

# MULTIPLYING LOCAL CHURCHES BY PRAYER Colossians 4:2-6

## INTRODUCTION

I made the point last week that God's eternal plan has always been to gather all of his people together into one body, one church by the growth and multiplication of local churches. God is right now extending his rule over more and more people in the world through the process of adding individuals to currently existing local churches and by starting new local churches that gather up individuals by the gospel. I gave you several strands of evidence from the NT to show that this is what God has always planned. In summary those strands of evidence are: When Jesus commands his church to baptize people in the name of the Triune God he is commanding the multiplication of local churches. The Apostle Paul's strategy was to start local churches everywhere he went. All the letters of the NT are written to local churches or leaders of local churches. It has never been God's will to simply spread the gospel into the nations of the world so that individuals are saved apart from local churches. As Paul states in Titus 2:14 Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people of his very own, eager to do what is good." He is saving a people, a group, a church, not simply individuals.

In this series we are examining the means by which God adds to existing churches and begins new churches. This morning we are going to look at a text that tells us that prayer is a chief means by which God establishes and multiplies his church. In Colossians 4:3-4 Paul directly asks for the church at Colossae to pray that he might be able to successfully proclaim the gospel which we know from Acts always leads to the planting of churches. Also, in vv. 5-6, Paul clearly shows us that a praying church is also a church that is concerned with its relationship to those outside the church. Thus, we are going to examine this morning methods God aims to use to advance his kingdom, his rule in this world through the growth and multiplication of local churches.

## MAIN POINT

**God's kingdom advances through the growth and multiplication of local churches by...**

### **I. Prayer that is persistent, watchful and grateful (v.2)**

Like most of the NT letters, this letter to the church in the town of Colossae is a celebration of the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ and his saving work on behalf of believing sinners. Colossians 1:15-23 is one of the most majestic descriptions of Jesus and his salvation in the NT. Also, like many of the NT letters, Paul wrote because this local church was being undermined by false teachers. You can see this in 2:4 when Paul writes, "I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments." As in most NT letters, after declaring the beauty of Christ and his salvation and correcting the wrong doctrines being taught he goes on to describe the way of life that always comes from the gospel. You can see that transition at 3:4-5. The "therefore" in v. 5 tells us that because our life is hidden with Christ in God there are certain ways of thinking, feeling and behaving we are to renounce and, beginning in v. 12, certain ways of thinking, feeling and living we are to embrace. The paragraph we are considering this morning is the conclusion of his description of the way of life that flows from the gospel.

In 4:2 Paul declares that every sinner who has been made alive with Christ and forgiven of all his or her sins through the death of Christ is devoted to prayer. The Christian life is a praying life and the Christian church is a praying community. The term Paul uses that is translated "continue steadfastly" in the ESV is normally translated "devoted to". It communicates the idea of giving concentrated attention to and investing time in a person or thing or cause. It is used 10 times in the NT and six of those uses are in reference to prayer. I asked myself, as I reflected on this command, what are the things to which I am devoted? What are the things in which I can honestly say that I continue steadfastly; that regularly occupy my time and attention and activity?

Here are some of the things to which I am devoted. I am devoted to eating and to sleeping. I continue steadfastly in caring for Jared, my disabled son. I am devoted to memorizing and reading the Bible. I continue steadfastly in talking with individual people about the gospel and its application to their lives. I am devoted to grocery shopping, loading the dishwasher, paying the bills, mowing the lawn, feeding the birds, etc. I am devoted to studying the Bible and preparing sermons based upon my study. I am devoted to watching TV. I continue to steadfastly communicate with my wife and children. However, quite honestly I cannot say that I am devoted to prayer. It is not that I do not pray but that in comparison to the time and attention I give to these other activities to which I am quite obviously devoted, I am not devoted to prayer. What about you? We are all devoted to a variety of activities but are we devoted to, continuing steadfastly in prayer?

I know that every Christian, even the most well known Christians throughout history have felt that they were not devoted to prayer the way the Lord would want. There is no measurement that comes along with this command such that we can say that if we are spending this much time praying each day, then we are devoted to prayer. My sense is that no matter how much time and attention I give to prayer, I can always do better, I can always be more devoted to asking my heavenly Father for his gracious help. So I would encourage each of us to assess the level of our devotion to prayer and resolve to do a little better this year.

