

Engage the World with the Gospel
Make the Most of Every Opportunity
Colossians 4:2-6

If today were “Bear Your Soul and Be Perfectly Honest Sunday” and, if on such a Sunday I asked, “How many of you have a major struggle with guilt?” I wonder how many of you would raise your hands? I don’t know about you, but guilt sometimes feels like my constant companion. Maybe it is my personality, maybe it is a generational thing, or maybe it is legalistic teaching that has been prevalent in Christendom since the earliest days of the Church, but I feel guilty. How guilty? Maybe I will feel guilty about saying this, later. Not really, but you get the point.

I do wonder if guilt is somewhat generational. There are so many things I used to feel guilty about that no longer trouble me, partly because culture at large has moved on and partly because the Church has moved on from some of its positions about what is acceptable and what is not. In some ways that is good and in other ways it absolutely is not.

Today’s text, Colossians 4:2-6, is tailor made to make me feel guilty. No, that is not at all fair. The problem is not with the text – the problem is my own. Even though I was saved by grace through faith that Jesus died for me, I tend to live by the law. “If I can just be good enough, if I can just do more, if I can just pay God back for the wrong that I have done and the good that I have not done, then he will be pleased with me. Until then, I will just stay guilty.”

It is not that guilt is bad. Well, conviction from the Holy Spirit is not bad. Guilt of the wrong sort, though, can be destructive because it puts the focus on us rather than on God. We quickly find ourselves with a payback mindset. Think about the difference between Peter and Judas when Jesus was crucified. Peter went out and wept in repentance for denying Jesus and Judas sought to make amends for betraying the Lord. Judas literally sought to pay off his debt and assuage his guilt. It is an insult to God to try to pay off the debt caused by your sin. Peter was forgiven and Judas went to the grave with his guilt. That is the benefit of the gospel over the law.

Where is all this talk about guilt going? Well, this is a series about witnessing, after all. So, do you feel guilty about your outreach efforts or lack, thereof? Witnessing is difficult for many believers on many levels. The guilt, though, may be unnecessary. The title of today’s message is “Make the Most of Every Opportunity.” It is taken from the text, but it is the New International Version translation of Colossians 4:5, and

although the ESV does not translate the Greek the same way, it means the same thing, as we will see. What is the Apostle Paul talking about? Taking advantage of opportunities to share the gospel. You may be thinking, “Exactly – that’s what makes me feel guilty.” Hang in there! Let’s read our text, Colossians 4:2-6. I will be reading from the ESV. Would you please stand?

2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. 3 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— 4 that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

5 Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Colossians 4:2-6 constitutes the conclusion to Paul’s instructions for the church at Colossae, a church that was founded by Epaphras and one Paul had never visited. He was, though, bound in Christ with the brothers and sisters in Colossae, some of whom he knew from other travels and ministry throughout the Roman Empire. Colossians, short book that it is, may be one of the most Christ-centered books in all of Scripture! If you have not spent much time in Colossians, you would be blessed to focus some attention here.

After Colossians 4:6, the rest of the letter is concerned with personal greetings and announcements, which, by the way, affirms the announcements in our services as part of our worship. God loves the body of Christ more than you can imagine, and he takes our communion with one another very seriously. Colossians 3:11-17 is one of the great texts in all of Scripture for body life in the church. Today’s text, Colossians 4:2-6, says a great deal about outreach. I am surprised that it is not given more attention than it is.

My thoughts about the text are organized in three sections, beginning with:

1. Pray, believer, pray, and as you pray, ask God for open doors to share Christ

Speaking of guilt, how about this one: “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” I wonder how many of you love to pray? I also wonder how many of you find prayer as difficult a discipline as I do? The moment I start to pray, my mind is inclined to solve problems that do not yet exist in the world. And, the Apostle Paul says, we are always to be praying.

How do you practice the discipline of prayer? Do you have a set time, or times, of the day when you pray, or are you more impulsive with prayer, seeking the Lord at odd times, or, not so odd times, like when you are driving or exercising?

I think what the Lord is communicating through Paul in this text is that we are to always be aware of his presence, communing with him throughout the day. We are incapable of practicing uninterrupted prayer, and, indeed, the Lord has provided work and recreation to give us purpose and pleasure, but he desires for us to always be aware of his presence and his loving purpose for us in Christ.

