

~Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson~
Colossians: Shaped by the Truth of Jesus
“The Fellowship of the Gospel: Through Prayer, in Word, in Life”
Colossians 4:2-6

~Take a first look~

I. From *Guideposts* a number of years ago: “**From his hospital bed on the eve of open-heart surgery [several years ago], Pastor Bruce McIver asked his cardiologist, Dr. Dudley Johnson, ‘Can you fix my heart?’**”

“The physician, known for being short and to the point, said, ‘Sure.’ Then he quickly turned and walked away.

“Following the 12-hour surgery, McIver asked Johnson, ‘In light of the blocked arteries that I had when I checked into the hospital, how much blood supply do I now have?’

“‘All you’ll ever need,’ replied the terse surgeon, who again ended the conversation by walking away.

“Upon his discharge from the hospital, McIver’s wife, Lawanna, asked the doctor, ‘What about my husband’s future quality of life?’

“Johnson paused and then said, ‘I fixed his heart; the quality of his life is up to him.’”¹

II. Mull that story over in your mind for awhile today, will you? Who is it that can really fix the human heart, spiritually speaking? What difference does this make in the quality of life for those so fixed?

III. The Apostle Paul argues that when God works in the human heart through Christ, He brings that transformed person into the Church, the Fellowship of the Gospel. This changes everything! Now, those so changed must earnestly cooperate with Him for the completion of the task that He began when He drew us to Christ. In a few short sentences, he demonstrates how this can happen, and what effect it should have on those around us.

~Take a closer look at Colossians 4:2-6~

I. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE GOSPEL IS SUSTAINED THROUGH PRAYER.

1. Paul calls for the followers of Christ to “be devoted to prayer.” The NIV translation gets the idea right on this verb. The root meaning of the word is to *attach oneself* to something, to *be faithful* to someone/something or to *wait on* someone. The command is in the present tense, so it carries a continuous feel. “Keep on being attached to prayer/ faithful to prayer,” hence, “devoted to prayer.” There is anything but a casual attitude commanded here. Paul assumes that the kingdom of God cannot be established by human effort alone and so he calls for a devotion to a practice of calculated dependence on God. This is where prayer comes in as a primary act of devotion.

A—Here is the first test for the Fellowship of the Gospel. This applies for us as individuals and as a local outpost of the kingdom of God. Are we continuously devoted to prayer?
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¹ Bruce McIver, “Stories I Couldn’t Tell While I Was a Pastor” (*Guideposts*, 1991), p. 244-247; submitted by Hugh Poland, Kingwood, Texas, to PreachingToday.com.

I—What is the first thing we do when confronted by a temptation to think, speak, or act in a way that is contrary to the Spirit of Jesus? Do we simply indulge ourselves, blurt it out (“Well, that’s just the way I am”)? Do we just think about it? Or do we *pray* about it?

Do we have an established pattern of private prayer to sustain and seek the Spirit of Jesus in our daily lives? Prayer has been compared with **breathing**. If the spiritual counterpart to physical breathing is prayer, then do we quit just because we have already taken one breath? Or do we continue to breathe in and out—to pray continuously—until it becomes so much a part of our existence *in Christ* that we hardly notice it? At first, it will appear as a discipline—needing a plan, a regular schedule, even a fixed place at which to practice it. Just as certain exercises are given to us when we are recovering from injury as the means of physical **rehabilitation**, so prayer is graciously given to us by the Lord as a means of spiritual rehab. Prayer opens our lives to God’s rehab program, bending our souls more and more in the direction of the virtues and practices of His kingdom and away from the temporary values of a passing world. This is the benefit that it brings to us.

As a weapon in our arsenal of faith, it brings powerful spiritual energy against the forces of evil.

“The devil trembles when he sees,
The weakest saint upon his knees,”

as the couplet goes. Our power individually and as a church comes from the life of prayer. We call upon God to establish the character of Christ within and among us. We call upon Him to convince the hearts of those who need Christ of how absolutely necessary Christ is to their ultimate wellbeing. We can do neither of these things apart from God’s work in Christ. As someone has said in regard to the work of the Church as the Body of Christ, “We can do much else besides pray, but we can do nothing else until we have prayed.” Jesus said, “Apart from me, you can produce nothing” (John 15:5). That is, without His work, we can produce not one bud of fruitfulness for His vineyard.

