

# Winsome Engagement

Colossians 4:5-6

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It was a few weeks ago that we were in Colossians chapter four. This month we're kind of have a bunch of different messages, and then next week we actually start with our Advent series. We'll be doing the Advent candles and the whole thing, going through Christmas. And so we were in that section where Paul asks us to pray, and we talked about watchful prayer. And prayer can sometimes be the kind of thing that makes us feel guilty, but what we tried to talk about is that prayer can be an area of victory. In particular, as we approach prayer from the perspective of something I do all the time and something I respond to immediately, something I'm looking out for opportunities to practice. And then seizing that opportunity.

I got an email from one of you that following week saying, "Hey, you know, I went to the gym and there was somebody there and it looked like something wasn't quite right. So we got talking and I said, 'Can I pray for you?' And we prayed together and they were so very blessed." That's what we're talking about, seize the opportunity. Just make it a part of what we do because we are followers of Jesus Christ. Well, in the following verses there in Colossians four, Paul then talks about our witness, talks about our effect on those who are outside. And so today, following on watchful prayer, we're going to be talking about winsome engagement with the world around us.

Every once in a while, somebody asks, "Why aren't these days like the day of Pentecost?" Peter got up and preached and thousands of people came to Christ. And we long to see that, don't we? Well, in some ways, I have good news for you this morning. Did you know that every day--and it's really hard to get exact on these kind of figures you know, you listen to what missions report from around the world and you do some math about the size of the church. But every day, somewhere around 80,000 people claim allegiance to Jesus Christ. That's a Pentecost around the world every day. You do the math and that comes out to about 3,000 every hour. I hope one of them is in Cary Alliance Church this morning.

But all over the world, every hour, thousands of people come to faith in Jesus Christ as the Holy Spirit works through His people in the world around us. This is an area in which we tend to be overwhelmed with guilt, but one in which we can actually have victory as we walk in step with the Holy Spirit and look at our witness as something that we do habitually, not something that we save for special occasions.

But we're flummoxed as we think about it. And I think two of the major questions that we ask ourselves are, "What am I supposed to do? And what am I supposed to say?" That is what Paul addresses in these following two verses in Colossians chapter four, calling us to walk wisely and to speak gracefully.

So we're reading Colossians chapter four. We'll go back actually, and start with verse two, which we read previously, and continue through verse six. 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. "I don't know what to do"

### A. How we relate to the world

So that first verse answers the question, or the concern: I don't know what to do. And Paul says, what to do is be wise in your lifestyle before the world. Be wise in your lifestyle before the world. We are talking here about how it is that we relate to the world, as in how we relate to those who are not followers of Jesus Christ.

Paul uses an interesting word here that can send us down all kinds of rabbit trails. Those who are on the "outside," be wise towards "outsiders." The word "outside," the word "those people," "the others," can conjure up all kinds of concerns in our hearts and minds> And they are real concerns in our world today. We're talking about not our group, we're talking about the other group. And in this world, that means we're talking about racial barriers, or we're talking about class barriers, or perhaps about legal status.

But Paul is not talking about the humanistic divisions that divide our world so deeply today. Paul is talking about the single fundamental difference between two kinds of people: people who follow Jesus, and people who do not yet follow Jesus. And he is calling us as people who follow Jesus to have, first of all on our minds: "What is the wisest way to relate to those who are not yet following Jesus?" And of course, the understanding within the context being, so that they will become followers of Jesus.

When we see somebody, when we meet an individual, that's the question. Are they a Jesus follower? And if they are not a Jesus follower, how can I relate to them in such a way that they will move more closely to becoming a Jesus follower? The assumption here is that we care about their eternal state, and that that motivates us in our interactions with them.

That flows out of something we've already mentioned today, and that's the tremendous love of Jesus Christ for a lost world. Think about all that He gave, all that He did. He set aside the riches of heavenly glory and perfect fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and humbled Himself to be born in weak, frail, human flesh. To walk our world with us, to suffer alongside us in every way as we suffered, to be tempted in every way as we were tempted. And then in the end, absolutely undeserving, absolutely unjustly, went to a cross and died the most painful death that can be imagined and experienced.

Separation from His Father all because of love. Because of His concern for my eternal soul, and your eternal soul, and the eternal soul of that individual that we happen to meet on the street. He cares that much. And then His love is what motivates us. Second Corinthians chapter five verse 14 says that the love of Christ is what compels us because He died for all. It's not something that we conjure up in ourselves: "You've got to love people!" It is Christ in you, with that same love, overflowing towards those around. Expressing itself in concern for their well-being and for their eternal state.