To continue steadfast in prayer is to not only acknowledge God's sovereignty over all things, but to believe that our prayers are part of his plan for establishing his kingdom on earth. Does he need our prayers? No – but, yes! In his stunning design, our prayers are vital for the salvation of souls. Wow. That is why Paul asked the Colossians to pray that God would open doors for him to be able to share the gospel. It is interesting that Paul did not ask for prayer for God to deliver him from an unjust prison sentence – that would be my prayer request. Instead, Paul acknowledged that since he was in chains because he shared the gospel, God must want him to share the gospel with those he met in prison. “And so, dear friends in Colossae – friends I have never met – pray that God will open a door for me to share the gospel and pray that when he does open the door I will know what in the world I am supposed to say so that the gospel will advance and people will come to Christ.”

Just imagine if you were a member of the church in Colossae. Epaphras, a local man, had traveled somewhere and heard the gospel. He went home and began witnessing. God blessed his efforts to the point that a church was planted and it had grown so much that the church had its own heresy – some sort of mystical Jewish sect that combined practices from the law with the gospel. So, the great Apostle Paul sent a letter that exalted Jesus and the gospel far above any rules and regulations that would get in the way of a clear view of the cross.

It was a big deal for Paul to write to this church. So again, imagine that you are a first-century believer in Colossae who has heard all about the Apostle Paul and now he has written to your church, but when you hear the letter read, it feels like God is speaking directly to you. He was. And he is this morning. Then Paul says something like this: “In God's design, I am in prison – oddly enough, to do the very thing that landed me here: proclaim the gospel. Sharing the gospel is the plan God is using to establish his kingdom through his people. And, you are a big part of his plan. How? Pray, brothers and sisters, pray. Pray that I will speak the gospel clearly and that there

will be no doubt because of my miscommunication. I need you to pray for what God is doing through me.”

There are some of you who are scared to death to witness to those who may not want to hear what is, to you, good news. They may become angry with you, they may mock you, they may lose respect for you. If you have never witnessed before, and you feel the Holy Spirit building a desire in your heart to share Christ with the lost, even though you are scared to death, you can move in the right direction by praying for those who are eager to witness. Pray that the Lord will open doors for the evangelists among us. And then, by extension and by implication in verses 5 and 6, pray that God will open doors for you to share the gospel. That’s the focus of the second point:

2. Always look for opportunities to share the gospel

What is it that you always desire to do? Some people are constantly looking for super sales in the stores or online. Some are always looking at cars and/or houses. For others, it is important to know the latest buzz with electronics and what is the next form of social media. For Paul, it was opportunities to share the gospel with those who didn’t know Jesus and he wanted the Colossians to have the same burden. Look at verse 5: “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.” That is the ESV translation. Here is the NIV translation: “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.” The meaning is the same, but the two translations have a bit of a different feel to them. Why the difference?

The Greek word that is translated “time” in the ESV and “opportunity” in the NIV is *kairos*. An expanded definition is “a fitting situation that is characterized by suitable circumstances.” What is he talking about? Witnessing. Not every encounter with an unbeliever is an opportunity to witness, but there are many more opportunities than most of us perceive.

The sense of what is an opportunity and what is not came into much better focus for me years ago on a mission trip to the Czech Republic. I may be mixing years and flights, but these events happened somewhere in the world and they will make the point. Even though I was participating in all kinds of evangelistic activities in Prague, by far the best witnessing opportunity presented itself on the flight from Budapest to Prague when I sat next to a man from Italy who had moved to the U.S. and was in Europe on business. He was Catholic, but quite interested in what I had to say about salvation by grace through faith. He did not convert, but a seed was sown.

On the flight from London to New York, I was revved up for another opportunity to witness. I was seated next to a young woman who immediately put headphones on and closed her eyes. Not everyone had earbuds in those days, but she did, of a sort. I sensed that this was *not* an opportunity, so I left it alone without guilt or conviction from the Holy Spirit that I was not doing enough.

How can you know when you have an opportunity to witness? Is it only when you can be sure that your friend will be receptive to what you will say? Heavens no! Quite a few people have died because they shared Christ with someone who absolutely did not want to hear it, but the rejection did not mean the witness was fruitless. Just think about Stephen in Acts 7, preaching the gospel to the religious leaders who became so angry that they wanted to kill him. The mob needed permission, though, and they got it from a Pharisee who had some legal authority. Saul had the men lay their garments at his feet while they stoned Stephen to death. Somehow, though, God used Stephen's presentation of the gospel to draw Saul, who would later become the Apostle Paul, to himself.