2. *Two corollary virtues must accompany such prayer:*

a. Watchfulness—This means that, in a very important spiritual and moral sense, we “pray with our eyes open.” We are on guard and awake to the kinds of temptation the enemy of our souls will surely bring against us. We are braced and ready for such assaults against our defenses and such diabolical defenses against the advance of the kingdom. Being watchful also means that we are watching to see where and how God is working. We are not just making vague and unspecified requests of God. We are asking and expecting to receive.

A—The assumption behind the instruction to “be watchful” is that we are engaged in something of spiritual warfare.

I—The soldier on guard duty outside a military hospital in a combat zone is not just “playing Army.” That soldier knows that the enemy is always looking for an opportunity to kill and destroy. That soldier cannot for one moment let down guard. That could be the instant of surprise attack. And so it is for the Christian life and for life together in the Church, the Fellowship of the Gospel. Prayer is the “guard duty of the Church.” To fail in prayer, to become casual about prayer, to become slack in prayer is to leave the Church vulnerable to spiritual and moral attack. We must pray against ungodly attitudes, against ungodly habits, against ungodly teachings that do not emerge from the truth that is centered in Jesus Christ, as He is revealed through the New Testament Scriptures. And we must pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to

work in every life to make Christ known. And we must pay attention to see how and when God is doing so!

b. The second corollary virtue of prayer is thankfulness—Again, Paul brings up this strategic element of Christian attitude and practice in prayer. We must never allow our prayers to become, as one wag put it, “Gimme, gimme, gimme, Amen!” Thankfulness is an attitude of the heart, a heart that is focused on the good things that God has already given in any and every circumstance. The giving of thanks is a practice that flows from a thankful heart. It in turn nurtures a heart of thankfulness. Sometimes the discipline of giving thanks must carry us through a dark and difficult passage of life until the feeling of thankfulness returns. If we are watching carefully for God’s answers to our prayers—whether that answer is yes, no or wait—then we are poised to give thanks when we see Him do the work that only He can do.

A—The first act of prayer should be to give praise and thanksgiving to God for all that He has made possible and actual through Jesus Christ.

I—O, how tempting it is whenever I turn to prayer to launch right into all the things I want the Lord to do ... right now! I am so pressed for time! I have so little time for prayer. Who has time to mess around with those expressions of thanksgiving? “Sweet *hour* of prayer,” as the old hymn went? We can hardly find 15 minutes to pray! *We really don’t have the time to belabor this point any further, thank you very much, so I get right to the point!*

Here is the fantastic—I mean this quite literally, as almost the stuff of fantasy—this fantastic opportunity to commune with the Creator of everything else outside of Himself. He has invited us into this ongoing conversation through the finished work of Jesus Christ. He has offered to forgive our sins, strengthen us in our weakness, reveal knowledge to us through the Scriptures and by the Holy Spirit that we never would have discovered on our own, and so much more. What an opportunity! Thanksgiving is the faithful practice of recognizing the nature of this opportunity and cultivating a grateful heart about it all. Let’s start here! And, then we must move on to give thanks for everything else: God’s generous provision, healing for our illnesses, fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ, families in which to share love and purpose. This is what we all must learn to do more and more.

II. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE GOSPEL IS EXPRESSED THROUGH THE WORD OF CHRIST.

1. *We must pray for an open door for the message of Christ.* Since it is the message of Christ that leads to the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, it follows that this message must be received. Paul, though in a prison cell as he writes these words, asks that “a door for the word” might be opened by God. In his case, this might have been like asking, “Pray that I can get out of this jail and get back to my calling as a messenger for Jesus Christ!” I’m sure that if the doors to the jail opened, Paul would be right back on the street, in the synagogue and everywhere else possible, proclaiming Christ. However, he believed too much in God’s sovereignty to think that he was the only one who could bear witness to this message. Paul never considered himself the only option in God’s arsenal. He was one man fully devoted to Christ, but he prayed that the doors would open everywhere and that the Good News would be shared by all who knew Him.