Paul's assumption is that we care, and that that motivates us and helps us to overcome barriers of fear, or barriers of apathy or insecurity or whatever it might be that keeps our mouth shut. The love of Christ compels us.

#### B. Conduct ourselves with wisdom

And in the way we act towards those who are outside, Paul urges us then to conduct ourselves with wisdom. The word "to conduct ourselves" literally means to "walk about." It is how we go through our day. It's not a one-off action. It is our habitual way of carrying ourselves in relationship to other people and in relationship to the world around us. It's our lifestyle.

Earlier, in chapter one of Colossians, Paul urged the Colossian believers to conduct themselves, in other words to walk, in a manner that is worthy of the Lord. We bear the name of Jesus Christ, and so we are called to act in a way that in no way dishonors Him, in no way causes other people to stumble, but instead reflects the name of Jesus Christ to the world around us. Walk in a manner that is worthy of the Lord. And of the different descriptions that Paul gives in Colossians chapter one, one of the things he says is that a life that is worthy of the Lord is a life that bears fruit. Walk in a manner that is worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work, conducting ourselves in a way that draws others.

I'm reminded at this point of the disciples. They were facing a situation of persecution and opposition in Acts chapters three, four and five. They were commanded not to testify to the name of Jesus Christ. They answered so wisely, they answered so concisely and so accurately, that the religious leaders were astonished. And they took note that those men

had been with Jesus. Walking in a manner worthy of the Lord. That means that sometimes somebody can say, “Wow! That person has been with Jesus, and it impacts their conduct and their conversation.”

This requires wisdom. And so he says, be wise in the way that you conduct yourselves towards outsiders. Wisdom doesn't merely mean knowing a lot. Wisdom means being able to live out truth in our daily interactions, in our lifestyles, not only in the things we believe, but in the things we do. The goal of living wisely is to point to Jesus. Knowing a lot enables us to prove a point, or to protect our rights, or to preserve power. That has to do with me and my place. Living wisely has to do with pointing to Jesus, because I know how to actually put into practice the things that are in my mind and in my heart, the changes that Jesus made.

Looking back at Colossians chapter three, Paul talks about all the ways that our lives can be transformed from what we were to what we are, and then urges us to live in what we now are. That is living wisely. Not the natural reactions, the knee jerk reactions, the natural responses to what's going on around us. But rather our new values: the love of Christ at work in us applied to the specific situations that we face and conversations that we are challenged with. One commentator said at this point, “There is no list of rules for the myriad possible interactions that we can have each day.”

There is no easy answer. We are not called to memorize a list of ways that we can respond to absolutely every single thing that happens in our lives, or every situation that we might confront. But rather to have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us inform our actions and responses with His kind of wisdom, which then in turn creates opportunities. Be wise in the way you conduct yourselves towards outsiders, not responding the natural way, but responding the way that the Holy Spirit prompts so that the Holy Spirit can create opportunities that we seize ahold of.

### C. Which creates opportunities

That's the next point, making the most of every opportunity, Paul says. If we are responding not in natural ways, but in godly ways, the world takes note and that creates opportunities. There's an interesting word that the apostle uses here it's actually “seizing hold of the times.” Now when we think about time, we think about a wristwatch, right? And it's divided very neatly into 12 units called hours, and 60 units called minutes. That's chronological time. But there's another concept of time. There's a concept of God moments. And that's actually what is in mind here. Not a clock, but special events where the Holy Spirit is at work so that various factors flow together.

A confluence of events, of circumstances, of conversations, creating a God moment. And Paul wants us to seize the God moments. Seize that moment of possibility. Do we believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in people's lives? That He is the One who convicts, that He is the One who opens eyes to understand truth, that He is the One who gives new birth. If we believe in the working of the Holy Spirit, then we understand that He is at work right now, and we are looking for those moments to engage, to seize that opportunity.

In Acts chapter 17, Paul is addressing the pagan Athenians, and one of the things he wants to convince them of is that God set us in certain places at particular times, so that He could reveal Himself to us. Those are the God moments that we are to seize hold of. I go back again to that story at the beginning of one of you at the gym a couple of weeks ago. I don't believe it's coincidence that that Sunday we talked about prayer, that at that moment that lady was there, that the person here in the congregation didn't fall asleep but actually listened and then was bold enough to say, "Let's pray together." The Holy Spirit created an opportunity, we seize it, making the most of every opportunity.

The best use of every opportunity. It's actually a commercial word here. Seeing the right moment to take advantage of the sale. I've never done Black Friday. I imagine that some of you do. You probably actually already have a shopping list and you are waiting for the right moment for that item to reach the right price, and you're going to snap up the deal, right? That's what he's talking about. Attentive, waiting for that moment, and grabbing the opportunity when it comes up. Because we believe that the Holy Spirit is at work. We're being called here to lead the kind of life, a life that is worthy of the Lord, such that the Holy Spirit creates opportunities that we are alert to. In fact, that we are expectant of, and then seize upon those opportunities with care and vigilance and hard work.