It is important to note that Paul does not give any more specific description of what he is talking about than simply telling us to be devoted to prayer. You can increase your devotion to prayer by praying more privately or by praying more with your family or in your small group or with a friend or with the whole church. You can be more devoted to prayer by praying more out loud or by praying more silently. You can continue more steadfastly in prayer by using prayers written by others, such as in the psalms or a book like "The Valley of Vision." Increasing your devotion to prayer can happen in any of these ways and many others. The main thing is that we as a church and each of us personally need to be more devoted to asking God to work on our behalf.

The second thing Paul commands us to do is to "keep watch or be alert in prayer". This is not simply a command to not let your mind wander when you pray or don't fall asleep while praying. The word translated "being watchful" is a significant NT word. Jesus used it quite often in relation to the fact that he is coming again. We are to stay awake or keep watch because he is coming back. Of the 22 times it is used, 13 are used in reference to the return of Jesus. In Matthew 24 Jesus compares our situation to that of servants whose master goes on a journey and leaves us in charge of his estate until he returns. The alertness that Jesus commands is that we remember that he is returning and we will be evaluated when he comes as to the way in which we have performed our duties while he is gone. He compares the vigilant servant who persists in his duties knowing that the master could return at any moment with the servant who says that the master isn't coming back for a long time and so uses his master's resources to get drunk and begins to abuse the other servants. The non-vigilant servant lives for the pleasures of the moment and forgets or ignores the fact that one day he will have to answer to the master of the estate.

The same verb is used by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he commands Peter, John and James to keep watch with him while he prays. They fall asleep and he rebukes them by saying to them "Could you not keep watch even for one hour?" He then commands them, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation for the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." The point of the word in its use regarding the return of Jesus and in the garden is the same: we are prone to wander, we are easily tempted and to forget our duties and to not remain faithful to the Lord and so when we pray, "being watchful," we are asking the Lord to give us strength to persevere, to remain faithful to Jesus in light of the fact that one day we will have to give an account to him. "Watchful" prayer is prayer that is alert to the temptations to sin that surround us and asks God's help to be faithful and not to give in or wander away. While God promises that he will bring us safely into our heavenly home we ask him to so work in us, in our church that we hold fast to Jesus to the end of our days, faithfully obeying him on this journey to heaven. We ask him who has promised to bring his saving work in us to completion to keep us from succumbing to the temptation to quit and give up.

The first time I heard of John Piper, the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis and author of dozens of books was in hearing a sermon he preached at a missions conference entitled, "Prayer the work of missions." In that sermon he said this, "You will not know what prayer is for unless you know that life is war." You and I will not learn to pray more or better until we realize that we are in a war with sin and unbelief until we die. He went on to explain that prayer doesn't work for many Christians because we view prayer as the bell we ring to have the butler come and fluff up our pillow rather than viewing it as a war time walkie-talkie by which we call up our commanding officer and ask him to send us more ammunition and reinforcements to enable us to fight the war. Paul's use of that verb, "keep watch" is confirmation that Dr. Piper is correct. In prayer we are seeking heavenly resources to fight the fight of faith to the end of our days. Prayer is the admission that we are weak and needy people who cannot hold fast to Jesus and resist temptation apart from divine enablement. When we don't pray we are asserting that we are strong and have what it takes to resist and fight on our own or we are declaring that we don't believe we are in a war.

Finally, notice that as we alertly pray for God's help in the fight that we are to also be sure to give thanks. Why include this in the command to be devoted to prayer by keeping watch? Obviously, giving thanks to God is the right thing to do. Everything we have and are has come to us from God himself. God is personally and consciously and intentionally giving you every good thing in your life all the time. Thus, you ought to be grateful. Our lack of gratitude is one of the chief evidences of our sinfulness. So cultivating thankfulness towards God is a clear mark of our conversion. However, thankfulness is also an important weapon in fostering prayer. When I remember and thank God for his great acts of salvation I am then strengthened to ask him for help. As my heart truly rejoices in Christ, in justification, in regeneration, in the giving of the Holy Spirit, in adoption, in reconciliation, in future deliverance due to Christ's resurrection; then I am more motivated to ask God to give me what I need, what my church needs to be faithful to the end of our lives.

