

STUDY 11 – COLOSSIANS 4:2-6

SO FAR

From the start of chapter 3 Paul has been showing us what our life “in Christ” looks like. We are to set our hearts and minds on things above, put to death what belongs to our sinful nature (which died with Christ), put on what belongs to our new nature, and live that out in the church and in the home.

THIS SECTION

The NIV headings for Colossians are very unhelpful. Chapter 3 is not about “Rules for Holy Living”, and these verses are not simply “Further Instructions”!

Paul is continuing to show how being “in Christ” affects every area of life, and he moves on to address the whole congregation again, particularly addressing our responsibility to non-believers. We have a responsibility to pray for those set aside to take the gospel to unbelievers, and we all have a responsibility to live amongst non-Christians in such a way that we have and use opportunities to speak to them about the gospel.

NOTES

2. Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

To “devote” ourselves to prayer means we must pray habitually and steadfastly. It is an active word, we shouldn’t just pray when we feel like it! The word prayer here is general enough to encompass all kinds of prayers, but particularly in the context seems to point towards petitions (requests).

Paul particularly stresses how we should pray. “Watchful” means awake and alert, the opposite of lethargic. This doesn’t simply mean we should be careful not to drop off while praying, but is expressing the fact that we should be alert to the times in which we live, the need for the gospel, and the fact that we are “in Christ” but who we are is not yet revealed (see 3:1-4). As is typical in Colossians, thankfulness is stressed. To truly pray we must remember who we are, and why we have access to God. This will fuel our prayers.

While it is natural for us to take this verse as referring to us individually, we must remember that Paul is addressing this to the church, so it may be that corporate prayer is what he is especially referring to. If so, it shows what a priority prayer must be in our services, and what a high priority the prayer meeting should be.

3. 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.

As the Colossians pray, they are to pray for Paul and his colleagues as they seek to speak the gospel. Paul was not a superman who did not need the support or prayer of other Christians.

Particularly they were to pray for an “open door”, a ready access to God given opportunities to speak their message which was “the mystery of Christ”. See 1:27 and 2:2 for other references in the letter to “mystery”. Paul wants to proclaim Christ, to make Him known.

This is the first time in the letter that Paul mentions that he is writing from prison (it comes up again in 4:18). He knows it is because of his message that he is there, but it does not discourage him. He knows that God can open doors for the gospel even while he is locked up. His imprisonment also emphasises the need for prayer for his work – there is great opposition to the message. He is engaged in a spiritual battle so he and others must call on spiritual resources.

4. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

As well as asking for prayer for his circumstances Paul asks for prayer for himself, that he will act rightly. His responsibility is to proclaim the gospel clearly (to reveal the mystery). Although this is God’s work, Paul knows it is also his work, and this echoes what Paul has already said about his and God’s work at the end of chapter 1.

5. Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

Although Paul and his associates have a particular role in evangelism, the Colossian church should also be engaged with non Christians in such a way that the gospel goes out to them. Paul moves on to their responsibilities in these next two verses. He

stresses their role in a way which recognises different gifts and avoids guilt (he does not say everyone must preach as he does), but he does emphasise that every member must be promoting the gospel in the way they live and speak.

Paul's first concern is the way the Colossians act. Literally he says "walk in wisdom". Live in way consistent with who you are in Christ before the watching world. This is living out the truths of 3:1-4:1. If we are not doing that, no matter what we say we won't be heard.

The second phrase in this verse is literally "buy time" or "make the best use of time" (ESV). We are to use the time we have been given to best effect, particularly with unbelievers. In the context, the NIV is probably right that it is pointing towards using opportunities in conversation to speak of Jesus and the gospel.

Taken as a whole this verse is saying we must be both wise and bold with our non-Christian friends and neighbours. This is a rare combination. Some people are often bold, but lack wisdom in what they say and how they act. Others of us may be wise, but are often cowardly at taking opportunities when they come. We must pray that we are both.

6. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

In the context of our relationships with outsiders Paul goes on to speak about our conversation. It must have a gracious and attractive tone (the context seems to point towards "full of grace" being about the tone of the conversation, rather than it being a substitute word for "gospel"). It is often difficult to work out exactly what "salt" is referring to in the bible, and we must resist the temptation to let our imaginations run away with us, but it is most likely pointing towards the fact that our speech must not be insipid or dull. We must be loving in our speech, but also not downplay the challenge of the gospel.

The statement "so that you may know how to answer unbelievers" implies that they will ask us about our faith. In the first century this questioning may well have come in the context of persecution (Paul is in prison – verse 3), and the Christians are reminded that even in that circumstance the way they defend themselves must commend the gospel.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

How are we called to pray in verse 2? What does it mean to do those things (“devote” “watchful” “thankful”)?

Why does Paul want prayer in verses 3 and 4? What does he see as God’s responsibility, and what does he see as his responsibility?

How does Paul remind us that evangelism is a spiritual battle in verse 3?

What is the Christians responsibility towards unbelievers in verse 5? What does “being wise” look like? How do you think the letter so far helps us in this?

Verse 5 calls us to be both wise and bold in our relationships with unbelievers. Is it easy to do both? Where are you weakest?

How should we speak (vs 6)?

