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Do You Know the One to Whom You are Speaking? Colossians 4:2-4

At the beginning of this new year I want to revisit a subject that I've emphasized repeatedly in the past. I think it deserves our continual attention because without it we will never become the sort of local church that makes an impact locally and globally for the gospel. I'm talking about our commitment to prayer, both individually and corporately.

I know that many people find prayer boring. You come to a prayer meeting and sit for 45 minutes to an hour struggling to stay awake. Your mind wanders. You exhaust in the first 5-10 minutes all the topics you might pray for and maybe spend another 5 minutes going down a list of individuals for whom you intercede. That's when spiritual rigor mortis begins to set in. And if you do survive until the end of the meeting, you get up and leave and wonder if anything meaningful actually happened. You didn't hear any supernatural noises or feel anything in your body or hear anything in your heart. It all makes it easy and justifiable not to return the next week.

Eventually you find yourself saying: "Well, Sam prays, and he's my pastor. A few of the others in leadership at Bridgeway pray. I think it's enough that I attend a church where others are faithful to pray on a regular basis, so I don't need to." It's called prayer by proxy. You think you can live your spiritual life vicariously through the lives of others.

This is one reason why I posed a question in the title to this message: "*Do You Know the One to Whom You are Speaking?*" You might be tempted to push back against me and say: "Come on, Sam. Be a little more gracious and kind. Of course I know the God to whom I'm speaking. After all, I'm a Christian." Well, I'm sorry, but that isn't good enough. A lot of genuine, born-again believers go through their Christian lives largely oblivious to the nature of their God and even more unaware of the supernatural dynamics that occur when God's people pray.

Let me briefly remind you of a couple of things. First, the God to whom you and I pray is the God portrayed for us in Revelation 4-5. When you pray you are speaking to the God whose majesty is so unfathomable that the four living creatures never cease, day or night, to cry out, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (Rev. 4:8). This is the God whose beauty and power compel the 24 elders to continually "fall down before him" and "cast their crowns before the throne" (Rev. 4:10).

This is the God who, they declare, is "worthy . . . to receive glory and honor and power" because he "created all things" (Rev. 4:11). This is the God whose love for you and me was so intense and so relentless and so measureless that he sent his Son to be slaughtered on a cross so that we would receive forgiveness of each and every sin we might ever commit and be granted entrance into the glories of the New Heaven and New Earth.

This is the God who, according to Psalm 115:3, "is in the heavens" and "does all that he pleases." This is the God whose "dominion is an everlasting dominion, and" whose "kingdom endures from generation to generation" (Dan. 4:34b). When you pray you are talking about the God who "does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'" (Dan. 4:35).

This is the God "who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20).

So let me ask you again, "Do you know the God to whom you are speaking?" How do you envision him as you pray? Do you think of him as so completely occupied with people more important than yourself that he could barely find a spare minute to listen to your little requests? Do you think of him as hearing your tiny voice or you half-muffled whispers and saying, "Good grief. It's you again. Come back with your prayers when you've put your life in order and cleaned up your house and stopped yelling at your kids and when you've overcome your struggle with lust and greed and bitterness. I may have some time for you then."

Do you think of God like the Santa Claus at Quail Springs Mall, who has to be paid to pretend that he enjoys listening to the requests of squirming little kids? Do you see yourself as one of those children, lined up perhaps for hours waiting

for your precious 30 seconds of time on his lap? Do you think talking to God is like calling your bank or credit card company and hearing only a recorded voice who tells you that you're the 37th person waiting for one of only a handful of operators who will try to get to you in about 45 minutes?

So, I ask you to close your eyes and try to envision what you think is happening in heaven when you pray? Let me tell you what is happening. The omnipotent, all-loving, all-wise God who called the universe into existence out of nothing is bending over with joyful anticipation, waiting for you to bring your requests to him. He is happily and with a glad heart and generous spirit urging you to come boldly and courageously to the throne of grace where he has abundant mercy and grace to help you in your time of need (Heb. 4:16).

This is the God who said this to his people, Israel. And don't think for a moment that because this passage is found in the OT that it doesn't apply to you and me. The God who speaks there is the same God we know and love. And what does he say?

"Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him. For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you" (Isa. 30:18-19).

The NIV translates the word "waits" in v. 18 as "wants". God's desire is to hear and respond to your prayers. Notice again that he will "surely" be gracious to you, but you have to speak, you have to cry out to him. It isn't the case that God "might" be gracious to you or that you and I can, at best, "hope" or "wish" that he would be gracious to us. No. He "**will surely**" be gracious to us. And as I'll point out in just a moment, that is true even when he appears to decline to answer our prayers in the way we had hoped he would.

Perhaps two more texts will be enough to drive home my point. I've spoken to you in the past about these passages but it needs to be heard again and again:

"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matt. 7:11).

And then there is Paul's statement in Romans 8:31-32,

"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:31-32).

"If God is for us . . ." What God? The God we've been talking about. This God. If he is for us, and he is, no opposition or enemy can ultimately prevail against us. And if this God has made the greatest, indeed the most inconceivable sacrifice possible for you and me in giving to us his Son on a cross to atone for our sin, "how will not also with him graciously give us all things?" This is unbreakable, unshakeable, glorious heavenly logic.

And this is why it simply makes no sense that you would find it boring to pray. Perhaps the remedy for boredom and passivity is simply to rehearse these biblical texts every time before you begin to pray.

I must tell you that my prayer life has been radically transformed by Ephesians 3:20. I've known and long ago memorized this text, but only recently has it embedded itself in my heart and mind in such a way that it changes everything about my attitude in prayer. The God to whom we pray is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, beyond everything we could possibly ask or think! That is why I urge you, as I urge myself, to start asking for outrageous answers to prayer. Answers that seem utterly impossible. They are impossible to you and me, but not to this God. If God can do exceedingly and abundantly beyond every single thing your mind could ever conceive or your tongue could ever articulate, what reason do you have for keeping your prayers tiny and timid? Make your prayers every bit as big and bold as your God is.

Colossians 4:2-4 may well be at one and the same time both the shortest and the most substantive statement on prayer to be found in the Bible. It's only three verses long, but it is incredibly deep and rich. There are in these verses four foundational principles or truths that we need to consider. We begin with the steadfastness of prayer.

(1) Remain Steadfast in Prayer

The easiest thing about praying is quitting. Giving up seems so reasonable, so easy to justify. Persevering in prayer when no one seems to listen strikes many people as a sign of fanaticism, if not mental instability.

On a regular basis I hear from friends who are facing the impending deaths of several family members. In any given week I hear the same stories you do: a loved one dies, a job is lost and another not found, bills go unpaid, relationships are shattered, dreams fail to materialize. Rain does not fall and crops fail. A teenager is loved and cared for, yet rebels and abandons God.

What makes such incidents especially disturbing is that they all occur notwithstanding persistent and fervent prayer that they not. Why is it that a man or woman prays for relief or deliverance or some essential blessing to alleviate intense aggravation, but hears nothing? In humble faith, with sincerity of heart, not for a moment doubting that God is able both to hear and answer their prayers, they pray. But heaven is silent, or so it seems.

I want to briefly address the reasons why a good God who can help often seems not to, or at least not to in accordance with our schedules. There are surely reasons other than these, but here are a few suggestions that I hope will encourage you to "continue steadfastly in prayer" (Col. 4:2a).

First, we are a presumptuous people! We just assume that God ought always to do what we ask, when we ask, precisely in the way we ask. *By delaying his response, God awakens us to the gracious character of all answered prayer.* In other words, that God says or does anything at all in response to our petitions is sheer, undiluted grace. Resolute continuation in prayer, watchful perseverance, is often the best way for us to learn this invaluable lesson.

