

## Upward, Outward, Onward

This morning we're wrapping up the our study of the book of Colossians. Let's turn together to **Col. 4:2-18** and I'm going to be reading from the NIV.

When Janice and I had only been married about a year, we realized that the apartment we lived in needed more light and could also use some air circulation so we bought this ceiling fan with lights thinking that I would get some help to install it (at that point I was even less handy around the house than I am today). Well, I never got around to installing it, but it probably worked out for the best because we moved it (still in its box) to our new apartment, and that apartment had the perfect place for it to go.

We were in that apartment for several years but the ceiling fan and light never made it out of its box. A couple years later, we bought a home and it just made more sense to install it in a place we actually owned...but I never installed it. It sat in its box for another six years. Then it made three more moves with us and arrived in Painted Post in 2003. A year later I sold it at a garage sale for a fraction of what we paid for it. For over 15 years it sat unused in its box, bringing no light, moving no air.

In this beautiful, Christ-centric letter, Paul has given us a glorious vision of Christ, the One who has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us to his kingdom of light, the perfect image of the infinite, eternal God, the One who, by his crucifixion, nailed our sin to the cross, canceling our debt and conquering the powers of Satan by the cross. It is a book chock full of rich, biblical, God-glorifying, theology. But God never means for us to keep our theology in a box. What we learn about God, what we know about God, what we believe about God, needs to be deeper than just concepts to us. They are meant to affect the way we think, the way we act, the way we live.

As Paul wraps up this powerful letter, he urges the young church in Colossae to take the truths in this letter out of the box and put them into action, action that will move us in three directions: upward, outward, and onward.

- Upward in prayer
- Outward in evangelism
- Onward in doing life and ministry together as a church family

You may notice there's one important direction missing: inward. The truth is that all of these actions flow out of the inner work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We need to be rooted and grounded in Christ (chapter 2). Our minds and hearts (which comprises all that goes on inside of us - our inner thoughts and affections) are to be set on things above (chap 3). The peace of Christ is to rule over our hearts (chap 3). We live our lives from inside out, and there's a lot in this letter that encourages us to pay attention to our inner connectedness to Christ. The point is, our inner connectedness to Christ shouldn't stay inward - it should flow outward. Faith leads to action - and Paul closes the letter with three directions these actions should take: upward, outward, and onward. Let's consider these three directions one at a time.

### 1. **Upward in prayer - *devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful (vs. 2)***

Paul doesn't say, "throw up a prayer every now and then" or, "pray in emergencies or when you need something." He says *devote yourselves to prayer*. Prayer is to be a constant part of our lives and I think Paul reminds us of this because he knew that there are powerful currents in life that try to keep us from

praying. The busyness of life is one. Life gets busy and we just don't have time to pray. Doubts that prayer actually does anything is another powerful current keeping us from prayer. Does it really matter if I pray or not? Isn't God going to do what He intends to do anyway? And underneath all these currents is the fact that our flesh really doesn't like to pray. We get antsy, our minds wander, we have a hard time praying with focus for more than a minute or two. And so these currents try to keep us from praying.

Paul is urging us not to give in to these currents because he knows that prayer is essential to our living a fruitful life for Christ. If we want our lives to make an impact for eternity we need to pray. Paul was a guy who would literally go on to change the world in his day and for the rest of human history - but he was very aware that he couldn't do what he did without prayer being a big part of his life and prayer is essential in our lives as well if we want to see the Lord working in our lives and using our lives for His glory.

Prayer brings us to God, asking Him to do what only He can do. It's so easy to get an earthbound perspective of all that's going on around us and either think that it all depends on us to change whatever needs to change, or get discouraged and give up. Prayer lifts our eyes and hearts upward as we take the burdens and needs of this life to our Father in heaven. In prayer we learn to depend on God to meet our needs, enable us to do what we must do, and trust God for the things that are beyond our control.

With the devastation of Hurricane Harvey in Texas, a lot of people have been talking about prayer. Commentators frequently begin by saying, "our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Texas". Four days ago I read a blog from a father in Houston who was trapped in his house with his wife and five young children, ages 8, 5, and triplets who are 13 months old. He gave us a window into the fears and challenges they were facing when he wrote:

*If our home floods, the public is being advised that we are not to go into our attics but rather wait on the roof for rescue. How on earth would we get five children on our roof (three of them babies) if it comes to that? My wife and I have had to work through scenarios of who would grab which baby while directing our older two children to stay in a safe place. He opened up his blog post with this plea: Please, pray for Houston.*

His family did make it out, but his plea for prayer hits home. Let's continue to pray for Houston, and the other towns and cities that have been hit by this 1-in-a-thousand year storm. Prayer doesn't take the place of doing what we can to help, whether it be giving financial donations or, as so many have done, grabbing a boat to go help rescue people. But doing what we can to help also doesn't take the place of prayer. Prayer brings us to God, asking Him do what only He can do and asking Him to help us do what we can.

Prayer does more than asking God for things: it connects us relationally to God our Father. Being devoted to prayer doesn't mean that we put everything on hold for long periods of time so we can get on our knees and pray. What Paul is describing here is more about a moment by moment connection with God than it is about closing our eyes, bowing our heads, and folding our hands in prayer. In the town of Mary Esther, FL, a 28 year old woman ran a stop sign and drove her car into a house. She told the police that she had been praying with her eyes closed. I think she took the song "Jesus, take the wheel" a little too literally.

