

Watchful Prayer

Colossians 4:2-6

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There have been several disparate elements of the service, but the thing is that they are not actually disparate. We started with, and continued in, a beautiful time of worship and had our kids leading us in song. Then we talked about missions and outreach around the world and prayed for the persecuted church. And we just talked about how we can be very practical in our local outreach. And we are now going to talk about prayer. The thing is, as a famous preacher said many years ago--John Piper that would be--“missions exist because worship doesn't.”

There are places around the world where the name of Jesus is not known, where the church is not well established, and where the name of the Lord is not lifted up and glorified. And so we're working towards that day when there will be people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, worshiping before the Throne. That's why missions and outreach exist. And the fuel that fires missions and outreach is prayer. So all of these elements are all of what it means, or are a part of what it means to be a church, part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

One of the core values of the Christian and Missionary Alliance is that lost people matter to God, and He wants them found. And then the very next core value that the Alliance mentions there is that prayer is the primary work of God's people. Again, the connection between prayer and missions. If you walk in the side doors of Cary Alliance Church, one of those beautiful signs that hang on the wall mentions the values of Cary Alliance. “We believe that individual and corporate prayer is essential for a right relationship with God and with each other.”

But isn't it remarkable that these two things are listed among the weakest areas of the church according to research done by Lifeway? A survey of pastors, listing prayer as the number one weakness, the need for ongoing passionate prayer in both personal and church life. And then on that list not far after prayer, is outreach. A decline of personal sharing of faith. That article goes on to say that if we as believers want to see the same mighty move of God that the early church saw, we must pray as the early church did. Show me a praying Christian and church, and I will show you a victorious Christian and church. Church, we can have victory in prayer, and that can overflow in outreach and in missions around the world.

So we're looking this morning at Colossians chapter four, verses two through six. And in fact, I believe we're going to continue in this passage in a few weeks. A lot is going on in the month of November. Next week Pastor Dave will be sharing with us. The week after that, we have our Thanksgiving service. Don't forget to sign up, it's only two weeks away. And one of our assistant district superintendents, the guy who helps oversee Alliance churches in North and South Carolina is going to be with us sharing that day. But then on the 23rd, I think we're going to come back to Colossians four and talk about the second part of these verses before we enter our Advent series.

So Colossians 4:2-6: “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And 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. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

1. How is prayer described?

A. Devoted

Prayer is described for us in this passage using three different words, three characteristics of prayer that we see here. The first, of course, jumps right out at us. Be devoted. Prayer is something that is described as an activity to be devoted to. To be devoted in something is to persist in it or to allow it to occupy your attention, your time, to be something that you engage in regularly. The word was used in the original language and used in Scripture in a concrete sense, to describe something that is set aside for a particular service, or a particular activity or purpose.

In my house we have sewing scissors, and I can tell you and maybe many of you understand, that if you need to cut a piece of cardboard and you go find the sewing scissors and do that, you're going to be in trouble, right? They are set aside. They are devoted to a particular activity. In my house, we also have a coffee tamper, and it sits right next to the espresso machine. And every morning at about 6:00, I go out there and go through my coffee ritual, in which it's essential to tamp down that coffee. I would be lost at 6:00 or 7:00 every morning if the coffee tamper, which is set aside for that particular purpose, were not in that particular place at that time. And it's used several times throughout the day because it is devoted to that activity.

In Scripture, Jesus had a boat. He asked His disciples, as the crowd was pressing in, to find a boat and set it aside for the particular purpose that He could get into it and escape from the crushing crowd if He needed to do that. And you see other uses like that. For example, full time work. Someone is devoted to full time work. That's the thing that occupies them. But of course, in matters of faith, this word is used to describe habitual or regular activity, something that we do consistently and frequently. Half the time that you see the word “devoted” in the New Testament, it's talking about prayer. It's talking about studying the Scriptures, the apostle's teaching, or fellowship. Be devoted to prayer.

This is a matter of inner dedication, not simply outward habitual and regular action, which is an important part, but an inward dedication. And so you see it in Acts one, the believers devoted to prayer. In Acts two. In Acts six, the apostles were devoted to prayer. In Romans and Corinthians, Paul talks about us as believers being devoted to prayer.

