

COMMUNICATION WITH GOD AND MAN
COLOSSIANS 4:2-6

I.

Jorge Valdes (PROJECTOR ON--- JORGE VALDES) came to the US to New Jersey from Cuba when he was ten years old. In 1972 he went to college at the University of Miami. He worked during this time for the Federal Reserve. When he graduated with a degree in accounting, he went to work for a small grocery store. Although it was a small grocery store, a whole lot of money went through the books which Jorge oversaw. It turns out that the business laundered money for the Medellin drug cartel. Jorge was very good at what he did. In a couple of years he was appointed head of American operations for the Medellin drug cartel. In that position he personally received over \$1 million a month.

But Jorge was unhappy. Something was missing in his life. So he left the business and bought a ranch in Florida. Jorge took up karate, and the couple who taught him turned out to be Christians. He knew that they had something that he did not, and he wanted it. So in 1989, as a result of their influence, he became a Christian. A year later US marshals arrested him and charged him with a variety of felonies related to his former drug involvement. Though he had left the business many years earlier, he was indicted for crimes punishable by eight life sentences.

Jorge had gone straight and had become a Christian, but now he was faced with prison. What was God doing? How was he to pray in that situation? He was guilty of serious crimes, but he had confessed his sins to God and had changed his life around. How were his Christian friends supposed to pray? (PROJECTOR OFF) Don Moberger shared a similar story last Sunday about a Connecticut bank robber who went straight. How would things work out for this Cuban-American?

When Hillary Clinton ran for the US Senate in New York in 2000 a political action group sought to buy air time from stations in New York to televise a commercial critical of the president's wife. The ad opened with images of Mrs. Clinton, and then an announcer declared, **"It is rumored Hillary Clinton is a lesbian. It is rumored that Hillary Clinton supports homosexual marriage. It is rumored Hillary Clinton will leave her husband after taking office. It was rumored Bill Clinton had an affair with Monica Lewinsky. Sometimes rumors are true."** Then the ad finishes with the question: **"Shouldn't you know the truth?"**

The ad was sponsored by a group called the Christian Action Network. Is that something appropriate for Christians to promote? What kind of message about Christianity does that present to a secular world? What does the Bible say about how Christians should relate to the secular world around us? The passage before us this

morning gives us practical advice about how we should communicate with God and how we should communicate with, and about, people in the world around us.

In our study of the New Testament Book of Colossians we have come to the practical section of the book where the Apostle Paul gives his audience instructions about how to apply Christian doctrine in daily life. Having talked about proper family relationships and work relationships, he now gives instructions about prayer and involvements with unbelievers.

I.

First, in vv. 2-4 of Colossians #3 the author talks about HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH GOD. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. HOW TO...-CONTINUE STEADFASTLY IN PRAYER) The Apostle Paul's emphasis here is that Christians should CONTINUE STEADFASTLY IN PRAYER. In v. 2 he says just that: "**Continue steadfastly in prayer...**" The original verb means "to adhere to" or "persist" or "be steadfast in."

In Acts #1 v. 14 the apostles are following Jesus' orders to remain in Jerusalem and wait until the Holy Spirit comes. Verse 14 uses the same verb again in the context of prayer. (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 1:14) Speaking of the apostles and the first Christians, the text says, "**All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.**"

So the command in our passage means that Christians are to make prayer a priority. They are to do it regularly. They are to do it in private and in groups. Regular communication with God is to be a way of life for Christians. (PROJECTOR OFF) In our elders' meetings prayer is always our first order of business. We spend a significant amount of time praying for individuals and for the church as a whole. We are seeking to be faithful to Paul's admonition about steadfast prayer.

Perhaps some of you remember the saying that I have mentioned to you before. "When you think of me, pray for me." It may not be especially profound. But I have found it to be a helpful reminder to pray for people whenever they come to mind. When someone comes to your mind, first pray for that person.

A.

