**.

So this morning, we're looking at Colossians 4:2-6. It's a simple passage, but it deals with some great truths. We'll start out by talking about prayer and how it is the natural response to everything we've been seeing in the Book of Colossians. Then we'll move on to praying for missionaries—taking part in the proclamation of God's message to the world. Finally, we'll talk about how we as a community interact with outsiders and how we welcome them into our midst.

This is an important passage for us. The issues addressed here are some of the hardest to approach within our culture. How do we minister to our world? We live in an incredibly difficult area of the world for the gospel.

Pray

We'll start out by looking at the first verse in this section.

Colossians 4:2:

²Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

This verse makes a lot of sense to me. Think back to the last several weeks and the kinds of things we've been talking about. We've talked about tearing down old habits in our lives. We've talked about putting on new ways of behaving; compassion and kindness toward each other. Last week we covered in a broad overview most of the major relationships in our lives: marriage, family, and the workplace. Throughout these relationships, the goal has been to walk in Christ and to have our lives be completely experienced in light of who he is.

Those are big challenges. How do you respond to challenges like that? You pray. You devote yourselves to praying. This is a present tense verb in Greek. That means it is something that the Colossians were already doing and needed to continue doing. The word translated "devote" was originally used in a military sense of "stand ready." Jesus uses it in Mark 3 when he says that a boat should stand ready for him in case the crowd becomes too large to handle. I like that image: a boat standing ready for when the need arises. This is how we pray. We pray in readiness: persistent and patient. We wait to see what God might do as a result of our prayers.

Our first encouragement is a simple and familiar one, but one that we overlook all too often. Pray. **Just pray.**

There are two words here to help focus our prayer. We are to be watchful and thankful. "Being watchful" means that we are eagerly looking forward and anticipating God's work in the future. "Thankful" means that we are looking backward and we are grateful for the past and how God has acted. So this command to pray is an all-inclusive one. It covers everything in time.

Right now we pray. That's the present. We look back at the past with thanksgiving. We are grateful for what God has done. We look forward to the future with watchful eyes: eager for what God will do. Pray now. Watch for what is to come. Thank God for what is past.

Think about how we normally operate. In the present, most of us don't pray, we worry. We're anxious. We can't calm down and we can't seem to find peace. When we look at the past, we regret the decisions that we made. Or we complain about the decisions others made. When we

think toward the future, we are afraid. We don't know what might happen, but we don't think we'll be able to handle it. So our natural tendency is to be anxious in the present, complain about the past and worry about the future.

However, being in Christ changes everything. It changes the way we think about time. We don't have to complain about the past; we can be thankful. We don't have to worry in the present; we can pray. And we don't have to fear the future; we can be watchful for what God is doing.

This one sentence can completely change the way we view the world: *Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.*

Let's think a little more about these words: "Being watchful in prayer." We hear a lot about being thankful and we know that we can pray instead of worry, but I was particularly struck by this idea of being watchful in prayer.

"Watchful" means that we are looking forward. We are looking for what God might do in the future. This applies to little situations. It means that when we are praying about a difficult time issue that is approaching, we're looking to find out how God is going to work in that situation. We *expect* him to act. So we're looking for it.

It also means that we are watchful for the BIG thing that God is doing in the world. It means that as we pray for whatever concerns us, we're anticipating the age to come. We saw this last week as Paul talked about how we're supposed to think about our jobs. Christians live toward the age to come. We are watching, waiting, and wanting for Jesus to come back.

Here's the problem. In our culture, the return of Jesus has become a joke among non-Christians, and even for some of us as well. Just a few weeks ago, we had incredible media attention focused on Harold Camping, who was convinced that Jesus was returning on May 21. He wasn't the only one that was convinced; he had thousands, if not tens of thousands, of other people convinced along with him. Of course, Jesus didn't return on May 21.