B. Watchful

The next word we see here is watchfulness in prayer. It means being vigilant or wakeful, having something on the front of your mind, looking out for opportunities. One of the places in Scripture where we read about watchfulness is in Matthew chapter 25, when Jesus is telling His disciples

to be watchful for the end times, and He tells the parable of the ten virgins who have oil lamps and are waiting for the bridegroom to come. And they are to be watchful, they're to be ready, expectant. The common element here is that something is kept at hand, at readiness, on the lookout. Being devoted and being watchful go hand in hand, because it's on the front of our mind, and we are ready at any moment for the opportunity. Jesus Himself connected watchfulness and prayer when He went to the garden of Gethsemane, and He took his inner core of disciples with him, and He said, "Watch with Me and pray." He's asking them to be vigilant, to be alert alongside of Him while He is in prayer, and to join Him in prayer.

So watchfulness and prayer go hand in hand. They go hand in hand as far as the enemy's attacks. We should not be surprised or caught off guard when the enemy attacks individuals or the church in our ministries, because we are told that the devil is on the prowl like a roaring lion looking for opportunities. And so we are to be watchful, on guard. And our spiritual warfare, praying. Praying through Ephesians chapter six, as we've talked about, is to be ready at hand. Be devoted to prayer in watchfulness.

C. Thankful

And then, in thankfulness. Thankfulness is, as it's described in these verses, actually a particular element of watchfulness. Always ready to give God thanks for the things that He is doing. Paul describes us being ready to give thanks in every circumstance. Giving thanks actually matters to God. Jesus dedicated an entire parable to giving thanks. Ten lepers who were healed, only one came back to give praise, to give thanks to God. "What happened to the other nine?" He asks. There's a frequent connection between prayer and giving thanks, and between prayer and all of our circumstances and all of God's activities in our lives, as we see in Scripture.

Thankfulness is important because it is an aspect of worship. Coming to God and acknowledging His mercies towards us, which He renews every day. His blessings, both in a material sense, the abundance in which we enjoy, but even more so in a spiritual sense. Every spiritual blessing poured out on us in Jesus Christ. Thanksgiving is important because it's an opportunity to acknowledge our dependance, giving thanksgiving in prayer for what God is doing is the flip side of acknowledging I can do nothing on my own. Jesus said, "Apart from Me, you can do nothing."

We can carry out all kinds of activities, but none of it will have any long term spiritual value if it is done apart from Jesus Christ. And so when we give thanks for the things that He is doing, we are acknowledging our dependance on Him. "God, there's no way that I could have done that. There's no way that we could have accomplished that. There's no way to produce that kind of result. Thank You for what You are doing." Giving thanks rids us of pride, rids us of works mentality. If we are thanking God for what He's doing, then we cannot be looking inside and saying, "Hey, look how wonderful I am. Look at the things that I have accomplished." Giving thanks rids us of pride and a works mentality and gives us an opportunity to humble ourselves before the Lord and to glorify His name. So prayer is described for us here in this passage as something to which we are devoted in watchfulness and in thankfulness.

2. So what do we pray about?

A. Opportunities

Paul then goes on to talk about what he would like us to pray for. “Pray that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.” The first thing that Paul asks for is prayer for opportunities. He asks us to pray for open doors. Now, if you read the New Testament regularly, that probably triggers some memories for you. Throughout the New Testament, Paul talks about open doors for gospel witness. God opened a door wide for the gospel in Ephesus. Paul then wrote that “In Troas a door was opened for me in the Lord,” And then throughout Asia minor he said, “God opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.”

-Asking God to do what only He can do

So he's once again asking prayer for open doors. That is an acknowledgment Paul can't open doors. And you and I can't open doors. And missionaries who are serving around the world can't open doors. That is something that is beyond our ability, because it is a matter of heart, and it is a matter of God's wider working in all of the world. And so Paul asks us to pray that God will do the thing that only He can do. And that is to open the door in the nations, but also open the door right where we are. I can't open the door of the heart of my next-door neighbor. Only God can do that. I can't open a mind that is closed and hardened against the gospel, to the truth. Only God can do that. And so Paul calls us to pray for open doors, and we're praying not only for open doors around the world, but we're praying for open doors right here. God can open the nations. God can perform the miracle of salvation. And so the first thing we do when we're praying for opportunities is we're asking God to do what only He can do.