## **II. Prayer for the successful proclamation of the gospel (vv.3-4)**

Paul not only commands that we be a praying church, seeking God's help to fight the fight of faith but also that we pray for the successful proclamation of his word which, as we have seen, creates new churches and adds to existing churches. Paul asks that the church in Colossae pray on his behalf for two things. First he asks that God would open a door for the word. Clearly this is a request for God to give him opportunities to preach the gospel to others. The word he wants to have a door opened for is "the mystery of Christ." "Mystery" in Paul, as I explained last week, is referring to information that can only be known by God's revelation. It is information that God kept hidden throughout the OT and only with the coming of Jesus has he made this information clear. In Colossians this mystery of Christ is described in 1:24-2:2. The information only revealed after the coming of Jesus is that Jesus is the long promised Messiah and that he alone is the one who saves every believer irrespective of their religious or cultural or racial heritage. Christ himself as the one who saves every believer by incorporating them into his one body, whether Jew or Gentile, is the mystery. Thus Paul asks them to ask God for opportunities to preach Christ as the Lord and Savior of every believer.

What is remarkable about this request for prayer is that he is under house arrest in Rome when he asks for opportunities to preach the word. He is asking God to bring people to him because he cannot go to people. It is noteworthy that the book of Acts ends by recording God's answer to this prayer. It reads, "He (Paul) lived there (in Rome, chained to a Roman soldier) 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." Being chained to a Roman guard night and day for two years is no obstacle for God. God is able to open doors for Paul to preach about Jesus even while he remains in a rented apartment in Rome under house arrest, awaiting trial. This is why Paul in another letter he wrote from another prison said that though he was in chains for preaching the gospel, yet, "the word of God is not chained."

So the first thing that Paul asks them to pray for is that God would give him opportunities to preach the gospel of Christ to people. The second thing he asks is in v. 4. He asks that God would enable him to make the gospel clear. Then he adds, making the gospel clear is what God has called him to do. This is the stewardship that he

received from the Lord himself, to make the saving work of Jesus plain and understandable to others. The word that he uses here is not simply the word for making difficult to understand things easy to grasp. Rather it is a word that is most often used of God himself. He reveals or manifests hidden truth to blind eyes. He causes people to be able to perceive, to understand the truth about Jesus. Thus, Paul's prayer request is not only that he will be able to clearly communicate but that his communication would result in others understanding with a Spirit given insight the wonder of Jesus' living and dying and rising for the sins of every believer. He is asking them to ask God to make him able to actually persuade others of the truthfulness of the gospel so that his hearers abandon all hope of finding life in this world and trust in Christ to give them God's eternal life. Ask God to make those who hear me to receive my words not as if they were merely the words of men but as they actually are, the words of God.

Churches and the Christians who form them are regularly asking God to give the missionaries we support open doors for the gospel, opportunities to preach the gospel of Jesus. We are regularly asking God to give our parents open doors to preach and teach the gospel to our children. We are asking God to give our pastors and elders and small group leaders open doors for taking the gospel into the lives of others. We are asking the Lord to open doors for the word for us because we are all part of the church. I wonder what would happen if all of us simply began asking God to open doors for the word, that we might all be able to speak the mystery of Christ. But also, churches and the Christians who form them regularly ask God to make those who preach the gospel to be able to make it clear and persuasive. We don't only care that the gospel is taught to our children, we want our children to see the glory of Christ and to trust and love him. We don't simply care that our missionaries get to share the gospel, we want those who hear to embrace Jesus and his saving work. We don't simply care that our pastor delivers a sermon every week but that those who hear him see and savor Jesus through the sermon. There are people all around us who God intends to save but who cannot be saved unless they hear the gospel and are persuaded by God's HS to trust in that gospel. Thus each of us, each of our families should be devoted to asking God to give us opportunities to clearly and persuasively share the good news about Jesus.

I hope you will come and join us at least one night this week to pray in this way for opportunities for the gospel to be preached and for the success of that gospel. Make coming to pray with us one of your steps towards "continuing steadfastly in prayer by keeping watch in it with thanksgiving" this year. Again, I ask, what might happen if we would do as we are told and ask God to open doors for the word and to make our proclamation of the gospel successful?

