

Colossians 4v2-6
RUCU Houseparty 2008

Well, it's been a busy weekend, hasn't it? We've heard some great stuff from Acts, haven't we? We've heard about huge opportunities for the gospel, but also about the inevitability of persecution. And we've been challenged to think about how we engage with our friends and our world for Jesus.

So I wonder how you're feeling, now it's Sunday morning. Have you been challenged by what you've heard? Have you been inspired? Have you been encouraged or rebuked? As we think about going back to Reading later, are you excited and raring to go?

The truth is, it would be really easy to go away from here and leave it all behind. It all sounds great while we're out here in the countryside, surrounded by Christians, maybe with a slightly rosy view of university. But it's not much use unless we take it back with us. What we need is a **take home message**. Like the piece of birthday cake in a partybag, we need to wrap up what we've learned so we can take it home with us.

We're going to do it by looking at Paul's closing remarks in his letter to the Colossians. As you can see, this passage comes at the end of Paul's letter. The way my Bible sets it out, this looks like a few random thoughts at the end before he exchanges a few hellos and signs off. I actually think it's the end of the beginning, rather the beginning of the end.

Paul is writing to a church he's never actually met – his friend Epaphras set it up. But he still prays for them constantly. And his main concern is that they'd understand what it means to live with Jesus as their Lord. Which is why he reminds them of the good news about Jesus which they'd heard and accepted. (We saw that yesterday in Colossians chapter 1).

He reminds them that Jesus is God himself, who made everything and keeps everything going. Every millimetre of creation, whether we see it or not, belongs to him. Including us. Jesus is superior to everything – and yet he **died** for our sake. He died so that people like us, people who hate God, could be **reconciled** to God (1v20, 22).

Reconciled is one of my favourite ways to talk about the gospel. When we talk about being reconciled, we mean a relationship has been restored. So it explains in a word what the gospel is all about. First, if reconciliation is needed, then a relationship has been broken. Our relationship with God is broken – we've rejected him, we've turned away to worship other things. But it also tells us what Jesus achieved in dying for us, because we can be reconciled – the relationship we destroyed can be put back together. We did nothing. God himself did everything to repair our relationship with him. Through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the Colossians were reconciled to God, and so can anyone who trusts him.

This is foundational to what Paul says in the rest of the letter (and it's foundational to the rest of what I'm going to say. So I think it's appropriate to say that I don't know most of you. It's possible that some of you aren't Christians. If that's you, then let me say it's great to have you here, and you're really welcome. But I guess the houseparty has probably been a bit weird. We've been talking and singing about sharing this message, but you might be wondering, "why?"

The good news of Jesus is foundational to everything the CU does. It's what we live by, and it's what we desperately want everyone else on campus to know.

If you're here and not a Christian, everything else I say this morning is basically irrelevant to you, because it will just be moralising and doing nice stuff. But it won't do you any good at all. You

need Jesus as your crucified Lord. Can I plead with you to think about where you stand with Jesus. And maybe the challenge from this weekend for you is whether you're going to keep being Lord of your own life, or if you're going to hand it back to him?

I've said already, the Lordship of Jesus is foundational to everything else Paul has to say. He urges them not to get talked into following religious fads or human rules. Instead, they need to know Jesus better. He tells them it's as if their old self died when Jesus did – so now they should focus on the right things, and live under the Lordship of Christ. Just before the bit we read, he gives them some practical examples of what that looks like, when he talks about husbands and wives, parents and children, and slaves and masters.

And so we get to this section. But I don't think it's a random addition – Paul is carrying on. This is more of what it means to live a life worthy of Christ. And in particular, this little chunk encourages the Colossians to be **outward looking** – it's all about people hearing the gospel, whether from Paul or from the Colossians.

