

# Colossians Chapter 4 v 2 - 6

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[ 0 : 00 ] I just want to say it's an immense joy, immense privilege to be back here at Whitby and having the opportunity to minister God's word.

Thank you for this opportunity. I think it was about two or three years ago I was up here and spending some time with the leaders of the church and what a joy it is to return and to see God's blessing upon the fellowship.

It's also been great being up especially for the September Bible School and the opportunities that that provided and a privilege of sharing with Phil in the ministry that has taken place.

I have an apology to make also in as much as I had planned what I was going to be saying this evening. You do plan these things in advance and we've been looking at the Sermon on the Mount and so I'd chosen something from the Sermon on the Mount.

But as this weekend has gone on and as from Phil's ministry this morning I just wasn't feeling comfortable with that but really feeling there's another way that maybe we can sum up some of the themes that have been emerging over the course of this weekend together.

[ 1 : 23 ] And actually it's what Paul sums up, how Paul sums up what he was saying to the Colossian church. I was just checking at the back because I had given a PowerPoint for the talk that I'm not doing.

So just in case suddenly a PowerPoint on the Sermon on the Mount emerged, well actually I'm going to be preaching on Colossians 4 on those verses that we had read to us earlier.

Because what Paul is doing here, Colossians is a great, it's a wonderful letter and he's come to summarise what he wants to say to that young church.

And when you come to summaries like this, these are really important things to listen to. This is where you get actually the heart of what he's on about.

And there are two things that Paul wants to leave ringing in their ears and I believe ringing in our ears. So I just have two points. By the way, don't be overly encouraged by that news, but I just have two points.

[ 2 : 23 ] Firstly, that we should look up. And secondly, that we should look out. That's what Paul is saying here. Look up, look out.

So first of all, look up. You see the most important and primary message that Paul could share with that young church, it wasn't about evangelistic strategies.

It wasn't about careful expository preaching. It wasn't even about warm united fellowship as a gospel community. But rather it was about prayer.

Devote yourselves to prayer is what he says. Because the business to which all true churches are called is spiritual. You see, ultimately blessing doesn't come from careful administration.

Now careful administration is good and it is right. But blessing only comes as the sovereign Lord is pleased to work in miraculous power in the lives of the spiritually dead.

[ 3 : 23 ] And therefore our dependence is first, is foremost, is always upon him. Not upon the schemes and gifts of people, but upon our sovereign God.

And that dependence is expressed in prayer. See, Paul in this passage tells us what to pray for. What to pray for.

He gives us two points here. He says pray for opportunity and receptiveness. Pray for opportunity and receptiveness. He says there, pray for us too that God may open a door for our message.

Actually it's a picture that Paul uses several times in his writings. It's the idea that God goes ahead of what we are doing. You see, the human heart is naturally hard.

It is antagonistic and it is God who must go ahead. It is God who must give the openings. And anywhere you go, you will find opposition to the good news of Jesus Christ.

[ 4 : 29 ] And what we need is that God will give us opportunities to share that good news. Whether that's here in Whitby or whether it's in Burkino Faso.

We need God to work and to give us openings and opportunities. So will you pray that for those who are engaged in gospel evangelistic ministries?

Will you pray that for yourselves? Will you pray for opportunity and receptiveness? But the second thing that Paul tells us what to pray for is this.

He says pray for clarity and boldness. He says I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should. You see, if ever Paul had a good excuse to take a holiday from being an evangelist, an apostle, from sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, it was as he was in chains under house arrest in Rome.

But this man was passionate about making Christ known. I'm in chains. Therefore, pray that I may proclaim it clearly. And how we need clarity and boldness today.

[ 5 : 40 ] Clarity because the Christian gospel is so often hidden beneath a clutter of cliches and a tangle of traditions.

Clarity because people have no Bible understanding. Don't assume that people have any conception of what the Christian message is about. They may have done 40 or 50 years ago, but they certainly do not know now.

There is an astoundingly high degree of biblical literacy. When you are communicating with people, you do not start with an assumption that they have this vast knowledge, this underpinning of who God is and what sin is and what man is about and the soul and stuff like that.

No, we need clarity. And we need clarity because the Christian message actually is so often misrepresented and slandered in the media. People have a really weird idea of what Christians do, of what Christians believe.

Can I just say I was making the observation that I came and sat down and you're with the communion table here. Now, please, I'm not having a go.

[ 6 : 47 ] But if you look with just fresh eyes at what that looks like, can I just say that looks pretty weird? It just looks pretty weird.

You know, this table and you've got some white cloths and it's in this strange shape, you know. And I'm saying I've never been into a Masonic lodge. I would never want to go into a Masonic lodge, but I've seen pictures of Masonic lodges and there are things.