Second, steadfast endurance in coming again and again to the throne of grace is God's way of *cultivating in us a sense of absolute and utter dependence upon him.* Admit it: you don't like being dependent on anyone, even on God. We are by nature self-reliant, self-sufficient folk. If God were instantly and at all times to answer our every prayer we would gradually lose our sense of urgency. Truth be told, most of us would soon lose sight of the fact that it is God alone who is the source of all good. By suspending his response, God is saying to each of us: *"Just how desperate are you? How conscious are you that I am your only source, your sole and all-sufficient supply?"*

Third, persistent praying puts us in that frame of mind and spirit in which we may properly receive what it is that God desires to give. In other words, it isn't so much that God is reluctant to give, but that *we lack preparation to receive.* Try to envision what a mess your life would have been had your parents granted you everything you asked for as a child! God often delays his answers because, quite simply, we are in no shape to receive them. Few of us are willing to admit that, but deep down we know it's true.

Fourth, steadfast, watchful continuation in prayer helps us differentiate between impetuous, ill-conceived, selfish desires, and sincere, deep-seated, Christ-exalting ones. Persistence in prayer thus enables us to weed out and purify improper petitions.

Fifth, perseverance cultivates *patience.* By withholding an immediate response, we learn how to "wait" on God. Waiting on the Lord is far from a passive posture. It's *an active, expectant, persistent pressing* in to the heart and purposes of a loving God. How might we ever learn to do this were it not for steadfastness in prayer?

Sixth, oftentimes God wants to give, but *not now.* The answer will come in better circumstances, at a more opportune moment. By delaying his response, a greater and better and more God-glorifying end is secured than by an immediate answer. But even if none of these reasons makes sense to you, persevere anyway! God isn't asking you to understand: he's asking you to be faithful.

(2) Be Grateful When You Pray

Paul insists that when we pray we should do so **“with thanksgiving”** (Col. 4:2b). How does one pray thankfully? And is he asking us to give thanks even in those instances when he declines to give us what we ask? Yes.

I believe Paul includes this qualifying phrase because he wants to instill confidence in us rather than fear and uncertainty as we pray. It’s his way of saying, “Yes, by all means be faithful and fervent in your prayers. But know this: God is always and ever on his throne. The battle in which you fight is ultimately his, on your behalf. Let gratitude for what God has done and will do permeate your petitions. In this way you will never lose hope or fall into despair or live in fear that he has abandoned you in your hour of need.” So, what does it mean to pray “with thanksgiving”? Here are a few thoughts.

First, pray with gratitude that God is actually there, alive and alert and never asleep. We do not speak into a vacuum or to a God who is preoccupied with other, allegedly more important matters.

Second, pray with gratitude that God not only lives and loves but also **actually listens** to what we say. He hears us! As you pray, therefore, thank God that he loves to listen and to be gracious.

Third, pray with gratitude that the God who lives, loves, and listens is also more than **able** to do above and beyond all we ask or think (cf. Ephesians 3:20). I’m so thankful that the God to whom I pray isn’t a wimp or a weakling, but an omnipotent and infinitely wise Father who delights in giving good things to those who ask (Luke 11:13).

Fourth, pray thanking God that **he has chosen to include you in the process!** God could have ordained that all his will be accomplished independently of our participation. But he didn’t. He has chosen to achieve his ultimate ends through means, the latter being primarily our prayers.

Fifth, pray thanking God **for all the ways he is changing you as you pray**. Wholehearted and humble intercession **transforms the intercessor**. Our ideas of God are elevated. Our awareness of personal dependency is intensified. The magnitude of God’s power and providence is manifest in ways that we otherwise might never behold. Our dreams and hopes and desires are cleansed and purified as we humbly submit to his will and crucify our own.

Sixth, and finally, pray with gratitude to God not simply for what he has done but for what he will do. **Thank him in advance** for what he will do in response to your requests. Without being triumphalistic or sinfully presumptuous, we should pray with expectancy that whatever we ask, according to his will, God will do. Thank you, Lord!

I know this will be misunderstood by some, but I’m going to say it anyway. After two years of unsuccessful searching for a job in his field, my son-in-law and his wife, my daughter, were on the verge of despair. Ann and I had prayed daily, literally, for a job in his career field. And then one day everything changed. I stopped asking that God provide him with a job and started thanking him for doing so. I know that sounds presumptuous. But I don’t think it was. I simply prayed persistently: “Lord, thank you for the job you have provided for Brett. You are so kind and gracious. Now just lead him to it.” And within a month he did!