Harold Camping and his failed predication became a huge joke. But it wasn't a very funny joke because many people's lives were ruined by their false belief. Even more than that, his efforts make the return of Christ itself look like a joke. Everybody, me included at times, was making fun of Harold Camping. And here's the problem: I believe that Jesus Christ is going to return to earth physically and complete the work of redemption that he began 2000 years ago. Harold Camping believed all that, and that it

was going to happen on May 21. So if we laugh at what Harold Camping believes, it's not that much of a stretch to laugh at what I believe.

The whole idea that Jesus is going to come back has become a joke for our culture. This can make it really hard for us to believe and to hold firm to our faith. A faith that believes that all of history is moving toward something, that God will act decisively in history, and that we will enter a new experience where there will be no more pain, suffering, or tears.

I met a man this week who was dying from the last stages of AIDS and whose family has completely rejected him because he became a Christian a year ago. I talked to someone whose parents are going through a painful divorce after years of marriage. I heard about another suicide on the Caltrain in San Mateo. This world is a hurting and broken place. We need to be watchful in prayer. We need to ask Jesus to return. We need to look for that.

Many times we make prayer more complicated than it has to be. We think we have to sit down and pray. It becomes this intensely spiritual experience. It's actually kind of odd not to pray. Have you ever sat down with someone over a meal and not said a word? Have you ever gone on a walk with someone in complete silence? It's a bit awkward. When you're around someone, it's natural to talk and interact with them, even if it's in small ways. So if we're living our lives "in Christ" then it's awkward not to pray. If we're constantly aware of the presence of God with us, no matter where we are, then it's normal to be in a constant conversation with him.

That's what prayer is: a constant conversation with God. There are lots of different types of conversations: deep ones, small talk, funny ones, reminiscing, and confrontational. There are all sorts of different kinds of prayer too.

I remember one time in college when I went to a late night prayer meeting. It started around midnight and I was up studying, so I thought I'd take a break and go pray for a while. So I arrived and there was a small group of people gathered in prayer. Many of them were on their knees or even lying prostrate, so I joined them. I lay there for a while, prayed a couple times, and then got up and went back to my room to continue studying. As I was walking back I thought, "Wow—that was the most refreshing time of prayer that I've ever had. I feel great!" I was a bit surprised when I got back to my room to discover that it was almost two hours later. I still think of that half-prayer/half-nap fondly as one of my favorite times of prayer.

For me, some of my most authentic and powerful prayers are the simple ones that Paul talks about here. This year has brought a lot of transition for my family and some really tough times. I've found myself frequently just praying, "God, help." There have also been some amazing provisions from God and times of great joy. In those times, I find myself just saying under my breath to God, "thank you, God." There also times when there seems to be so much pain and trouble, that I pray, "Jesus, come back." That's all there is to pray for.

These are the simple, honest prayers that Paul is talking about here. They aren't complicated ideas or deep theology. It's just basic emotion, expressed to God. God, help me. Thank you, God. Jesus, please come back.

Pray for Open Doors

So the apostle starts off this section with a general emphasis on prayer. But he moves on from there quickly and transitions into praying for a particular type of activity. He asks his readers to pray specifically for him and his missionary activity.

Colossians 4:3-4:

**³And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.
⁴Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.**

So Paul moves seamlessly from asking the Colossians to pray to asking them to pray for him. This is actually a bit of a remarkable thing that Paul is doing. This is the apostle Paul. He's written most of the Bible that we have. He founded most of the churches that existed at this point and here he is asking for prayer. He's asking the Colossians, whom he is writing, so that they may know how to walk in the mystery of Christ to pray for him.

The cool thing about this is the reciprocal relationship that we see. This isn't as true in our culture anymore because of the influence of Christianity, but in most cultures, the leader would pray for the people. It wasn't very common for the people to pray for the leader. When I've gone to India before, people are always excited for me to pray for them because I'm viewed as a holy man from the West. They want to be prayed for by someone they think is an important person. But they wouldn't think of praying for me. In their way of thinking, it is the spiritual person who prays for the other.