And you think, oh, this is interesting. This is a cult. This is weird. And could I just tell you the world completely misrepresents and slanders what Christianity is about? I've never been into a betting shop, but I wouldn't know what to do in a betting shop.

If you gave me a pound and said go in a betting shop and lay a bet, I wouldn't have a clue what's behind the doors. And the vast majority of people who walk around in Whitby have no idea what goes on in a church.

You think, well, it's obvious. Here we are. We're sitting together and we're hearing the word of God and we're seeing praises to God. They have no idea. They think it's weird. They think it's cultic. We need clarity.

[ 7 : 47 ] And we need boldness as well as clarity. We need boldness because of the pressures of this relativistic, hedonistic age in which we live.

People are opposed to the gospel. They are opposed to any message that says, you are a sinner and you are under the wrath of God. And there is a God who's ruler and king of all.

That invites opposition. So Paul tells us what to pray for. He says, pray for opportunity and receptiveness.

Pray for clarity and boldness. But he not only tells us what to pray for, he also tells us how we should pray. He says, devote yourselves to prayer.

We need to pray with passionate perseverance. We need to pray with passionate perseverance. That word devote there is a very strong word in the Greek.

[ 8 : 46 ] It has the sense of total unbending commitment. Proskitaro, it's sort of super glue yourself to prayer. That's the idea being conveyed here. And I have to say, it's at this point that so many of us feel our inadequacy.

We hear and read Paul saying, devote yourselves to prayer and we say, but that's not me. I don't have that passionate perseverance in prayer.

We do not pray as we ought. Can I suggest there are a number of reasons for that? Number one is some of us are too busy. That's why we don't pray as we ought. We're just too busy. There's too much stuff going on in our lives.

Secondly, I think some of us are too inconsistent. We're up one moment, we're down the next. Sometimes we feel like praying, usually if there's a problem. Other times, yeah, it's not that important.

And thirdly, I think some of us have become prisoners of the age. We expect thrills now. You see, we live in an instant age. You know, when I boot up my computer now, if it's not up and running within two minutes, I'm going, oh, goodness me, I've really got to upgrade the speed.

[ 9 : 55 ] Now, when I originally got a computer back in the dark ages, it might take 10 minutes. I was going, wow, look at that. I've got 20 megabyte that I can store stuff on.

And, hey, see, I want things now. I want a cup of coffee now. I want instant coffee now. I'm not going to percolate it. That takes too long. I want it instant. I want instant access to Wi-Fi and to, I want good phone signals because I want it now.

And the commitment of spending time in God's presence and enjoying his character and grace has become too high a price for our pleasure-obsessed, materially-driven lifestyles.

That's precisely what Phil was saying this morning. How rarely are we still before God? How rarely do we take time? Suddenly there's a ping and I need to check the emails or I need to check the Facebook or I need to go on Twitter and see the latest things that are being spoken about.

You see, the key to blessing in any church is people who commit themselves to prayer. Devote yourselves to prayer.

[ 11 : 09 ] So we need to pray with passionate perseverance, but then secondly we need to pray with vigilant sensitivity, with vigilant sensitivity because Paul says devote yourselves to prayer being watchful.

See, the sense here is that prayer isn't the mindless repetition of the same words. You may say, well, I pray every night as I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul will keep. And you say that's prayer. And you say it every night.

And you say that you're praying. No, that isn't prayer. Paul is talking about prayer as an activity that demands eager and receptive minds that are acutely aware of what it is that needs praying for.

Being watchful. Do you, I'm a sucker for World War II movies. I love World War II movies. And I love those scenes, you know, where you've got air command and there's a big table and you've got the early radar stations and they're phoning in.

And suddenly they're saying there's a, you know, a German squadron of bombers coming over and they're coming in this sector. And you see the women, what it usually was, sort of pushing things around on the map and the general, inevitably a man, saying, now let's send up such and such a squadron to try and get them.

[ 12 : 32 ] You see, there was a sense in which they were being watchful, in which they were responding to the opportunities and challenges that were emerging. And that is precisely what Paul is saying.

He says we need to be watchful in our prayers. What is happening today? Where is Satan attacking today? Where is God providing the openings and opportunities today?

We need to be watchful. Could I say we need to be reading our papers? We need to be understanding what's going on in the world stage so that we can pray intelligently into that situation. Could I say one of the things we should be praying about is the refugee crisis that is so much on the news.

Do you know, I think this is one of the great gospel opportunities that we've got. This is just a phenomenal opportunity for the gospel. And already reports are coming through of people from an Islamic background, Muslim people who are coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

They are hearing about Jesus. They are fleeing repression. They are fleeing countries that do not want them. They are seeing things for how it really is. And they are discovering love and mercy and grace.

[ 13 : 35 ] This is one of the wonderful opportunities that we are seeing today. And could I say we should be praying for that? Not just saying we'll keep them away from our borders. We don't know. No, Lord, thank you that you are giving us the opportunity so that we can share the good news of Jesus Christ with men and women who are lost.