We Christians should exhibit steadfastness in prayer. Steadfastness in prayer should involve at least four things. First, STEADFAST PRAYER REQUIRES PERSEVERANCE. (I. A. SP REQUIRES PERSEVERANCE) Some of the situations that we face seem unending. My wife and kids have had health challenges for most of our life together. At times it has seemed unending. Recently our Scott has finally seen success in overcoming health challenges. He has been able to finish college, get a good job, and persevere sometimes through long hours. The danger in such continuing challenges is that we will give up on prayer when it seems like God is not responding,

Jesus recognized that danger. That is why He told the parable of the widow and the unjust judge in Luke #18. In the original setting Jesus was speaking about the delay of His return to earth. The gospel writer Luke (LUKE 18:1) begins the account of that parable with the words, **“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”** How should we pray? With perseverance, with devotion to it.

The Second Great Awakening swept through Europe in the early 1800s. One family in Amsterdam was touched by the preaching of their pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church. (PROJECTOR OFF) The ten Boom family was in particular struck by the Biblical promises concerning the return of the Jewish people to their homeland. The father in the family began a weekly prayer meeting in his home. That prayer meeting continued for weeks and then months and then years. When the father died, his son took over. They continued to pray for the Jewish people. The prayer meeting continued for decades. When this son died, his son Casper continued the tradition. In 1944, one hundred years after the prayer meeting began, the Nazis raided Casper ten Boom’s home and hauled off the family to jail for harboring Jews in their house.

The Gestapo leader told Casper that he could go home if he would promise not to hide any more Jews in his home. The Christian man replied, **“I would consider it an honor to give my life for God’s chosen people.”** He died a short time later. But four years later the persevering prayers of this century-long prayer meeting were answered as the modern state of Israel was formed. (Michael David Evans, *The History of Christian Zionism*) Steadfast prayer is characterized by perseverance.

B.

(PROJECTOR ON--- I. A. B. SP REQUIRES WATCHFULNESS) Secondly, v. 2 in our passage says that STEADFAST PRAYER REQUIRES WATCHFULNESS. **“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it...”** We are to be watchful. We are to be on the lookout for dangers and opportunities. We are to be watching for answers to prayer and for things that we need to pray about. (1 PETER 5:8) In 1 Peter #5 v. 8 the apostle warns, **“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”**

Jesus in Gethsemane warned His disciples to stay awake and pray. Instead they all fell asleep. But there was danger lurking about. Peter, who learned in a painful way about the need to be alert, and the others were suddenly awakened by people coming from Jerusalem who arrested Jesus. The disciples all ran away. They didn’t acquit themselves very well in the next few days. Later that same evening, when questioned by a servant girl, Peter denied that even knew Jesus.

Alertness is needed not just to avoid the snares of the devil but also to take advantage of opportunities. Paul will mention that in the next few verses.

C.

(I. A. B. C. SP REQUIRES THANKSGIVING) Also, according to v. 2, STEADFAST PRAYER REQUIRES THANKSGIVING. This is the fifth time in this short book that Paul has stressed the need for Christians to be thankful. Thankfulness accomplishes many things in our lives. It keeps us humble and less selfish. It tends to make us more positive. It also helps our prayer life in that it reminds us of God's past faithfulness and present blessings. It reminds us of His past answers to our prayers, and thus encourages us in our present prayer life.

D.

(I. B. C. D. SP REQUIRES A SPECIAL CONCERN FOR THE GOSPEL) We need to pray with persistence, with alertness, with thanksgiving, and with A SPECIAL CONCERN FOR THE GOSPEL. Paul continues his thought in v. 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..."** This is the apostle's first mention in his letter that he is a prisoner.

Paul is requesting prayer for himself and his associates. This prayer is related to his desire to speak about the mystery of Christ. That is a term that we saw the apostle use earlier in this letter. We saw that the mystery of Christ has to do with something that was once hidden but has now been revealed. This particular mystery has to do with the eternal salvation that is available through faith in Jesus. This salvation is available not only to Jews but also to Gentiles.