Do you recall the incident in 2 Chronicles 20 where Jehoshaphat and the kingdom of Judah came under siege by the Moabites and Ammonites? After their prayer seeking God’s assistance, the prophet Jahaziel came to them with a bizarre word of counsel: “Send out the choir to confront the enemy troops and have them sing these words: ‘Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever’” (2 Chron. 20:21). He instructs them to be thankful on the front end of the battle, **before the enemy is ever engaged**. Let the reality of God’s steadfast love fill your heart, he told them. Praise him for who he is. Rest peacefully in what he will do. “Stand firm,” he said, “hold your position, and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf” (2 Chron. 20:17).

(3) The Place of Prayer in Glorifying God

So, is prayer really all that important? Is it truly necessary? Can’t God just directly do things he wants done without calling on us to ask him to help us do them? Let’s take evangelism or the salvation of the lost as one example.

We all agree that God loves lost souls and wants them to hear the gospel of salvation in his Son. So why does he suspend the opening of an evangelistic door to them on the prayers of the Colossians? I'm tempted to say, in the words of the Nike commercial: "God, 'Just do it!'" Or, perhaps more reverently, "**God, why don't you directly open these doors rather than telling Paul to tell us to ask you to do so? What's the point of our asking you to do what you've already revealed is in your heart to accomplish? As I said, Lord, 'Just do it!'**"

I suspect God's response to me would be: "No, Sam. That's not how I operate. Yes, of course, I could 'just do it' directly and instantaneously, without your involvement or anyone else's. But I prefer to do it when you ask me to. **In fact, in most instances I won't do it unless you ask me to.**"

Here's another question that comes to mind. **Why does Paul encourage the Colossians to pray for him?** What's the point of his asking them to ask God to open a door for the word? Why does he urge *them* to pray that God would give him clarity of speech? **Isn't it enough that he asks God himself?** I'm assuming he did, but he evidently believed that it would greatly help his cause if others joined him in beseeching God for this blessing. Does this imply that God is more inclined to say 'Yes' to our requests if more people are united in asking him for them? That seems odd.

One thing we know: **God loves to be asked**, and there's good reason for it. Consider Psalm 50:12, one of the most sarcastic verses in Scripture. God says to the Israelites: "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine." That is to say, if God were hungry (which, of course, he's not), he doesn't need the Israelites to provide him with a meal. "Every beast of the forest is mine," says the Lord, "[not to mention] the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psalm 50:10).

So, if God doesn't need us or our prayers, why does he create us and then command us to ask him for things? That's a pretty profound question, but it comes with a fairly simple answer. In Psalm 50:15 God says, "call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." When you're in trouble, says God, when you have needs and problems and trials and obstacles to overcome, pray to me and ask that I intervene and make provision. If you do, I'll deliver you. And in your obvious dependence upon me I will be glorified. **We both win. You get delivered. I get glorified.** You receive a blessing. And people and angels and demons see that I'm the all-sufficient supply, the infinitely resourceful God, the One being in the universe who exists to overflow in abundant goodness to weak and needy people like you!

It's amazing how asking a few questions about the nature and purpose of prayer drives us directly into the reason why God created the universe! Why did God bother to create anything at all? **He made it all so that in its (our) utter and absolute dependence on him for everything his glory as God might be seen and savored. Our need magnifies his supply. Our lack draws attention to his abundance. God honors and glorifies himself by overflowing in bountiful blessings to those who otherwise deserve only death.** And how do we get these blessings? By praying for them! God suspends his work on our prayers not because he can't do it alone but because our prayers highlight our dependence and his supply. **We are humbled as dependent and he is exalted as depended upon!**

Not only does he get the glory for being depended upon but we get the gladness for being dependent! There is no greater joy than getting what God gives (and he is himself, of course, the greatest gift). And there is no greater glory than for God to be giving.

(4) Prayer and Salvation

Here in Colossians 4:3-4 Paul solicits the prayers of these believers, not for his own health or freedom or prosperity but for the opportunity and clarity to proclaim Jesus as Lord to lost and dying people. There are two elements in Paul's request that call for our attention.