What does the last phrase of verse 6 imply? In what contexts might we need to give answers for what we believe?

STUDY 12 – COLOSSIANS 4:7-18

SO FAR

Paul has written this letter to remind the Colossians of who they are “in Christ” and to urge them not to move away from him, and not to be swayed by the false teaching that has come into the church which seeks to add something else to Christ. He has reminded them of the greatness of Christ (1:15-20), of the fact that they have fullness in Him, and have been united to him. They are live now by recognising who they are in Him, by putting to death what belongs to their earthly sinful nature, and by putting on the behaviour of Christ as they live out their identity in the church, in the home, and in the world.

THIS SECTION

As is common in Paul’s letters, he concludes with a list of greetings to and from individuals. It would be easy to skim through this list, but it contains many interesting features which relate to

the message of the letter, and the life changing power of the gospel

NOTES

7. Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord. 8. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts.

Tychicus was sent to the Colossians with the letter, and to bring them news of Paul. Paul wants the Colossians to greet him as they would greet Paul himself or one of their own number – notice how he describes him. In the context of the whole letter it is unsurprising that Paul calls him a fellow servant “in the Lord”.

Biblically encouragement is more than just saying nice things. It is a spurring people on in the faith, making sure people do not quit. This has been the purpose of the letter, and Tychicus has the particular responsibility to do this personally for the Colossians. He is not simply a postman!

9. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here. Accompanying Tychicus is Onesimus, who came from Colossae. We learn from the letter to Philemon that he is a converted runaway slave who Paul returns home and encourages his master to accept him back.

Once we know that, this verse becomes far more significant. Onesimus is described as a “faithful and dear brother”. Although he is a slave, he is described in the same way as all the other Colossians (see 1:2). This is a practical application of 3:11.

10. 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.)

Paul is not the only one in prison for the gospel, Aristarchus is as well. He had been a companion of Paul throughout the latter chapters of Acts. He greets the Colossians in a display of brotherly love.

Paul also sends greetings from Mark who may visit the Colossians. It has been assumed that the comment Paul makes is necessary

because the Colossians would have heard about Mark's desertion and Paul's criticism of him (see Acts 15:38), but that is speculation. It may simply be that the Colossians had never met him before.

11. Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow-workers for the kingdom of God, and they proved a comfort to me.

In this verse we see the uniting power of the gospel. Amongst Paul's companions are gentile and Jews. These men mentioned are Jews who have come to faith in Jesus Christ, and are now working for the "kingdom of God" which Christ has inaugurated. As well as doing this work they were a comfort to Paul – another sign of the humanness of the apostle.

12. Epaphrus, 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.

Paul sends greetings from Epaphrus, the one who first brought the gospel to the Colossians (see 1:7), and who is identified here as a Colossian himself. Like Paul, he is not just content that they accepted the message, but he wants to see them standing firm (not wavering away to follow the false teachers), mature and fully assured (i.e. knowing the riches of what they have in Christ). This matches Paul's desire for the Colossians (see 1:28-2:2).

13. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Although Epaphrus is far from the Colossians geographically, he can be described as "working hard for them" because he is "wrestling in prayer" for them. These phrases show the value, but also the difficulty of prayer.

His work extends to the other churches in that region of Turkey – in Hierapolis and Laodicea.

14. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.

Luke is the man who wrote the gospel and Acts, who at this point was travelling with Paul.

Demas is a sad warning to us. At this point he is a close companion with Paul, but in 2 Tim 4:9-12 he is said to have deserted Paul because he loved this world. We must never

become complacent. This shows the significance of the entire letter to the Colossians and the need for warnings like 1:23.

15. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. 16. 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.

God has not preserved the letter to the Laodiceans for us, but it does show us that Paul had a wider writing ministry than just the letters we have access to.

17. Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord."

We don't know what task Archippus has been given, but the apostle wants to urge him on in completing it.

18. I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Paul's common practice was to dictate his letter to a scribe (possibly Timothy here – see 1:1), and at the end write in his own handwriting to authenticate it.

His final plea is for the Colossians to remember his chains. This stirs as a stimulus to prayer for Paul, but also for passion for Christ and the gospel, for which Paul is imprisoned. The message of Christ alone brings persecution and suffering, as well as salvation. Any diluting of this message also dilutes the persecution – but puts salvation in jeopardy.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

A tricky passage to write study questions for! Don't go through it verse by verse – this might get laborious.

As the leader in preparation, read my notes (above) and pick out things which interest you and perhaps ask

- *What do we learn about Paul from this list?*
- *What do we learn about the Colossians?*
- *What do we learn about the gospel? (Look up other refs to Onesimus in NT and Demas)*

Then it would be good to spend some time on some summary questions drawing together the whole book

- *What have you learnt about Jesus Christ from Colossians?*

- *What have you learnt about how to live the Christian life from Colossians?*
- *What have you learnt about Christian service (ministry and evangelism) from Colossians?*
- *If you had to summarise the message of this book in one of two sentences, what would you say?*
- *Why do you think the letter to the Colossians is particularly relevant to the church in the 21st century? In what areas of our life do we particularly need to heed its teaching?*

Spend some time praying about what you have learnt.