

Advancing The Gospel

Letter to the Colossians

For the Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter to the Colossian Christians, his life was dominated by two passions. Before he met Christ, his passion was to do everything he could to stop the advance of the Gospel. He was smart enough to see that if this belief that Jesus was the Messiah wasn't stopped dead in its tracks, it could undermine everything the Jews had been taught for generations. As a Pharisee, he was absolutely fanatical about Judaism. Paul realised if this gospel about Jesus being the Christ were to spread, it would be a major threat to everything he has given his life to. So with all the energy he could muster, he devoted himself to stamping out this belief in Jesus as Messiah. He persecuted Christians wherever he could find them. He had them put in prison, and in the case of Stephen, he was only too glad to see him being put to death. That was the driving passion of Paul's life. But then he met Jesus. That encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus changed everything.

His encounter was so overwhelming, that this hater of Christ became a passionate follower. The persecutor became the champion of the gospel of Christ. The new passion of Paul's life was to tell everyone he could about Jesus. The first part of his life had been utterly devoted to stopping the spread of the gospel. After he encountered the risen Jesus, the second part of his life was utterly devoted to advancing the gospel. In this last part of his letter to the Colossians, he teaches these Christians principles to advance the gospel. I want to share three of these principles today. [Here is the first.](#)

1. Pray Earnestly.

"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." (Colossians 4:2-4 NIV)

During the summer holidays many of us take the time to make some new resolutions. We say to ourselves "This year I'm going to lose weight". "This year I'm going to exercise more". "This year I'm going to read more good books and watch less TV." "This year I'm going to spend more time with my family." The problem is not getting started on our resolutions. The problem is perseverance. It's keeping at it. Persevering is hard, but it's only those who persevere who receive the benefits. If you don't believe me, let's do a little survey. How many of you have exercise equipment hanging around in your house that you no longer use?

In several places, including here in this letter, the Bible encourages us to persevere in prayer. Jesus told a story about a persistent widow who kept bothering a judge until she got justice. In Luke 11 he told another story about a persistent neighbour. In these stories Jesus is teaching about prayer. He's saying to his disciples, when you pray, don't give up. Persevere. Why do we need to persevere? Because we get discouraged and despondent. We get bored and distracted. We begin to doubt that God even hears our prayers, let alone answers them.

Many of us don't understand prayer. We think we understand what God is doing when he answers "yes". But when the answer is "no", or "wait" or "not yet", we tend to want to give up. Like many of you, I don't understand how it is that many of the prayers we pray don't turn out the way we desire. But the bottom line comes down to this. We either pray, or we give up. We either pray, having questions where we haven't seen answers, or we don't pray at all.

Paul asks the Colossian Christians to pray for him. He doesn't ask that he should be set free from prison, but that God would make him effective in advancing the gospel. This coming year we are going to have a major emphasis on advancing the gospel. But it's not going to happen without prayer. Unless we devote ourselves to praying for people who don't know Christ, we are not going to be effective in sharing our faith.

2. Act Wisely.

***"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."* (Colossians 4:5-6 NIV)**

There is a book that is being read by many evangelical Christians called "I Sold My Soul On eBay". It's written by an atheist who auctioned himself on eBay in the United States to visit Christian churches and report on what he found. It doesn't make for comfortable reading. Sometimes we have no idea how outsiders perceive us. In one church where I was Pastor a member of our congregation was having one of his children dedicated in a church service. So Mark did a great thing. He invited all his work buddies along to church to be followed by a barbeque lunch at his house afterwards. Mark is a policeman, so on the day of his child's dedication, we had a couple of rows of policemen and their wives and in church, most of whom were not Christians. It was a great church service. I tried to speak in a way that outsiders would understand and the worship team was just great. People really entered into the singing. Over lunch, Mark asked some of his police buddies what they thought of the service. One of them said "I thought it was pretty good, but I couldn't cope with all those Nazi salutes during the singing!"

The New Testament is full of warnings to Christians to be careful that they don't do anything to discredit the gospel. People are incredibly sceptical about Christians and the church. I recently watched an interview with Bono of the Irish rock band U2. He said, "I never had a problem with Jesus, but Christians and the Church were a bit weird to me". The reason we are to act wisely is to win people to Christ. Paul mentions three things that should characterise our speech in relation to outsiders.

- **It should be gracious.**

Graciousness in speech means even if others are dismissive, scornful, mocking, or rude to us when we talk about our faith in Christ, we are to always respond with grace. Being clever or sarcastic or obnoxious may win you the argument, but it won't win people to Christ. The objective is not to win arguments but to win people.

- **It should be salty.**

In common idiom, salty speech that is speech peppered with profanities. That's not what Paul is suggesting. In his day, speech that was seasoned with salt referred to someone who was witty, amusing, clever and humorous. Let me give you my paraphrase of what Paul is saying here. "When you talk to outsiders about the gospel, don't be dull and boring". It doesn't mean you have to be a comedian, but there are ways of talking about Jesus that are enough to put people off to sleep, and there are ways to communicate gospel truth that keep people interested. Jesus was a master at communicating truth to people using everyday language using things they understood. He talked about a woman looking for a lost coin, sewing on patches of cloth onto a garment, farmers building bigger barns, kids that run off with the family fortune. He was talking about real life issues to real people.

I remember David Watson, the Anglican evangelist who died in 1984, telling of a time when he was sitting next to an Olympic athlete at a dinner. David asked a very simple question. "Why do you spend your life running around in circles?" That question caused that young man to think about spiritual things, which ultimately caused him to put his trust in Christ.

- **It should be ready to answer people's questions.**

The important thing for us to remember is that we should have answers to their questions, not answers to our questions. Too often Christians have answers to questions people are not even asking. One of the great things about the Alpha course is that it allows people to ask their questions without feeling like they are stupid for not knowing the basics of the Christian faith. Those that lead the Alpha course learn very quickly that pious, trite answers learned from childhood Sunday School are not helpful. 1 Peter 3:15-16 tells us that we should **"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."** If someone were to ask you today why it is that you are a committed Christian, could you answer them in an interesting way in less than three minutes?

The last part of Paul's letter reveals his network of relationships. Listen as I read it.

"Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.

***My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord." I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you."* (Colossians 4:7-18 NIV)**

3. Live In Unity.

One of the greatest hindrances to the advancement of the gospel has been divisions that have been allowed to continue between Christians. You don't have to talk to outsiders for very long before you discover this is a major stumbling block to people putting their faith in Christ. Countless thousands of children who grew up in a christian family who put off from trusting Jesus because parents failed to live out their faith in front of their kids. High profile christian marriages that fell apart before a watching world. Divisions between Pastors and their congregations that damaged the faith of those inside the church and those watching from the outside. Church splits and fights that crippled the progress of the gospel. Verbal public punch ups between denominations that bought discredit to the name of Jesus. When we stand before the judgement seat of Christ, how will we explain this scandal of disunity?

Paul finishes his letter by greeting his extensive network of friends who were co-labourers in the spread of the gospel. This list of friends is a challenge to us all to work hard to build good relationships with other believers, for nothing less than the progress of the gospel is at stake. Unity with other believers is not an optional extra. It's an essential if the gospel is to advance.

So here is the word of the Lord for today. Persevere. Pray earnestly. Act wisely. And live in unity.