2. *We must pray for a clear proclamation of the mystery of Christ.* “Mystery” connects Paul’s words to two interesting features of the Colossian context. First, it is a word that became very important for some Gnostic teachers of the next century after him. They believed that they had a

special “secret knowledge” (one Greek word for *knowledge* is γνῶσις—*gnosis*, from which the term *Gnostic* is formed). This mystery was only available to those initiated in their secret rites. Some of them claimed to be Christian teachers, but they taught something essentially different from that of the Apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ. Second, it connected to the teaching of some Jewish mystics of the time, who referred to the Jewish faith in similar terms.

This much is clear from Paul’s teaching: the “mystery of Christ” is not meant to be available only to those who attain some inner level of consciousness. *It is for the world*. Paul prays that when the door is opened “for the word,” it will be an opportunity to make “the mystery of Christ” clearly known, just as it was necessary for him to do (v. 4).

A—This is an important reminder for us all. As I have stated before and will state again, *the message of the Church is not the Church*. The message of the Church is Jesus Christ as Lord.

—It is a temptation that we must resist to believe that what we have to offer to the community is a youth program, a children’s program, an adult education program, stirring worship services or something else that is centered on us. Paul stated this flatly, and we must never forget this nor divert from this nor minimize this (2 Corinthians 4:5-6): “*We do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants because of Christ. Because the God who said, ‘Light will shine out of darkness,’ is the One Who has shown in our hearts for the illumination of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*”

I will continue to ask God to bless our outreach to university students, our outreach to middle school and high school students, our outreach to children and all ages and situations of adults. I will pray that God will bless our Bible studies and our worship services. But here is the focus of my prayer, and it should be the same for all of us. I will not just pray that we will enjoy these opportunities for spiritual nourishment; I will pray that Jesus Christ will be lifted up and His truth will be made known more and more. In short, I will pray that Jesus Christ will be proclaimed by everything we do as the Church that bears His name.

III. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE GOSPEL IS COMMENDED THROUGH WISE ACTION.

1. *The actions of Christians toward those outside of the faith should show godly wisdom, “redeeming the time” because we don’t know how or when we may have another opportunity to act or to speak.* Verse 5 is a strategy for relationships with those who are outside the fellowship of the Gospel. How should we relate to them? “With wisdom,” is Paul’s answer. The command is literally, “*Keep walking in wisdom toward those outside.*” Why is this so important? Because the people who are outside the faith need as much as those inside what only Jesus Christ can provide. How do they know that Jesus Christ has the power to transform their lives? They watch ours to see if anything might be different. And note those last words of the sentence, “making the most of every opportunity.” This is also often translated “redeeming the time” both here and in Ephesians 5:16. Some moments in time are open windows that will never return. We must “buy these up” by discerning the opportunities that they are. This is a major aspect of wisdom, knowing when a timely and timeless moment of opportunity has come our way and resisting the temptation to think that it will return.

A—Do our actions display the timely wisdom of Christ as we relate to those outside the Christian faith?

—I asked myself this every time I went up to The Wellness Hour to play basketball, as I did for about twelve years (until my 3-inch vertical leap ceased to be effective and we

did a mammoth building project). The Wellness Hour was an opportunity for faculty and staff from Central Washington University as well as other adults from the community to get an hour's exercise at noon, Monday through Friday. When I was going up regularly, around 20-30 of us would play pickup basketball games. I know from comments that a couple of them made to me that they were watching, listening, and considering whether the claim of being a "Christian" made any difference to our approach to the game. Did we play fair? Did we have a good attitude? Did we make an effort to include everyone in the game (like, by passing them the ball)? In the intensity of trying to run up and down the court, act halfway coordinated, stay alive, and even score a basket from time to time, it was sometimes hard to keep one's witness up.