### **III. Churches that are Jesus to non-Christians (vv.5-6)**

I do not think it is an accident that immediately after Paul asks for prayer for his successful proclamation of the gospel that he commands this church and thus our church to pay attention to how we are living with and among the non-Christians in our community. We cannot really pray for God to give our missionaries opportunities to preach without considering our own responsibility to the non-believers in our lives. We cannot be devoted to prayer in view of Christ's return without considering the condition of those who are outside of Christ around us. So what does Paul command local churches and the Christians in them to do?

First, he commands that we walk or live wisely with those outside the church. Let me note in passing that Paul's view of a local church requires that there be an identifiable membership. The church at Colossae had some method of knowing who was in the church otherwise it would be nonsense to talk about who was outside the church. This is one of the reasons that it is right for a local church to have formal membership and why everyone who is a true Christian should want to be visibly identified with a local church. But what does it mean to live wisely with those outside the church? If we ignore the context of the letter in which this statement appears it would seem to be encouraging us to be thoughtful and tactful and courteous and discerning in our relationships with non-Christians. Don't be foolish or rash or rude or ignorant but be cautious and considerate. However, this word "wisdom" is a key word in the letter. In 1:28 Paul says that he preaches Christ to everyone, teaching them with all wisdom. In 2:3 he says that in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. In 3:16 we are to allow the word of God to dwell in us richly, "teaching and admonishing each

other in all wisdom.” Thus to walk in wisdom is to walk like a Christian. It is to live with non-Christians as if you are a Christian, a follower of Jesus.

This is confirmed by the second phrase in the verse which literally says, “by buying up (redeeming) the time.” That same clause is used in Ephesians 5:15-16 where we are commanded to live like wise men “by buying up the time because the days are evil.” Thus living wisely among non-Christians means that we are to use the time we have with non-Christians not to join them in doing evil, but to live like a Christian as spelled out in passages like Colossians 3:5-4:1. As Peter says in a similar context, we are to abstain from the passions of the flesh and to live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse us of doing wrong they may glorify God on the day he visits us. If we will live in accord with the gospel of Jesus, being wise men and women in accord with our Lord and his word, then we will bear witness by our deeds to him and his glorious salvation.

Then in v. 6 Paul says, literally, “Your word always with grace, as having been seasoned with salt, so that you might know how you should answer each person.” I know all the English translations use “speech” or “conversation” but Paul uses the same word here he just used when asking that God would open a door for the word, which is the mystery of Christ. So while we should speak with grace, that is, winsomely, yet, the primary emphasis is that the word of our testimony about Jesus is to always be full of grace because it is a word of grace. In Colossians 1:6 Paul says that the gospel is the message of God’s grace. Our word is a word that describes how God, contrary to what we deserve has sent his son to live and die so that everyone who believes in him will be delivered from the condemnation that we deserve and made right with God and given eternal life. Thus as we live among non-believers Paul commands that we regularly speak the savory word of God’s gracious salvation in a gracious way. And we are to pay attention to the individual people to whom we speak. Not everyone needs the exact same message delivered in exactly the same way. We are to know the gospel of God’s grace and as we pray for opportunities and ability we will discover ways to speak our word of testimony concerning God’s gracious salvation in Jesus. We are not delivering a word of moral reformation or how to save our culture from the evil bad people. We are speaking the word of the gospel, the good news of God’s grace that sinners of every shade, stripe and variety are welcome to trust Christ and receive God’s grace and become a part of his glorious church.

Here we have a vision of the local church as that place where God’s people are being formed by the gospel into a holy, loving, faithful, praying, witnessing community that reproduces itself through the faithful proclamation of God’s word. This week, beginning tonight in our own homes, we are going to ask our Father to make us into this kind of a church. We are going to be devoted to prayer for at least this week, asking God to protect us from sin and the devil so that we make it safely to our heavenly home. We are going to ask that God give open doors and success to our missionaries and to our parents and to our own witness for Jesus. I urge you to join us on at least one evening this week as we seek to continue steadfastly in prayer, keeping watch in it with thanksgiving.

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