If you have never witnessed before and you wish you had the courage, may I make a few suggestions? First, pray for opportunities, as we have been commanded to do. Then, think deeply about a biblical worldview as you hear people talk, as you observe social media, and as you watch Netflix. Finally, think about how you would respond to a person who has a nonchalant attitude about religion or who adheres to a "what goes around comes around" kind of karma belief system. What would you say, if you had the courage? Think deeply about it. It may well be why the NT writers spent so much time explaining the gospel to those who already believed it. Sooner or later, it will spill over, and that's when you need to be very careful, which leads to our last point:

3. Avoid putting impediments between sinners and the cross

Have you ever heard someone say something like, "I could believe in Christianity if it were not for Christians,"? I understand that we can surely make a mess of things, but it is sad to hear, nonetheless. Each person will answer for him/herself, but what a shame when we muddy the waters with our words and our actions.

Michael Horton said, "The only thing that the church can provide to the world that is truly unique is the gospel." That's right, isn't it? Anything else we can offer, non-believing individuals and organizations can also offer, including love. Financial assistance, social justice, encouragement, training, and on we could go. But, only the church has the privilege to offer the gospel. If you belong to Jesus, you are part of the

Church and you should offer the one thing that very few people in this world possess – the good news that Jesus died for their sins and when they repent of their sins and trust Jesus, they receive eternal life. One cannot earn eternal life. It must be received. That’s the gospel. Without the gospel, big trouble. With Jesus? Eternal life. You get to tell people the good news. How shall we deliver this good news? Verse 6: “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”

May I ask you a personal question? How do you feel about those who think differently than you do about social issues and politics? Do you care more about aligning with people on social issues or on the gospel? Have you put something on Instagram or Facebook or Twitter other than the gospel that may have possibly offended someone? Have you said something like, “I have no respect for people who think this or that,”? I don’t mean that you should always present a religious affectation, but has there been something you said, recently, about politics that might have made someone else angry? Perhaps someone who doesn’t know Jesus? By the way, the NT indicates that it is at least as bad to offend a brother as it is to offend an unbeliever, and maybe it is worse. Are politics really that important to you? Even if you would be willing to say to someone’s face what you say on social media, should you?

Was your speech gracious this past week? Salt is sometimes used as a preservative, but of course we know its benefit as a flavor enhancer, as well. Paul is most likely talking about flavor, in verse 6. You know what it is like to have perfectly seasoned food, don’t you? I get the sense that Paul is saying we should be careful about everything we say to unbelievers. We need to know how to answer them in a winsome manner. That is not easy, but it is what we are commanded to do.

When you are bombastic and vitriolic in the presentation of your beliefs to others, you may very well obstruct their view of the cross. All they can see is you. They don’t get to see Jesus. They don’t hear the good news that Jesus’ death is far more meaningful to us than where we stand on the issues of the day. They cannot understand that Jesus died for sinners because those who profess to know and follow him are so offensive in speech. Paul had asked for prayer that God would open doors for him to proclaim – the word. Don’t let *your* passions and *your* causes and *your* vision and *your* words get in the way of *God’s* word pointing to Jesus on the cross. Remove the obstacles, in fact, and let them see Jesus in you.

This morning, we come to the Lord’s Table, as we do on the first Sunday of every month. When we partake of the bread and the fruit of the vine, we are reminded of

Jesus' broken body and his blood that was spilled for our sins as he bore the Father's wrath against sin. 1 Peter reminds us that rather than reacting to those who reviled him, Jesus stood silently before his accusers, entrusting himself to the one who judges justly. I rarely encourage you to think about a specific aspect of your walk with Jesus when we meet at the Lord's Table, but today it would be good to think about the ways that you relate to those who don't know the Lord. Are you praying that they will know the Savior who has granted you eternal life? Are you looking for opportunities to graciously share the gospel with them, thinking deeply about what you will say and how you will interact with them so that they see the love of Christ in you? The book of Colossians exalts Jesus as the preeminent one who is above all Creation. It tells us of our union with Christ. We participate in that union today at the Table. Let's pray.