But notice his situation. He indicates that he is a prisoner. Outwardly it might seem that Paul is out of action. It might seem that the devil has been successful in accomplishing his purposes. In a moment we shall see what did come out of this situation. But here it is important to see that his big prayer request is not that he get out of his situation of being a prisoner, like most of us might have been asking. Instead he is asking that God might open up a door for the word.

Because of our church's involvement with prison ministry, we may be more aware than many Christians about all of the opportunities that there are to present the gospel in that setting. It is often in situations of difficulty when people become more open to the gospel. Imprisonment and dealing with the consequences of sin often bring people face to face with the need for some kind of deliverance.

In v. 4 Paul says specifically that his prayer for an open door is **"that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak."** Paul is seeking prayer for wisdom in knowing how to most effectively communicate the gospel.

It is good for Christians to pray for one another to have opportunities to share the gospel and to effectively take advantage of those opportunities. It is good to pray for Christian leaders in that regard. I appreciate your prayers for our health challenges. In a congregation with many senior citizens there are many among us who face challenges related to health and aging. These also involve opportunities for the gospel.

A couple of years ago I decided to have a pair of pulmonary embolisms, blood clots in my lungs. Those can be dangerous as well as uncomfortable. They were discovered here at Boulder City Hospital. I was sent to another hospital to more appropriately deal with them. I wasn't obviously feeling the greatest. Being strapped into a gurney in the ambulance and having a conversation with one of the paramedics he discovered that I was a Baptist pastor. This young man was Jewish, and it turned out that he had taught CPR and first aid courses at another Baptist church. So he asked me, "What is it exactly that Baptists believe?" Pretty tough to miss that one as an opportunity to make it clear how we ought to speak. The main issue, of course, is not what Baptists believe but what is that the Bible says about what we need to do and believe in order to go to heaven. So we had a nice conversation about the gospel.

Christian leaders, pastors, and missionaries always appreciate prayer. (HUDSON TAYLOR) Hudson Taylor (HUDSON TAYLOR) was the founder of the China Inland Mission. He brought scores of missionaries to China and established mission stations throughout the country. One station seemed especially successful in reaching Chinese people with the gospel. Hudson Taylor tried to figure out what that station had going that others did not. He could not see any obvious explanation. The leaders there did not seem to be any more committed or spiritual or gifted than those in other places. The program and methodology did not seem to be any different.

One year Hudson Taylor was back in England promoting his mission's work in China. After one meeting a man came up to Taylor and began to ask a series of questions about this particular station. He also asked specific questions about the missionary leader of that station. It turned out that the questioner was the former college roommate of this missionary. He told Taylor that he prayed daily for his friend and his ministry. Hudson Taylor observed, "**Then I knew the answer.**" It was a committed prayer warrior's persistent prayer that had made the difference. (PROJECTOR OFF)

May we as a church be faithful to pray for our missionaries and to take advantage of the monthly prayer report that Rob makes available for us. My suggestion has been that if this whole list seems to be daunting, pick one of our missionaries and make him or her or them a subject for regular prayer in your family. Perhaps some of you would be prompted by the Holy Spirit to join us on Wednesdays at 1 PM for our Zoom prayer meeting where we pray for our missionaries as well as for other needs in our congregation.

How did things work out for Paul? Were his prayers and the prayers of the Colossian Christians that the Lord might make it clear in how he ought to speak answered? History tells us that during this time of imprisonment Paul wrote four letters that came to be included in the New Testament. I would think that this was a pretty significant accomplishment related to making the gospel clear to a variety of people.

The last two verses of the book of Acts tell us a little about the other opportunities that he had in his imprisonment in Rome. (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 28:30-31) The text

says, **“He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”** It seems that Paul was chained to a Roman guard but still allowed to have a considerable measure of freedom.