-Making the most of every opportunity

But keep in mind, there's a second thing that we're doing when we pray for opportunities, when we pray for open doors. And that is, we are committing ourselves to make the most of every opportunity. He talks about that in the following verses. I think that we have a pretty good need/response ratio as a people, as a church. When a need is proclaimed, Cary Alliance Church responds. It's a beautiful thing to see! It is for God's glory to see the generosity, to see the kindness, the compassion, the service attitude of so many in our church body. Need--response. Let's then follow that up with prayer, that that response will lead to opportunity to share the gospel, and that we will be quick to seize those opportunities.

We see it in our neighborhoods. I think pretty much any one of you, if you heard about a neighbor in need, you would be right there. Is it a meal? Is it giving them a ride to the doctor? Whatever it might be, right? Pray that that then turns into an opportunity to share. An open door into someone's heart and life, to follow up with the good news of Jesus Christ. Pray for open doors and be ready to seize the opportunity.

B. Faithfulness

In addition to calling us to pray for open doors, the apostle Paul asks for prayer to be faithful to do what he is called to do. That is, he says, pray that I may proclaim it clearly. One of the things we're acknowledging today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. And in particular, in 2025, Voice of the Martyrs is calling us to pray for pastors around the world in difficult places to carry on their ministry faithfully while they are in chains, in many circumstances. Exactly what Paul says in Colossians chapter four, is what people are living out today.

Let's not just have--it was beautiful. Pastor Danny, thank you so much for having us gather in those groups and pray together. Let's continue that throughout this week: lifting up brothers and sisters around the world who are being persecuted for their faith, that they would remain faithful to proclaim the gospel clearly. That they would be protected as they carry out their ministries for the sake of Christ, to which they are truly devoted. And that they would have the spiritual fruit of long-suffering, the ability to remain faithful even as they suffer for their faith.

But this prayer is not for them alone. This is a prayer for us. That as the Lord gives opportunities, that we would not fail to proclaim the gospel clearly as we should. In no way watered down. In no way skipped over, whether it be out of shame or fear. But that we would be like that video called us to, maybe not called to be martyrs as some are around the world, in the sense of giving up our lives. But called to be martyrs in the sense of being daily witnesses for Jesus Christ, no matter what it costs us.

I think in particular regard, it's important that we pray that our witness not be diluted with secondary issues. I remember one of the very first people I shared my faith with, this was back in high school. Right along with Jesus, I had a message of giving up smoking and drinking. And that totally drove that person away. Diluting the core message of the gospel with secondary issues that may have been important to me or to someone else. But not the primary issue, and that is of a lost soul in need of a Savior. And then letting the Holy Spirit do the work of sanctification, not letting our message be diluted with personal agendas. People can tell when they're a project. We are not about projects, we are about people. And so the love of Christ, and not our own need for some sort of fulfillment or justification. And not letting our message be diluted with politics or culture wars or the like. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly: undiluted, undistracted, bold, to the point.

C. In every area

This is what we pray in our faithfulness of what we are called to do. These requests, then, praying for open doors and praying for faithfulness, extend to other areas of our life. Paul doesn't talk about it here, but he talks about prayer all through the book of Colossians. And the book of Colossians is about living a life that is worthy of the name of the Lord and of what He has called us to. And so when we ask for God to open doors that only He can open, we can also ask God to do things in our own life that only He can do. Accomplishing the work of sanctification in our hearts and in our families and in our church family. Asking God to do what only He can do in the lives of others. Ourselves being an open door for God's mighty working among us.

And then, of course, asking that we would be faithful in our part in what God is doing in our own life, what God is doing in our church family, in our community and around the world. Paul says, pray. Pray that God will open doors and pray that we will be faithful to step through them. That extends not only to mission and witness, that extends to every area of His working in us and around us. We are to be devoted and watchful and thankful as we pray for these things.