So we're going to look at **3 things** he tells the Colossians to do. Actually, we're going to look at three things he tells them to **BE**. And as we reflect on the weekend we've had, as we think about going back, and particularly as we look towards the FREE project, these things apply to us too. These are three things we can take away with us as we think about reaching our mates with the great news about Jesus. The 3 things are:

Be Prayerful

Be Wise

Be Ready

Be Prayerful (2-4)

Paul tells the Colossians to “*continue steadfastly in prayer*” or “devote” themselves to prayer (v2). And you don't have to read much of Paul to see that he modelled this himself. He prayed for the Colossians constantly. But **what does it look like?** Does it mean that if we ever stop praying, then we aren't devoted to prayer? Well no, it doesn't mean that, otherwise how would Paul have found time to write a letter? What it means is **giving prayer the right priority**. This isn't so much about the *quality of our prayers*, but more about the *quality of our lives*. He isn't saying that prayers will only work if you arrange it so someone is praying 24-7. This isn't about the quality of our prayers, it's about the quality of our lives, which should be marked by prayer.

Paul knows prayer is **wildly** important because he knows who God is. He knows God's part in reaching people with the gospel, and he knows Paul's part in preaching the gospel. And he knows that Paul's part is useless if God doesn't do his part. It's God who opens blind eyes and shines light into people's hearts. It's God who stirs people up and brings the dead back to life. Without God, everything Paul does would be fruitless. So prayer is the foundation of everything he does, and the same goes for all of us too. That's why he prays steadfastly for other people, and why he tells the Colossians to pray.

He fleshes out more of what he means with the words “**watchful**” and “**thanksgiving.**” Which sounds straightforward, but you'd be surprised. “Watchful” for what? Giving thanks for what? People have lots of different suggestions as to what Paul means. But I'll tell you what I think he's getting at here. Basically, be alert when you pray. It's possible to pray and not be alert. Your heart isn't really engaged, you aren't really very interested in what you're praying about. But don't be like that, Paul says, be alert.

We need to be engaged in prayer, not asleep on the job. Prayer is a serious business, and we need to be alert. **Be alert** to the needs around you, to the things you have to pray for. **Be alert!** We need

to pray in a way which is connected to the world we live in, to our campus, and to the lives of our mates.

And we need to be **thankful**. Being thankful is connected to being watchful, in that we have to be on the lookout for God answering prayer, and be thankful. But I think it's more than that. It needs to be **rooted in grace**. When we realise that we're sinners who have been saved by grace, it will grow a grateful heart in us, and that will change the quality of our prayer.

A grateful heart realises that everything we've got come from God. **A grateful heart** knows that without him, we'd be alienated from him. **And a grateful heart** won't stride arrogantly up to God with a shopping list of demands. **A grateful heart** will humbly ask God, out of the riches of his grace and mercy, to give us more of what we could never deserve. Do you see how that will change things?

*Now I feel **hypocritical** even as I say this stuff, because I don't think I could describe my life like that. And I guess a lot of you feel the same. But what we shouldn't do is look at Paul and feel discouraged. We should look at him and realise what a difference really being prayerful will make.*

There are loads of practical steps we can take. **Praying with other people** is a great thing to do as we try to be like this together. Whether that's **prayer breakfast**, or just getting together with a **couple of friends** to pray for your non-Christian friends, praying with others is a massive encouragement and stimulus to pray steadfastly. But this is about our lives, not just about being in public. What can you do to **help yourself pray steadfastly**? Don't think, "*I'm going to pray for 3 hours every day*" if you aren't praying for 3 minutes! Be realistic. But here are two key things:

Be inspired by Bible prayers: Look at the prayers of Jesus, or Paul, or David, or whoever. Soak up Bible prayers, and it will help you to pray.

Pray God will help you to pray: It sounds silly at first (like a solar-powered torch), but it's not. It's a heart thing. Ask God to change your heart so you can pray the way you should.

So that's **how** Paul tells the Colossians to pray. But he asks them to pray for him (and Timothy), and specifically for two things. Both of them are about reaching people with the gospel:

"that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ," (v3)

and

"that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak" (v4)

Again, this is **God's part and Paul's part** in proclaiming the gospel. He asks them to pray for what's going on out there (that a door would open for the message), and also for what's going on in here (that Paul would proclaim the message properly). The two things have to go together. Paul's attitude is irrelevant if there's no chance to speak. And he could have all the opportunities in the world, but they're useless if he talks nonsense. They're different, but they go together. And they both need God to work, either in the hearers or in the speaker. So Paul asks the Colossians to bring both before God.