However, here you have Paul asking the Colossians to

pray for him. He wants their prayers. That's kind of a turnaround, but Paul recognizes that God is over everyone. So in asking for prayer he's not just inviting the Colossians to participate in his ministry, he is acknowledging that he is no better than they are. He needs their prayers just as much as they need his. They are equals here, praying for each other.

But it's not just general prayer that he's asking for. His specific request is that God may open a door for their message. He's specifically asking that the Colossians would pray for his efforts at proclaiming the gospel. He wants for them to participate with him in his mission. They can do that by asking God to open a door. God creates the opportunities for his message to go forth. So we can ask him to do that. **Pray for open doors.**

I love the way he articulates his mission here: to proclaim the mystery of Christ. This is what we've been talking about for the past two months: the mystery of God; Christ in the world. Paul sees his job as proclaiming a mystery, explaining the unexplainable, and making the eternal known to the temporal. That is quite a task! So it's natural that he should ask for prayer.

The other thing that I appreciate about Paul's request is that it focuses on something he can accomplish. Notice that he doesn't ask them to pray that the message be accepted or even understood. He asks them to pray that he can be faithful to the task of proclaiming the message. This is Paul's prayer: that he would have opportunities to speak the message.

One of the big questions in ministry is always trying to figure out what God does and what we do. We know that only God can change people's hearts. We know that he is the one who is actually at work, but we also know that we have a role in it and we can do something.

This picture that Paul gives us is a great way of understanding that tension. God opens doors and we walk through them. We don't have any way of creating opportunities. We can't make people receptive to hearing about God. We can't soften anyone's hearts, but we can wait for God to open doors.

When he opens those doors, we can walk through them. I think a lot of the stress that I've felt in ministry is feeling like I need to open doors. We can feel like we have the burden to create opportunities, but that's not the way Paul presents it. God opens the door and we walk through it. This still requires action and obedience because we can still choose to ignore an open door. But walking through

an open door is a lot easier than opening a door that is sealed shut.

We can learn something from this passage about how to pray for our missionaries. We, as a church, support missionaries all over the world; from Palo Alto to Washington, to Croatia, to South America, to India, to Indonesia. We partner with a whole bunch of people all over the world as they try to proclaim the mystery of God.

We have a bit of a unique way of supporting these missionaries as a church. We provide very little support from the church as an organization to these missionaries. Our hope is that all of you would develop relationships with them and support them individually. We believe in relationships between people and people, not between people and organizations. So we want you to support our missionaries individually. And support is more than financial. Part of supporting missionaries as a church is also praying for them.

As we remember them, we can ask God to open doors for them. Most of these people are talented, dedicated people. They can do hard work, but they can't create opportunities. That's what God does. So we pray for open doors in the world and we pray for opportunities for proclamation.

Here's one quick application for you this morning. Pray for someone that you know who is working full time to proclaim the mystery of Christ and send them a quick email, a note, a text, or something to let them know you've prayed for them. Proclamation is a lonely task—encourage someone who is doing it.

Take Opportunities

We started out with an instruction to pray in general and that developed quickly into praying for missionary activity. The next few verses continue that development and give us some instructions about how we might proclaim the mystery of God in our own communities.

Colossians 4:5-6:

⁵Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. ⁶Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

This is actually a somewhat unique passage in the New

Testament. We are a church that comes from a tradition of American Christianity who call themselves evangelicals. Part of that language comes from the fact that we, as a tradition, have emphasized evangelism as a very high value in the Christian life. It's interesting to note, however, that the letters of the New Testament contain very few commands about evangelism. They are mostly concerned with reforming the life of the community. There is not a huge emphasis on how outsiders fit into that community.