At the end of the Book of Philippians, also written by Paul during this Roman imprisonment, (PHILIPPIANS 4:22) there is this brief statement: **“All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.”** How did there get to be Christians in the household of the Roman emperor? Many commentators suspect that it was through Paul's influence. The elite Praetorian guard was likely responsible for guarding Paul. Perhaps some of these guards, who were chained to Paul, became believers and spread their influence into the emperor's household.

Then also the consensus of historians is that Paul did get to defend himself before the highest court in the empire. (PROJECTOR OFF) There he explained the gospel, and there he argued that this Christianity deal was a legitimate part of the Jewish faith. That was very important because Judaism had achieved a protected status in many places in the empire. Jews were often exempted from requirements that were placed on other Romans, such as worshipping the emperor. The evidence is that the court found in Paul's favor and that for at least a few years Christians enjoyed a more favorable legal status in much of the empire.

So how should we pray? With persistence, with alertness to both dangers and opportunities, with thanksgiving, and with special concern for the spread of the gospel.

Jorge Valdes (PROJECTOR ON--- JORGE VALDES 2) applied many of these principles to his prayer life when he found himself faced with the prospect of receiving eight life sentences. He kept his faith in the God whom he had recently discovered. He decided that the right thing to do was to plead guilty to all of these felonies. The federal officials who were involved with him for many months were so impressed by his changed life that they recommended a much reduced sentence. In court he was sentenced to only ten years behind bars. He was released after only five years.

During that time in prison Jorge began taking Bible college courses by extension. He got his bachelor's degree in this way, and he began a master's degree program with Wheaton College in Illinois. After he got out, he finished that master's program, and he went on to get a doctorate in New Testament studies from Loyola University. After that he taught part time at Wheaton College. Today he heads up a ministry that is involved in criminal reform in Mexico and the US. Among other things it provides scholarships for needy kids. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We need to pray with persistence, with alertness, with thanksgiving and with specific concern for the spread of the gospel.

II.

In vv. 5 & 6 we are given advice about HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH OUTSIDERS. (II. HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH OUTSIDERS) The Apostle Paul speaks about the wise use of behavior and speech.

A.

In v. 5 he says that his readers should USE WISDOM. (II. A. USE WISDOM) Paul writes, “**Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.**” “Walk” is a verb which Paul often uses to describe a lifestyle. By “outsiders” Paul is referring to people outside of the Christian faith. Literally he says, “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, redeeming the time.”

“Redeeming” was a term that meant literally “to buy in the marketplace.” So Paul is saying that Christians need to “buy up the time.” In our day we have all kinds of options about what we do with our time. Many of the options are not necessarily bad. But we should wisely choose the uses of our time that have the most eternal significance. In doing that we are to look for opportunities that have significance.

In the first century Christians were accused of a variety of things. The Romans called Christians “atheists,” because they refused to worship the emperor or the Roman gods. Thus they were also regarded as unpatriotic. Some Romans heard Christians make references to eating the body and blood of some Lord. They took those references out of context and spread stories about Christians being cannibals.

The Jews accused Christians of being heretics and cultists. They denied that Christianity had anything to do with Judaism. Christians in these situations were tempted to retaliate, to engage in name calling of their own. But the apostle here calls upon Christians to adopt high standards of conduct. They are to behave with wisdom toward outsiders. They are to make the most of every opportunity. Given what Paul has just said about the gospel, it is likely that he was encouraging Christians to look for every opportunity to share and demonstrate the gospel.

Christians ought to have the highest standards of integrity. They should also reflect the highest values in their behavior. We live in a world that values money and physical beauty and fame and pleasure and power. It is easy to get sucked up in the pursuit of these things. It is tempting to drop our Christian standards in the midst of political battles. Jesus Christ urges His followers to pursue godliness and service and humility and commitment to Him. In the pursuit of these values we are to look for opportunities to point people to Him. In terms of eternity the most important thing in the world is our relationship with God.