But then I remember comments that several of those men I have seen from year to year up there have made. I have also been impressed by a young man named Jeremy Lin, who broke on the National Basketball Association a few years ago as the dawn of a new day. He was a California native whose parents immigrated to the US from Taiwan. As far as I could see, he was "continuing to walk in wisdom toward those outside," while playing some great basketball for the New York Knicks (and in 2015 for the Charlotte Hornets). In his words:

"Not just in basketball, but I think in life, when you're called to be a Christian, you're automatically called to be different from everyone else. In today's world of basketball, it makes you really different, because the things that society values aren't necessarily in line with what God values. Much of it comes down to humility," Lin said. "We as Christians are called to be humble. And if we really understand the Gospel, we will be humble. We should be humble, and understand that everything that is good comes from God."²

2. The words of Christ's followers to those outside of the faith should express grace and seasoned truth. This is a very interesting expression, isn't it? "Let your word always be *with grace, seasoned with salt* . . ." What does Paul mean by *grace* in this context? What do conversations *seasoned with salt* sound like? Grace is what we have all received from God if we have become followers of Jesus Christ. We have been loved despite ourselves. We have been forgiven of our sins—past, present and future. We have been received into His very family, transformed from slaves of sin to sons and daughters of the true Lord of the universe. God has received us, even though we continue to be weak and fail morally and spiritually, because of what Jesus Christ has done for us in His death and resurrection. So how does this affect our conversations? For one thing, it means that we are redemptive in our speech and not condemning. We look for the good that God is doing in every person and in every circumstance, rather than for the evidence of how broken those people and situations might be. We remember that "but for the grace of God, there go I."

And how do we sprinkle salt into our conversations? In the ancient world and in the modern, salt was used to **preserve** and **purify**. At the very least, our conversations should preserve the good, because we refuse to wallow morbidly in the evil of the world, and should purify, because we are unwilling to live in put-down or patently obscene humor. We are unwilling to get into the same bad-mouthing habits that characterize the break room or the lunch room.

And salt does something else. *It creates thirst*. When our conversations are *seasoned with salt*, they should create thirst for God. He has given us life and He has transformed us from merely fallen human beings to those being redeemed by His own acts of grace. When we bear witness to Him and to His current work in our lives, God creates a thirst in the hearts of those who listen for the same work in their own lives.

3. We should pray and prepare so that we "may know how to answer everyone." This is why our word should always be "with grace, seasoned with salt." We might have many, if we are truly walking with Christ as His very own, wonder "what makes us tick."

² <http://www.bpnews.net/BPnews.asp?ID=37214>.

A—Do our conversation-patterns speak of God’s grace, the good things that He is doing in our lives and in the world, so that others will want to know this transforming grace for themselves? Are we “always prepared,” as Peter urges, “to make a defense for the hope that is in us”? (See 1 Peter 3:15).

I—“Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, has lectured throughout this country on the powerful, and often negative, impact of words. He often asks audiences if they can go 24 hours without saying any unkind words about, or to, another person. Invariably, a small number of listeners raise their hands, signifying ‘yes.’ Others laugh, and quite a large number call out, ‘no!’

“Telushkin responds: ‘Those who can’t answer ‘yes’ must recognize that you have a serious problem. If you cannot go 24 hours without drinking liquor, you are addicted to alcohol. If you cannot go 24 hours without smoking, you are addicted to nicotine. Similarly, if you cannot go 24 hours without saying unkind words about others, then you have lost control over your tongue.’”³

God wants us to regain that control, to allow His Spirit to so fill our hearts with His grace and truth that these are the things that come out of our actions and our mouths.

~Take it home (applications)~

I. “Can you fix my heart?” asked Bruce McIver to his cardiologist. Well, there is an overtone of truth in that story that applies to our walk with God and the fullness of life in Him that we experience. God could say to us through Jesus Christ, “I have fixed your heart; the quality of your life is up to you,” and that would be partly true.

II. *We must determine* that our conversation with Him will be ongoing and not sporadic, *that we will pray as though the quality of our lives depends on it (which it does).*

III. *We should be watchful*, both for the attacks of the enemy and for the work of the Savior in our lives and circumstances.

IV. *We should cultivate a natural habit of thanksgiving*, so that praise and thanks are the first words to emerge whenever we address God in prayer.

V. *We must choose to allow God’s grace and truth to saturate us* so much that when we are squeezed by situations what will pour out is His grace and truth, not just evidence of our fallen humanity. Christ should be more and more visible in our actions and in our words—*grace* must show in word and in deed or we are out of step with His Spirit!

³ Rick Ezell, *One Minute Uplift* (7-21-06).