But this is one of the few and probably the clearest passages that give some instructions on how the church reaches out into the community around it. Again, it fits with the overall flow that we've seen in this entire book. From the picture of Christ to walking in Christ; to living in Christ as a church community; to living in Christ in our homes; to praying for Paul to proclaim the mystery of Christ and now finally there is a picture of us as the community who walks in Christ to invite others to that same experience.

But we have to understand that how we treat outsiders is integrally connected to our relationships with each other, our families, and Christ. You don't see it in the NIV, but the same word is used here that we saw way back at the beginning of this series. A literal translation of this instruction would be "walk in wisdom toward those outside." Remember way back in Colossians 2:6, we were given the instruction "walk in Christ." That's the phrase we've been unpacking these past seven weeks and now we have the same phrase with a different goal. Walk toward those who are outside.

This should make us realize something. When we looked at Colossians 2:6, we talked about how the image of walking is an everyday image. Almost all of us do it every day. It's a part of who we are and almost every single activity that we participate in involves some kind of walking. But now we realize that it isn't just an everyday activity. Walking is a purposeful activity. Walking gets us somewhere. When you walk, you're going toward something. You have a goal in mind. You might even say that you have a mission.

Now all the way over in chapter 4, we see that mission revealed. We are walking in Christ toward those who are outside. We are walking to the world. We are in motion, moving from here, out to the world. That's the movement that we are involved in.

Several weeks ago, I talked about assignments in school. I said that I used to think about my spiritual life as an individual project, but now I think about it more as a group project. The point was that my spiritual life is about

learning to get along with others, learning to work together, learning to be a team. What I left out is that group projects aren't just about learning to work together, they are about doing something. It's about a project; you learn to work together so that you can accomplish something. There is a mission in the midst of the relationship.

For the Christian church, mission and relationship are woven together. You may have heard the phrase "missional community." That's a new phrase that people are using to describe what the church has always been about: purpose and people. The ideas aren't new though. This is always how the church has understood herself.

What often happens, though, is that organizations get really good at one and not so good at the other. They're either really good at getting stuff done or they're really good at caring for each other. But the church does both. It is a community with a mission.

We've been talking a lot about relationships as we've looked at the book of Colossians. So here's our reminder that community happens in the midst of a mission. We are instructed to walk to the world and to look for opportunities to welcome outsiders into the mystery of God. **Look for opportunities.**

Paul gives the church this instruction to walk with wisdom toward the world. Go out. The bulk of his instruction doesn't have to do with telling people what to do, but how to do it. The main part of his instruction here is focused on the manner that we interact with outsiders.

Look at the type of words that he uses to describe the manner; wisdom, grace, and seasoned with salt. There is clearly the opportunity to interact with outsiders in a negative way. The fact that Paul instructs them to interact wisely and with grace means that he knows there is the possibility, even the temptation, to interact otherwise.

I think this is one of the great tragedies of American Christianity. Somehow, the face of Christianity in America has been tarnished. The caricature of evangelicals is not one who is wise and seasoned with salt. It is loud, in-your-face, and sometimes even obnoxious. The irony is that this is the perception of Christianity in America. But if you ask most people who aren't Christians about the believers they actually know, most of them don't really fit that category. For the most part, our reputation is worse than our reality, but reputation matters.

What's interesting is that the instructions here in Colossians seem to directly address some of the very things

that we have been known for as a tradition. Let's think about some of these things and how they might apply to us.

We're told to walk to the world in **wisdom**. Wisdom means that there is no easy answer. It means there is no formula or obvious path to follow. Someone who is wise is able to take in the situation, think about the unique aspects of what is going on and respond appropriately. That's different than a lot of what you see today. If you wanted to find a formula for evangelism, there are dozens of books or methods that you can follow. I read a lot of them in college, but now I'm convinced that evangelism is more about wisdom to respond to people individually rather than learning a method.