Every day we should carve out time to stop what we're doing and pray. But being devoted to prayer also means praying with our eyes open and our hands on the wheel. It is relational connection with God and acknowledging His presence and His power. It's confessing our need, and calling on God to give us wisdom when we need to make a major decision, to help us when we are in over our head, to give us strength when we're feeling weak, to give us courage when we feel afraid. It's praying for others who have needs that we can't meet, praying for God to reach hearts we can't seem to reach. The beauty of it is, devoting ourselves to prayer doesn't paralyze us from taking action, it reminds us that we are co-laborers with Christ. We need him, and he loves to use us. And, in fact, Paul's encouragement to look upward naturally leads him to encourage us to look outward:

**2. Outward in evangelism - *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity (vs. 5)***

I love what Paul does here. He tells them to be devoted to prayer. Then he asks them to pray for him to have the courage to evangelize boldly and then he tells them to evangelize boldly. Yeah, pray that I do it, but also you do it! Evangelism isn't just for the professionals, there's need and opportunity all around us, but a lot of us need to get a lot better at making the most of every opportunity. The opportunities are there, but opportunities are just that: opportunities. They are something we can make the most of, or they are something we can miss completely.

In the Korean war there was a Marine Corp commander named Chesty Puller. Puller wasn't a guy who gave up, and the story is told of a time when his soldiers were engaged in a fierce fire fight with a North Korean unit when word came to him that some of the enemy had slipped around to his right flank. They kept fighting. Not too much later another scout radioed that the enemy had been able to move to Puller's left flank also. Now the enemy is in front, to his right, and to his left. It wasn't much later when the news came that troops had established a position behind his unit. Puller and his men were completely surrounded!

Most guys would be devastated by hearing that they were surrounded but when Puller heard it he said, "By God, they won't get away this time!" What most would have seen as a disaster Puller saw as an opportunity. We are surrounded by opportunities to share Christ - people who need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ are literally all around us! If we think we never have opportunities to witness we're wrong. The opportunities are there - we're just missing them. Make the most of every opportunity.

We need to pay attention to our lives and our words. Verse 5 says, *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders* (pay attention to how we live), verse 6 says, *let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone* (pay attention to how we talk). Our lives should reinforce the Christian message, and that takes wisdom. We should ask the question: how can my actions especially towards those who don't know Christ help them want to know Christ? Seasoned with salt means that the way we talk should taste good to the listeners. Our words should taste like grace.

And this takes a lot wisdom today. How do we stand for biblical truths graciously when our culture looks at them as outdated and sometimes even hateful or bigoted? Paul knew what that was like as he entered cities that were completely pagan and had no belief in, or respect for, the Bible. He says be wise and

Speak truth graciously. Don't dump truth on people by the truckload, season your conversation with grace the way you season your food with salt. Choose the opportunities carefully. Speak respectfully, don't get combative. Share Christ in a way that makes people thirsty to hear more, let them see in your life something that makes them want to learn more about Jesus. And pray. Only God can open people's eyes and hearts to believe.

God has left it to us to be witnesses for Christ. Let's be bold, but also wise, in how we do that. Bold, wise, and gracious is how we make the most of every opportunity.

3. Onward in doing life and ministry together as a church family - *stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured...Grace be with you (vv. 12 and 18)*

This last section might seem like Paul is just naming names of people that don't mean anything to us - a perfect section to skip over. But in these verses is a portrait of what life in the church looks like. God knits us in the church with other imperfect people to do life together and to make progress in Christ together. To move forward, to press onward.

- There are dear brothers and sisters in Christ like Tychicus - solid, mature believers who are a blessing to our lives.
- There are people in the church with a redeemed past, like Onesimus who was a slave who had run away from his master (who lived in Colossae) but Paul had led him to Christ, and now Paul was sending him back to Colossae, no longer a slave, but now a dear brother.
- There are those who have messed up and failed, like Mark, but who is now a valued partner with Paul in the gospel.
- There are those who labor with us and are a part of us and then feel the Lord calling them to another place of ministry, like Epaphras, who was from Colossae, still wrestles in prayer for the young church there, but has felt the Lord calling him to work with Paul in another location.
- And there are those who fellowship with us and become dear to us, and then walk out on the Lord and the church like Demas.
- As we do life together, some of us might grow weary or distracted and start to let our responsibilities slip, like Archippus apparently had, and we need to be reminded to be faithful to the ministry God has called us to. It's not how fast we started the race that counts, but whether we break the tape and complete the race that counts.

And there are probably a hundred other scenarios, but God calls us together as a community of brothers and sisters, so that we encourage one another to keep going, forward, onward. It's going to be messy at times. God's grace being with us doesn't mean that everything is easy. Or that we don't fail each other. It doesn't mean that we won't hit hard times or that we won't have relational challenges. But somehow God mixes it all together and brings good out of it. We grow. Our faith is stretched. We learn to love and we learn patience.

Following Jesus means going onward together. Not giving up. Not falling back. Not turning away.

*Only hold fast until I come. <sup>11</sup> I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. <sup>12</sup> The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new*

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*Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. <sup>13</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' Rev 3:10-13*

Upward, outward, and keep moving onward. And God's grace will be with us every step of the way.