

# “Them That Are Without”

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## Text:

Colossians 4:2-6

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. 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-- that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”

## Introduction:

We have reached the end of the teaching part of this letter. The rest contains Paul’s closing salutations. They are of historical interest, and we learn some interesting details from them, but we will conclude our meditations on the Epistle to the Colossians with this last paragraph of exhortation. The paragraph contains two major exhortations united by a common theme. That theme is expressed in the word “outsiders”. What Paul means by “outsiders” or “them that are without” is unbelievers, those who have not yet entered into a covenantal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The Colossians themselves had been outsiders before they had heard and responded to the Gospel. What Paul says in Ephesians 2:11-17 describes their previous condition to the letter:

“Wherefore remember, that ye *being* in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were **without** Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and **without** God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition *between us*; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, *even* the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, *so* making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.”

In the previous two studies we have looked at our responsibility to those who are “within”, to our fellow-believers, and to those of our own households, in studying this passage we will be considering our responsibility to those who are “without”, those who do not yet know Christ.

An interesting preliminary observation is that Paul considered his responsibility and that of the Colossian believers to be essentially the same. Notice the two occurrences of the word “ought” in the text. First he asks the Colossians to pray for him that he might be able to make known the “mystery of Christ” as he ought. Then he tells the Colossians to walk wisely, and to be careful of their speech, so that they might be able to answer each person “as they ought.” In both cases the word ought expresses obligation and responsibility. The responsibility of which he is speaking is the obligation of sharing the gospel with those who do not know Christ, and he makes it clear that it is both his responsibility and their responsibility. Sometimes we imagine that evangelism is only the responsibility of those who have been called and gifted as evangelists, or in Paul’s case, as an apostle, but Paul makes it clear in this passage that all believers have a responsibility towards those who are still without, still outside of Christ. This is the mission of the church. Christianity is a missionary religion. Our responsibility is to share the good news of salvation through Christ with all. This is the last instruction Jesus gave us before he ascended into heaven, when he told his disciples: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, *even* unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matthew 28:19-20).

If Christianity is a missionary religion, it is not a religion of coercion. We do not seek to convert people against their will, nor do we force mass conversions upon entire populations. We believe that faith is an inner conviction that comes as a result of the work of the Spirit of God. People are brought to faith one at a time as they are convinced of the reality that is in Jesus Christ through the witness of those who know him. This is our responsibility to those who are without; to bear witness through our lives and through our words to the saving reality that exists in Christ alone. We do this as we live out our faith honestly in the world, and as we give answers “to everyone who asks us the reason for our hope” (I Peter 3:15).

Everything that Paul says in this passage is related to this responsibility. He is concerned first that he fulfill his responsibility as the Apostle to the Gentiles, so he asks the Colossians to pray for him that his work of evangelism might be effective, then he tells the Colossians to be careful of the way they conduct themselves with unbelievers in order that they might also be effective evangelists. A careful examination of the text will help us understand how we can be effective in evangelism by focusing on the following three things:

- Prayer
- Wise Conduct
- Gracious Words

## I. Pray

The passage begins with a rather general exhortation to watchful prayer. Paul then asks the Colossians to pray for him. He has told them at the beginning of the letter that he is always praying for them, and now he wants them to return the favor. What he asks them to pray for is that God open doors for him to fulfill his ministry of evangelism. This is typical. On every occasion that he asks others to pray for him the request is always that his ministry would be effective. In II Thessalonians 3:1-2 he asks the Thessalonians to “pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith.” In Ephesians, 6 in a passage somewhat parallel to the passage under consideration, after exhorting the Ephesians to pray asks them to “pray also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph 6:19-20).

Paul saw a close connection between prayer and the effectiveness of the gospel. He understood that there was an enemy who wanted to hinder his efforts to preach Christ; that this same enemy sought to blind the understanding of those to whom he preached. He understood that evangelism was a spiritual battle, and that his chief weapon in that battle was prayer.

All of us know people who are not believers that we would like to see come to faith in Christ. We must begin by praying for them. Salvation is a work of grace. God works in the life of each one individually. There is no set way, no standard set of circumstances through which a person will come to faith. There are things which must happen; he must hear and understand the Gospel, his heart must be made responsive. God will use various people and various circumstances to bring individuals to faith. We will discuss other ways in which he uses us in a moment, but the first thing he wants us to do is pray. Prayer overcomes the forces of evil that blind individuals to the light of Christ; it opens their understanding to the truth of the Gospel, and prepares their hearts to receive the saving message. It also opens our eyes to opportunities that we may seize to share Christ with others. We must pray, and we must pray for specific people. God will direct us if we ask him. He will burden us to pray for specific individuals, and then he will make it clear to us how we must act toward those individuals and what we must say to them.