We're told that our words should be full of **grace**. Grace is not something that often characterizes the message of the mystery of God to the world. In fact, there are many methods that emphasize that people have to be convicted of their sin before they can understand forgiveness. So they don't start out with grace, but with the opposite. I don't think I find that approach in Scripture. Scripture seems to begin with the message of salvation through grace and love and then it works on dealing with the issues in our lives.

We're told that conversation should be **seasoned with salt**. That means that conversation is pleasurable. It's friendly. Nice. The Bible says that the message of the gospel is going to be offensive to the world. Most of us are convinced that we can do it ourselves. It is hard for us to turn to Christ in need and we know him. Think of how hard it is for someone who hasn't met Christ to admit their own need and ask for salvation. It's so hard that the Bible says it is impossible—it can only happen with the Holy Spirit's empowering. So the message of salvation is inherently offensive, but that doesn't mean you need to add to the offense. I've known some people that think that just because they are being offensive must mean they are sharing the gospel. That's not true. There are lots of ways of being offensive. Many of them have nothing to do with the gospel.

The last instruction we have is that we might know how to answer each person. This is actually one of my favorite instructions, but it can be easily misunderstood. You might think this means you are supposed to make sure you have all the answers before talking to anyone, but that completely misses the point. How can you have all the answers before you know the questions?

The focus here is on **how you might answer** someone—how you interact with them. The focus is not on having all the answers. I know a lot of people who are afraid to

talk about their faith because there are big aspects they don't understand. They're afraid to talk about it because they don't have all the answers. I don't think that is what's talked about here. If you believe what you believe without all those answers then someone else can too.

The point here is that you are interacting with someone in relationship. If you are answering someone, that means that you've listened to them. Answering is a response to someone else. There are too many times if we do think about sharing the gospel with people we know, we have some formula of the gospel that we want to get out. If we can manage to say these few sentences then we feel good about ourselves. But what's being described here is a conversation.

Answering means you start with listening. Has this person had a bad experience with church? Have they never heard of Jesus? Did they grow up Christian but walked away in college? Are they just too busy to think about deeper things? Interact with people. Listen to them. This is one of the hardest things in the world. Notice the people around you this week. Notice how few people really listen. A lot of people ask questions, and then move on. They don't even wait for the answer.

We can take this instruction to answer as a reminder that answering begins with listening. Listen to people. In case you're not familiar with that, it means that you have to stop talking. Don't worry. If you stop talking long enough, you'll have a chance to start up again and maybe by that time, you'll have something to say that addresses where somebody is at. Answering begins with listening.

So this last part of the passage has some very clear and helpful instructions on how to interact with outsiders. Go toward them. Be wise. Be winsome. Listen so you can answer them.

Conclusion

I love this passage because you can see where the letter has been going all throughout. What a progression the Book of Colossians has made. It started with a glorious view of the cosmic Christ, then an instruction to walk in him, then what that looks like as part of a community, and then in our homes. Now we're instructed to pray, to

pray for missionaries, and to interact with outsiders well.

That's a good place for us to end up this morning. The realization that walking in Christ takes us out into the world. It's a reminder that it is about relationship. It's not all that complicated. The instructions given on how to interact with outsiders isn't that different from what it looks like to treat people you are close with. You don't have to have fancy answers or smooth gospel presentations; just interact with people and listen.

Pray for what it looks like to walk in Christ. Walk into the world, but walk out there in Christ.

Interpretive Translation—Colossians 4:2–6

With all these lofty goals, you can't stop praying. When you pray, you stay awake to God's activity and thank Him for it.

Remember us too in your prayers. Ask God to provide opportunities for us to proclaim the message of Christ's mystery to those who are ready to hear it. That is why I'm in prison as I write this. So ask God to give me clear language to reveal it to people.

Be careful with how you interact with those who don't believe in Christ. You should take advantage of opportunities to bless them with your interactions. Always treat them with grace, never belittle or condemn them. Make your conversation seasoned with good flavor. And listen first so you can answer the questions they're asking instead of the ones you have answers to.