Pray with vigilant sensitivity. Thirdly, pray with confident joy. Because he says, devote yourselves to prayer being watchful and thankful.

That's actually the note that should characterize our prayer times, whether those are our own personal private prayer times or whether they are our corporate church prayer times. Thankfulness should be the mark.

It should be the note of what we do. And could I suggest, how could it be anything else? As we come together and as we bring to mind the great truths of Scripture, as we think about the grace of God and the work of Christ and the faithfulness of his promises and the knowledge of his supreme control for our God reigns and the joy of his unconditional love.

He loves me even though I go on screwing up. How could thankfulness not characterize our praying? And yet, all too often, when we come to corporate prayer, it seems like a list of the walking wounded.

[14:54] Lord, we pray for Mrs. Jones' bad back. Now, there may be a Mrs. Jones here, I don't know. And if you have a bad back, Mrs. Jones, you have my sympathy and that should be prayed for. But that is not the first thing we pray for.

When we come in prayer, what fills us, what delights us is, Lord, thank you. We're so grateful. We are your children. You've saved us by your grace and mercy. Thank you.

Look up. That's what Paul is saying to the church. Look up. You see, the problem that so many of us face is that we regard prayer like a domestic intercom.

I have some grandkids. I know you say, oh, it's impossible, Andy. You look far too young. But I know. I have grandkids. And my daughter, they have one of these intercoms.

And that's super. And very useful. But prayer is not like a domestic intercom. No, we need to understand that prayer is a wartime walkie-talkie. That's what we're about. We're engaged in this spiritual battle.

[15:58] And we are engaging with the King of Kings. And Lord, thank you that the victory is yours. And we pray, we long that more and more people would come to know and love and follow Jesus Christ.

Thank you for what you are doing in this world. Sovereign Lord, do it more and do it here. Look up. But then the second point, my final point, is look out.

Paul says, look out. You see, not only should believers speak to God about people, they should speak to people about God. And once again, Paul is very specific in the instructions that he gives. First of all, he says, it's to do with your activity. It's to do with your activity. Because he says, there it is in verse 5, be wise in the way you act, in the way you act towards outsiders.

See, today, the most potent evangelistic tool the church possesses is the transformed lives of Christians.

[17:02] See, people today don't stop to consider the truth claims of the Christian faith. Well, very rarely do they do so. And it's good to mug up on those things. And it's good to be aware of apologetics. And it's good to be able to engage in some of the philosophical debates and some of the creation debates and stuff like that.

But basically, folks rarely, if ever, examine the facts. If ever, consider the arguments. But what does make an impact, what does make a difference, is a deliciously distinctive life.

A life of consistency and purity and integrity and joy and peace. That'll attract. That'll draw the questions.

That'll provoke the attention. And I'd like to suggest to you that this is the assumption of the New Testament, that every believer will be living out Christ in the context of an antagonistic, disbelieving world.

You see, Jesus said that we're to be in the world, not of it, but in it. He said that we're to be like salt amidst the decaying surrounds. We looked at that yesterday in the September Bible school, how Jesus said, you're salt, you're light, you're salt, you're in the world.

[18:18] You're to be having an effect upon the world. Let's face it, it's very rare for people today to come in off the streets, into a building, to hear a gospel service.

Can I just say, if any church is likely to have that, it's you guys here in Whitby. I think you have a superb frontage, you have a superb location, and probably you do get people who will just come in off the street because of the way you handle things.

But can I say, that is actually quite rare. But what they will do, what men and women will do, is respond to the invitations of those whose lives transparently commend the message of their lips. People who are different, people who love Jesus, people who are walking in that lovely, distinctive way. You see, Paul says, it's to do with your activity as you look out. But then secondly, he says it's to do with your attitude. Because he says, be wise in the way you act towards outsiders, towards outsiders.

[ 19 : 24 ] That's a very interesting expression that Paul uses. He doesn't call them unbelievers. He calls them outsiders. And for the Jew at that time, actually that was a very powerful description.

That resonated with his readers. You see, to be outside meant you were outside the community. You were cut off from fellowship. You were cut off from all the joys and privileges that went with being part of the Jewish community.

If you were outside, it was a dangerous place to be. You see, to be outside meant you were outside the camp. For the Israelites, this imagery resonated from their wilderness days.

They moved around and they had tents and they laid them out in a particular pattern. But outside the camp was a place where danger and disgrace lay.

It was where disease and dung and death were located outside. It was a terrifying place to be. To be outside also meant you were outside the city.