First, he asks them to ask God to open "a door for the word" that he might proclaim "the mystery of Christ" (v. 3; see also Acts 14:27; 1 Corinthians 16:8-9; 2 Corinthians 2:12). The "door", evidently, is closed. This may suggest political opposition, social, cultural, and educational barriers to sharing the faith, adverse weather that hinders travel, or any number of factors that make evangelism difficult from a human perspective. It may be that Paul is asking God to grant him favor with those who have the authority to give him access to certain arenas of activity or platforms from which he might declare his message. In any case, Paul believed that God was sovereign over all such circumstances and that

he could remove obstacles and overcome resistance and restrain the enemies of the faith when asked to do so by his people.

That an Apostle, no less, would ask ordinary Christians like these Colossians to pray for his evangelistic success is stunning. Paul refused to trust in his skill or eloquence or theological knowledge alone. He needed the intercessory support of other believers. It's almost as if he's saying, "I'm helpless if you don't ask God to help me." Amazing!

Paul's second request is that they ask God to enable him to proclaim this mystery with clarity (v. 4). "Pray that God will work in me," says Paul, "that I might have the words to speak in the most persuasive manner and at the most appropriate time. Ask God to operate in my heart and mind and soul so that my message will ring true and will reverberate with passion and conviction and courage."

Stunning, isn't it, that a man of Paul's spiritual caliber and gifting felt so desperately dependent on the prayers of others for his effectiveness in ministry! He made a similar plea to the Roman church, appealing to them "to strive together" with him in their "prayers to God" on his behalf, that he might be "delivered from the unbelievers in Judea" and that his "service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints" (Romans 15:30-31).

His request of the Colossians raises an interesting question: *What precisely might serve to inhibit or hinder his clarity of speech or prevent him from proclaiming the gospel in the way he desired?* It may be that he anticipated *trick questions* from a hostile crowd and needs the assistance of the Spirit to see through their deception and speak truth into the fog of error. It may be that he sensed the importance of using just the *right illustration or parable or analogy to make a point* that would penetrate a closed and calloused heart with the truth that brings light and life. Paul, no doubt, felt confused at times and needed the quickening ministry of the Spirit in his mind. "Pray that God would *clear my head of intellectual cobwebs* and overcome any sluggishness of speech that would be unworthy of the gospel I proclaim. Pray that the Father would fill me with the Spirit of boldness and confidence and drive from me all fear of man and concern for my own reputation or physical safety."

Conclusion

Prayer isn't primarily about getting things you want. It isn't about being faithful to obey biblical exhortations. It isn't about checking off another box and feeling good about yourself for doing what other Christians said they do but really don't. It's about cultivating *friendship with God. Relationship. Love.* It's about spending time with the God who loved you so much that he sacrificed his son so that you might live. It's about listening to your very best and eternally faithful friend speak to you. Prayer is always a dialogue. Sometimes God speaks back to you in a still, small voice, or perhaps through Scripture. Sometimes he does it through some providential encounter. Sometimes he does it by directing your attention to the beauty and glorious design in nature. But sometimes he does it in the most surprising yet undeniable ways. Let me tell you about one example.

Jack Deere's son, Scott, took his own life on the day after Christmas, 2000. Two weeks after Scott was buried, the funeral bill arrived. It came to \$10,064.69. Thirty minutes later Jack's secretary walked into the room with 38 sympathy cards and letters. In them were twenty-two checks, one for each of Scott's life. The total: \$10,065.00, 31 cents more than the cost of putting his body in the ground. Jack was stunned. "What are you saying, God?" I asked. The voice of mercy spoke in response to Jack's prayer: It said, "I paid for his death. I also paid for his life. And I'll pay for everything you ever need for as long as you live."

We have an outrageously generous, awesomely powerful, infinitely good and kind heavenly Father. So why don't you spend 2018, and the rest of your Christian life, praying to him for outrageously huge and awesomely massive and humanly impossible things? He might end up giving you 31 cents more than you need.