How can we have victory?

-Confess prayerlessness

So how can we have victory in prayer? How can this become an area of strength for us? The first thing is to confess prayerlessness. The prophet Samuel, when he was leaving his ministry as a judge, or leader, of Israel and transitioning things to King Saul. He would continue his ministry as a prophet, but no longer such a public ministry. As he was giving kind of his farewell speech to the people of Israel, he said, "Far be it from me to sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you." Prayerlessness is sin. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. It is the first step towards sanctification to confess our sin in this area.

-Recognize need

Second thing would be to recognize our need. Somehow we always manage to find time to do the things we need to do. Our priority list for the day gets the things that need to be done. Do we truly recognize that apart from God we can do nothing? Do we truly recognize that we can't open doors? We can't accomplish change. We can't change lives. Not our own lives, never mind somebody else's. That it is only Jesus at work in and through us Who can do anything worthwhile. If we actually understood our need and grew in our dependence, then we would pray more because we would understand that we are nothing without it.

-Cultivate the habit of watchful prayer

And then let us cultivate a habit of watchful prayer. Establish the habit. Jesus Himself, the Son of God, took--He didn't find. Jesus couldn't find any extra time. The people pressed on Him constantly. Jesus took the time regularly to get alone with His Father in prayer. If He needed to do it, all the more we need to do it as well. Identify the time. Notice I am not saying find the time. You will not find it if you go out looking for it. You have to carve it out. It might be the early hours. It might be right before you go to bed. It might be lunchtime. You've got a half-hour break, you can devote it to prayer while you eat your sandwich. I don't know what it is. Find it. Establish the habit. Devote yourself to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

But prayer is more than an established habit. It is an opportunity that presents itself to us along the way. So be watchful. Look for the opportunities. When somebody shares with you a need, don't simply say, "I'll pray about that" and then forget about it. Or maybe actually write it down and pray about it at 11:00 that night before bed. Pray about it right then. Thank you for sharing that. Can we pray about that now? I love looking out after the service, or before the service, and

seeing here and there somebody praying together. There are opportunities that our church family presents. Sunday mornings before the sermon, Sunday after the sermon up front. Sometimes people will come forward with needs for prayer. Let's devote ourselves and our small groups to praying for each other. Our adult Sunday school class, they pray for each other. Every quarter we have church-wide prayer in room 115. It's going to come up the first Sunday of January.

Look for the opportunities. Seize the opportunities. Claim that moment that God has given. Let us be watchful in prayer and then keep short accounts in that regard. Don't put off for tomorrow what we can do today. Don't put off for an hour from now what we can do right now. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we as a people confess to you prayerlessness. I don't think there's a complete lack of prayer in this room. We love You. We turn to You at different points through our day or week. But I also don't think that there's anyone who is devoted in constant watchfulness and thankfulness as we are called to be. Lord Jesus, You told us to love You with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. And as long as we walk this earth, we will continually fall short. And here You call us to be devoted constantly in prayer. We fall short. In doing so we betray our independence. We betray a belief that if we get up and get going, we can do everything that we need to do. When in fact, apart from You, Lord Jesus, we can accomplish nothing. And so we confess to You our pride and independence and carelessness. When we ask for Your forgiveness we ask You, Lord, to help us to establish these habits. Not of a legalistic, fulfilling of some requirement that we can check off so we might feel ourselves a better person or look better in Your sight. But like drinking water. Coming to You to be satisfied, in the ways that only You can satisfy deep in our souls and spirit. Turning over to You the needs and concerns of the day. Asking for You to use us as instruments in Your hand. To bring Yourself glory in our families and in our neighborhoods. At work, at school, at church. Thank You, Father. How can it be that the Almighty and perfectly holy Creator of all the universe actually calls us, invites us into His presence to pray. That You hear, that You answer. Thank You for the privilege. Bless us Lord, as we endeavor to avail ourselves of that opportunity more and more. Lord, we do pray, we continue to pray for persecuted brothers and sisters around the world that they would remain faithful, that You would open more doors for their witness. And Lord, we pray in these coming weeks as we endeavor to care for the needy among us, that You would open doors. That You would get glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.