[ 20 : 30 ] At evening, the gates of a city in the Middle East were closed and within the gates, within the city, was safety and security and light but outside was the dangers of robbers and invaders and darkness.

still we see city walls today. In Bristol, where I live, we still have remnants of the city walls. That used to be what happened. You closed the city walls. You went inside the city if danger approached and to be outside was a place of danger and that is precisely the imagery that Paul is working for. To be outside. Actually, it's also an expression that Jesus himself used. There in Matthew 8, verse 12, he said this, but the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Or in Matthew 22, verse 13, again Jesus said this, then by way of the story, then the king told the attendants, tie him hand and foot and throw him outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Look, do you get the point that Paul is making? For our gospel work to be effective, we need to have that same understanding as to the condition and destiny of those who are without Christ.

[ 21 : 54 ] They are outside. My friends, this cannot be academic or theoretical. It's not something you say, oh that's very interesting and so you're saying they are. No, this is something that needs to penetrate to our hearts.

We need to get it not just in our heads but it needs to get to our hearts and maybe the only time we'll see if it's got to our hearts if it comes back to our eyes with tears as we recognise the fate of those who are without Christ.

You see, those without Christ are in the place of danger, of loss, of eternal separation. Do you get that? Has it affected your attitude?

attitude. If we are to not only look up, we are to look out and recognise that the people who walk around these streets, they may look affluent, they may look well-heeled, they may look happy but they are outside.

It's to do with your attitude. Thirdly, it's to do with your anticipation. Paul says, make the most of every opportunity. Make the most of every opportunity.

[ 22 : 57 ] Literally, the expression means buy up the opportunity. That's why in the AV it puts it, redeem the time. You see, there's nothing more precious than an opportunity to share the good news about Jesus Christ with someone and those moments can be so rare.

When lives are touched and hearts are moved and folk are made to think about issues to do with the eternal welfare of their immortal soul, those moments are to be bought up.

Actually, the wonderful thing is that it's the sovereign God who himself provides those opportunities and our responsibility is to be eager and ready to take them whenever they arise.

And I'm just asking you, will you do that? Will you be looking out? Will you be expecting? Tomorrow, I don't know what you're going to be doing. Maybe it's going to be school. Maybe it's going to be college. Maybe it's going to be the workplace. Maybe it's just going to be your neighborhood and doing some shopping or whatever it is.

Can I just say, the scripture says you should be doing this with anticipation. Just getting ready. Maybe if someone just says something and the question emerges and you're able to respond and say, well actually, this is what I think.

[ 24 : 08 ] Say tomorrow, someone says to you, what did you do at the weekend? It's just one of those throwaway comments. Now, how many of you are going to duck the question? You can say, I went to church.

So, I had a great time. Went to church. You know, it's just lovely to be with God's people. So, it's to do with your anticipation. Make the most of every opportunity.

Fourthly, finally, it's to do with your answer. He says, let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt so that you may know how to answer everyone.

See, our lives earn us the opportunity to speak about Jesus and our lips must be ready to speak in appropriate ways. I think the great tragedy is that so many Christians aren't characterized by grace-saturated conversations.

So many drip bile or spout criticism rather than commend the saviour. So many of us are unprepared.

[ 25 : 15 ] So many of us are just still full of the clichés and if someone said to you, you know, what is this, what is the Christian message? Would you be able to convey that without going into jargon, without going into the clichés?

Would you be able to maybe relate it and illustrate it in ways that people today understand? We are living in 2015, we are not living in 1850. And Paul is saying we should be able to speak and reply in appropriate ways.

Would you be able to do that? Someone tomorrow said, hey, what is the message of that Christian faith? Could you say it? Could you give it to them? Could you tell your own story? Could you tell your own salvation story?

Jargon free in a way which is true and reliable, in a way that would engage. Lord, may God give us wise speech in which not only is the content full of Christ but also the manner in which we do it commends him as well.

Let me just finish with these words from 1 Peter. let me read to you 1 Peter 3 verses 15 to 16. Paul says this, but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.

[ 26 : 28 ] Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

May that characterise you. May that characterise what be evangelical. May we be a people who look up, a people of prayer. May we then also at the same time be a people who look out, seeking to use the opportunities that God sovereignly gives to make Jesus known in the way that we live and in the way that we respond for his glory.

Let me pray. Father, we thank you for the wisdom of your word. We thank you for the genius of Paul and the way that under Holy Spirit inspiration he penned these instructions to that church.

Father, help us to hear and listen and understand and apply. Forgive us, Lord, that so many of us have just lost the edge. We've become professional Christians or we've just hidden away.

Lord God, we don't pray as we ought. Passion doesn't characterize our walk with you and neither does it characterize the way that we go about our lives in relation to others.

[ 27 : 58 ] Father, may there be that eagerness and readiness in our hearts to be able to share the good news of Jesus with men and women who we come into contact with. Father, thank you that here in this gathered company of people, in this church, Father God, are the people who you will use for your glory, for the saving of the lost.

Have mercy, we pray, and we ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.