That is being wise in how we relate or conduct ourselves with those who are outside, so that we can take advantage of every opportunity. He goes on. "Be wise in the way you act towards 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."

## 2. "I don't know what to say"

### A. How we talk within our sphere of influence

And here we have the second concern: "I don't know what to say," and we are being called to a witness that is graceful and winsome and personal. First thing to grasp here is that we are talking about how we talk within our sphere of influence. We're not talking about memorizing a very convincing method of sharing the gospel, so that we can go out and

share with random people. That's something that is good to do. I don't believe that that is what Paul is talking about at this point. And you'll see why as we go through it.

An emphasis here is on individuality. Another translation actually doesn't use the word "everybody." It uses the word "each one." And that is actually what's in mind here. It would be overwhelming--can you imagine if Paul was putting on you the responsibility to be prepared to answer everybody in all the world, with all of their objections, concerns, the challenges they've gone through, the baggage they're carrying? "You better be able to answer everybody!" He's saying you can be able to answer each one. Those individuals that God brings across your path. He's talking about how we communicate with those in whom the Holy Spirit creates the opportunity.

It's interesting, in fact, that earlier in verse two he said, "Pray that a door may be opened for my message." And then here he actually says, "Let your message be full of grace, seasoned with salt." Our lives and our words communicate. And Paul wants a door open for his communication. And Paul calls for us to have our communication be full of grace and seasoned with salt.

### 1) Full of grace

First of all, being full of grace. There are two things at work here, aren't there? There is God's grace. So let your message be full of the grace of God. Think about Scripture in all of its abundance, describing to us the multiplicity of the riches of the grace of God to us in Christ Jesus. Let your conversation be full of the grace of God.

But in addition to being full of grace in the sense of communicating God's grace, it also means for it to be gracious. Let your conversation be gracious as you interact with an unbelieving world. This is probably a good moment to have a frank conversation about how we talk towards those who are outside, and about what it means to communicate graciously. I feel like in today's climate, we as a whole have gone from a defensive posture--you know, we're tired of being on the defensive--now we're going on the offense.

And so often our conversation is offensive. It's harsh, it's callous towards the most vulnerable around us. Does our conversation really reflect Jesus Christ? Think about Jesus at the well with that woman. He knew her past. He knew how very lost she was. He said, "I have living water for you." Is that what people hear from our lips and our interactions? "Have some living water."

The woman caught in adultery. The people who were righteous in their own eyes were ready to condemn, point out the sin. Make sure it was punished. Jesus had that one wise comment. Just one little command. "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone,"

and everybody went away. “Woman, has no one condemned you? Then neither do I condemn you. Then neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”

The highest words of praise towards people's faith, Jesus saved for the outsiders, for the foreigners. “Never have I seen such faith in Israel,” He said. The greatest anger that He demonstrated was for those who turned the house of worship into a place of division. His passion was that the house of worship be a house of prayer for all nations.

It's remarkable to me that Peter, in writing to the early church, which was in the midst of a hostile world. He was writing to people who actually experienced real persecution, threat to their lives and livelihood. And in the middle of that kind of pressure, he called them to relate to the world outside with gentleness and respect. One commentator said here, “Deep convictions can be shared graciously, and don't have to be expressed with harshness.” We are called to the place where the only thing that causes someone to stumble is the offense of the cross. Putting aside every other stumbling block, keeping Jesus as the focus, that is letting your conversation be full of grace.

## 2) Seasoned with salt

And then seasoned with salt. It's such a lively expression here. It actually can be translated “sparkling conversation.” In the secular literature of the day this idea was used about pleasant discourse in public settings, about being witty and winsome. Now, Paul's not calling us all to be extroverts. Introverts can actually be witty and winsome. He is calling us to be engaged.

That's the key idea here, not so separated that we are not able to carry on a pleasant conversation with somebody who doesn't know Jesus. But rather engaged in such a way that we can have that conversation that is sparkling. That is, as he says here, seasoned with salt. One commentator said, “We're talking about lively interchanges with non-Christians in a style which would be expected to find a positive resonance among our conversation partners.”

How do you do that? You go out there with your activities or with your hobbies, or you engage in service groups, or maybe even the HOA, whatever it might be. Somewhere where you are interacting with people who are not yet following Jesus, engaging in common areas of interest so that you can have conversations that draw them in and conversations in which all of the grace and love of Jesus Christ is expressed. And so creating opportunities for that witness.