## II. Conduct yourself wisely

The next thing we are encouraged to do is to walk or conduct ourselves wisely towards them that are without, redeeming the time. One person has translated “redeeming the time” by “snatching up the opportunity”. That is a good vivid translation. People are not always open to

the Gospel. There is a time to speak and a time to refrain from speaking. Wisdom knows the difference. The wisdom of which Paul speaks is divine wisdom, which is a gift of God and an answer to prayer. This kind of wisdom helps us to see people in the way that God sees them. It helps us see them not as irritations to us but as potential fellow-believers and citizens of heaven.

We must conduct ourselves in such a way that we become signposts on the road to salvation and not roadblocks. Unfortunately, the most common objection that people have to faith in Christ is Christians. Mahatma Gandhi is reported to have said that he would have become a Christian if it hadn't been for Christians. While the objections are sometimes unfair and misplaced there must be some truth in them. This is at least a part of what Jesus meant when he told us that we are the "light of the world", and the "salt of the earth". Our calling is to live in such a way that our lives are gospel magnets, that we attract people to Christ and to faith in him. The advice that Peter gives to Christian wives who have unbelieving husbands has application for all relationships between believers and unbelievers. He tells them: "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct" (I Peter 3:1). Winsome conduct must precede winsome words. The new life of which we have been speaking must be lived out not only in the church and in our families, but also in the world – in school, in the workplace, wherever we spend our days and before whomever we come in contact. People need to see Christ-like conduct in the context of real life. We may never be the one to speak a word, but Peter says that people may be won "without a word" by our "conduct".

Now, if we follow the flow of the passage wise and godly conduct before unbelievers will give us opportunities, and those opportunities must be seized. This is what Paul means by "redeeming the time". Time here is time as opportunity. Wisdom not only makes us aware of opportunity, it pushes us to seize the opportunity. We have already alluded to Peter's words in I Peter 3:15-16. Here is the complete passage: "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, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame." These words parallel very closely what Paul says in the passage we are studying. Here is the pattern implied in both passages. Godly conduct before the world will prompt unbelievers to ask questions. We must see these questions as opportunities and be ready to answer even if the questions seem hostile in motivation. We must be careful how we respond. The way we speak is as important as what we say. This leads us to our last point.

### **III. Speak Graciously**

In evangelism there will always be a time when words are spoken. “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10: 17). Whether it is you or someone else, there will be a moment when the gospel must be put into words. It must be explained, and the person must be given a clear opportunity to accept or reject it. Both our text and the passage from I Peter quoted above imply that when that moment comes, two things will be important: what we say, and how we say it.

Peter tells each of us to be ready at any moment to give an answer to any person that asks us. This implies a clear enough understanding of our faith on our part that we can verbalize it to someone else. Each one of us should be able to clearly state in words supported by Scripture what it means to be a Christian. We should be able to explain both the need of salvation, and the means of salvation. We don’t need to be a walking Bible or a theologian, but we do need to have clear beliefs and clear biblical reasons for believing them that we can, when the opportunity presents itself, share with anyone who might ask us. You can test yourself by putting yourself in the following scenario. Someone comes to you and says: “I have been observing you, and I see you don’t live like the rest of us. I see that you are a Christian, and I would like to have the kind of life you have.” How would you answer them?

Both Paul and Peter emphasize the way we say what we say. Paul says that not only should we know how to answer each person, but that our words should be “gracious seasoned with salt.” It should, perhaps, be pointed out in passing that for Paul “seasoned with salt” does not mean what we sometimes mean by “salty language”. What he means is that our words be wise and appropriate to the situation. Peter, who is especially thinking about a more hostile situation, says we should speak with gentleness, respect, and from a good conscience. Now our conversation should always be governed by these qualities. If they are, people will come to see us as someone worth listening to, and in their time of distress they will turn to us for answers, and we will have an opportunity to share with them the truth that has transformed our lives.

## **Conclusion:**

So in this text Paul gives us clear instructions. If we follow them we will all have opportunities to bear witness to our faith in Christ, and we will see others come to Christ as a result of that witness. Make these three actions a habitual part of who you are and you may be amazed at the opportunities God gives you. Pray for those whom God puts in your path. Have a wise and godly conduct. When opportunity presents itself, seize the opportunity by sharing the gospel, clearly, convincingly, and graciously.