We Christians are all witnesses. We are either good witnesses or bad witnesses. None of us can live the Christian life perfectly. So in a sense we are all hypocrites. At the very least this requires a certain humility on the part of all of us.

B.

According to v. 6 effective communication with outsiders also requires that we Christians USE GRACIOUS SPEECH. (II. A. B. USE GRACIOUS SPEECH) In v. 6 Paul says, **“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”** Speech with grace is kind speech. It is speech that is gentle and friendly and forgiving. It is not arrogant or vengeful or defaming or gossipy.

Was there anything gracious about that Hillary ad? No! It was defamatory. It was based on gossip. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 1:29-30) In Romans #1 this kind of speech is associated with unbelievers. The Apostle Paul writes, **“They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips [notice], slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents...”** Proverbs #20 v. 19 (PROVERBS 20:19) says, **“Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babbling.”** It is bad that a group calling itself Christian promoted this kind of an ad.

Christian speech toward outsiders is not only to be gracious, it is also to be salty. (PROJECTOR OFF) He doesn't mean “salty” in the negative sense that some people have used the term. He is talking about it in a positive way. Salt was used in two primary ways in the Ancient Near East. It was used as a preservative. Salt killed germs and preserved food. It was also used as a flavoring to enhance the taste of food, to make it more palatable.

So Christian speech is to have a preserving effect. It is to be truthful. It is to have an antiseptic effect on that which is bad. It should also be enhancing speech. It should be flavorful. It should be attractive and encouraging and gracious and interesting.

Rebecca Pippert (PROJECTOR ON--- REBECCA PIPPERT), whose husband served as UPI bureau chief in the Middle East, wrote in one of her books, **“Recently at a party I was introduced by a very staid diplomat with: ‘This is Becky and she really believes. She’s really devout and she’s so interesting!’ Wes and I have laughed many times over how people have introduced us here with great enthusiasm, fascination and respect. This comes out of the context of our efforts to genuinely get to know these people and their interests. We go to concerts together, see films together and out of scores of conversations, our Christian beliefs have emerged. We don’t do this as a gimmick to slip in the gospel. We do it because we are genuinely interested in relating to non-believers and their world views.”** This Christian couple seems to have learned how to make the most of every opportunity and how to use gracious and salty speech.

Paul in our passage says that this gracious and salty speech is to be used so that we may know how we should respond to each person. (1 PETER 3:15) The apostle Peter in his first epistle wrote in #3 v. 15, **“...but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as**

holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...”

I remember a couple whom I knew in earlier years who described several encounters with unbelievers. (PROJECTOR OFF) I remember in particular how the wife told about a situation where somebody used foul language, and she told them off for using such language and proclaimed what an offense that was to God. This woman came away from the encounter feeling proud of the good deed that she had done for God. I cringed. There didn't seem to me to be anything attractive and gracious about her speech. From my perspective this Christian just helped Christianity look less inviting to this unbeliever.

Wise Christians will display integrity toward outsiders, and they will have gracious and salty speech with them. In their speech and in their behavior and in their prayers they will look for opportunities to point people to Jesus.

If this gospel thing has never been quite clear in your own mind, let me explain it briefly. According to the Bible people have a problem with sin. We are born sinners, and we all have this natural tendency to turn away from God and His standards of conduct to do our own thing. Furthermore this sin creates a barrier between us and God. If the sin problem is not addressed, it means that we will be separated from Him in eternity.

The good news is that Jesus Christ was God who became man. He lived a sinless life and ultimately died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. On the third day He rose from the dead, demonstrating that He really was God and that His claims were true.

The one thing that we must do to receive the benefits of this death for sin and to receive eternal life is place our trust in Jesus. Good works don't do it. Baptism doesn't do it. Church attendance doesn't do it. The Apostle Paul put it simply, **“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”** (Acts 16:31) That's it. Nothing more. It is simply trusting in Jesus, believing that He died for our sins and that He will be our Savior.