## B. Enabling us to answer



And the result, he says, is that you will know how to answer everyone. Now that's dangerous. It's kind of tempting. "I'm going to know how to answer everyone! I'm going to have all the arguments in line and show how much I know." Defeat every argument, prove the truth, and lose the people we're talking with because obviously it's more important to prove a point than to love a person. Remember, in this context, he is talking about us being in relationship, us demonstrating the love of Christ, us knowing the individuals with whom we are interacting. And the knowing here is an experiential knowing, not a head knowledge. When Paul uses the word knowing, for example, in Philippians chapter four, he says, "I know what it is to be in want, and I know what it is to have plenty." It's not because he read a book, it's because he went without food at times. And then at other times he experienced the abundance of God's provision. He knew in his life and experience what those things are.

And here, if we are engaged with people in the way that Paul is describing in this passage, then we know how to answer because we know their concerns, their background. They ask a question, "What do you mean, God is Father?" And I realize, wow, what a bad relationship that person had with their father, I'd better explain this so very carefully. Knowing, yes because we know the truth, but also because we have experienced the individual. And so we see the connection between the wise and winsome conversation, and then the ability to point folks to Jesus Christ. It assumes relationship. It assumes time spent.

There's one more word to pay attention to here, and that is the word always. So that you will always be able to answer everyone. That's another tough one. It calls for constant vigilance. I wrote down in my journal this week as I was reading through the Psalms, where the psalmist asked the Lord to put a guard over his mouth. Because He's the one who can keep us always vigilant, always attentive, always ready to seize every opportunity.

### 1) Pray

And since "always" is so tough, our first closing thought is to pray. It is no accident that Paul begins this paragraph asking the believers to pray for him, that God may open a door for his message. And so we pray for each other, and we pray for our own selves too, that God would do the things that only He is able to do. That He would give the wisdom, that He would guard our tongues, that He would speak through us, that He would create the opportunities. That confluence of circumstances and His working in an individual's heart so that we can seize those opportunities.

Pray that God will do the things that only He can do so, and that we will do the things that we are called to, walking worthily, speaking graciously, engaging the world actively, and seizing the opportunities that He creates. Please don't think, "Oh, prayer. Okay, that's fine." Grab hold of that for your neighbor, for your coworker. Make the list of five people that God



has put in your sphere of influence that you can pray for. And as you pray, you will be attentive to the opportunities.

## 2) Engage

Then engage. Pray and engage. We have events here at the church. Pastor Danny talked about Christmas at the Coffeehouse that's coming up. The Coffeehouse event is a professional-level event. I don't think I'm hyping it up too much to say that it is amazing, and it's a great opportunity to invite the people you're praying for to come to this place with you and hear an excellent concert, as well as the message of Christ. Engage in With Love from Jesus and the other service opportunities we have. But I do have another warning for you here. Engaging with the world that we don't know is actually a whole lot easier than engaging with our neighbors.

There was a ministry I was involved in a few years back. It was in Moscow: feeding the homeless every week. Somebody else organized it, I just had the privilege of going and helping. In Moscow in the winter, below zero temperatures, sometimes unpleasant circumstances. But you know what? That was a whole lot easier than talking with the guy who lived in the apartment across the hallway, because reaching out to people I don't know is very low risk. It's important--we're called to do it--to demonstrate the love of Christ to the most needy and vulnerable.

But when we talk about engaging, we must do the harder work of engaging our neighbors, engaging our sports team, engaging our school, engaging others who share similar hobbies to what we have. I have a friend who asked for prayer recently. He's got a gaming group, they're going on a gaming weekend. His goal is to share Christ, and he asked a group of guys to pray for him. That's taking a risk.

## 3) Follow through

And then finally, follow through. That's just as hard as engaging: not forgetting, not moving on, valuing people enough to follow up, and to spur one another on to follow up. And so I would like to call you to share your opportunities with each other, and pray for each other and, follow up with each other. Small groups is a good place to do that. Other relationships are a good place to spur one another on in faith and good deeds in this area of winsome engagement with the world around us. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, so many of us here can thank You for someone who took the moment to engage us with the message of Jesus Christ. And it changed our lives, and it changed eternity. If nothing else happens here this morning, Lord, open our eyes to the incredible love of Christ shown at the cross. And how it flowed through somebody else to us. And so fill us with gratitude to You and with hearts of worship. But then, Lord, as Your love fills us,

may it compel us. Open our eyes to the world around us. Compel us to engage the world around us. To serve with the love of Christ. To speak with the grace of Christ. We pray in Your name and for Your glory. Amen.