As we look forward to the **FREE project**, surely we need to follow Paul's example and be lifting both of these to God too. We need to **pray for doors to open** – pray for your mates, for the people on your course, that there would be chances to tell them the truth about Jesus. And **pray for Michael Ots**, that when he comes to speak, he's speak clearly, and explain the gospel well. But **pray for yourselves too**, that you'd be able to do the same.

So, be prayerful. Be steadfast in prayer. Be watchful and thankful. And pray there'd be opportunities to share the gospel, and that we'd take them and use them well.

I've spent ages on prayer, because I think it's crucial. And please don't think we're leaving it behind as we move on. Paul turns his attention specifically to their evangelism, but he still wants them to be prayerful. Don't think of these things as separate!

Be Wise (v5)

He tells them to conduct themselves wisely towards outsiders, making the best use of the time (v5, you might have "every opportunity" or something similar). An outsider is someone who is outside God's people – it's someone who isn't a Christian. So this is about Christians relating to non-Christians. But what does he mean by "wise"? Does he mean be clever? Or be really good at apologetics? Or plan really carefully when you're going to speak so that you get your friends in exactly the right mood?

I don't think so. This is about living wisely as you relate to people who aren't Christians. Paul opened the letter with a prayer that God would fill the Colossians with "*the knowledge of God's will through all wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives...*" with the aim that they would live lives worthy of Christ. Paul's already explained that, through Jesus, the quality of our lives will be different. And he's applied it throughout the letter – the way their new life in Christ will affect how they live. Now in **chapter 4 verse 5**, he's taking all of that and applying it to people on the outside. As people look in, they'll see the results of the gospel in the wise choices you make.

I guess this prompts the question, "are you being wise in the way you act towards outsiders?" Are you making wise choices which allow people to see the gospel at work in you? Or does it make no difference to you. Would your friend look at you and see no difference between them and you? Sometimes as Christians we make a lot of effort to fit in with our friends (and to an extent that's good). But if we get to a point where there's no difference between us, then we've pushed it too far. What will your friend think of Jesus if you get hammered at the weekend just like they do? What will your friend think of the gospel if you sleep around just like everyone else? What will your friend think if you lie or cheat? **Be wise.**

It sounds like Paul has one eye on the future here. "*Make the best use of the time.*" There's a sense of urgency in the words Paul uses. When time is limited, it becomes important that we use it wisely. We need to use the time we have to tell people about Jesus.

Are you making "the best use of the time"? Are you using it wisely? That will mean looking for opportunities – the open doors we've already heard about. Are you on the lookout for chances to tell people about Jesus. **Hey, wait, here's one** [at which point I produce a FREE gospel]!

Or it will mean making opportunities. Like, for instance, getting an allotment so you can get to know the other people who have allotments. (Which is what I'm in the process of doing). OK, that's probably not practical for you lot – I just wanted to mention my allotment. But what opportunities are there? Do you ever invite people round for dinner? Are you too busy to go to the pub with people from your course? **Make the best use of the time.**

And, of course, all of this depends rather heavily on actually having contact with outsiders. Being wise is irrelevant if your only ever wise hiding in your bedroom or at a CU meeting! **Be wise.**

This is all linked to the final verse, verse 6. Paul has told the Colossians to be prayerful, and he's specifically asked for prayer for his evangelism. Then he's told them to be wise, to live out the gospel for outsiders to see, and making best use of the time that remains until Jesus comes back. But once they're doing that, Paul says, they need to **be ready**.

Be Ready (v6)

Again, we can ask "How?" Do I need a PhD? Do I need to read all the books on the bookstall? Do I need to become a Relay worker?

They're all good ways to be prepared to talk to people about Jesus (particularly the last one), but knowledge and training aren't Paul's priority here. He's more concerned about **attitude**.

“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (v6). Your version might say *“full of grace,”* but I think this gets the sense about right. He's still talking about being wise towards outsiders. Part of that is about making the best use of the time. But another crucial element is speaking to them properly when you have chance. Basically, you need to be gracious in the way you speak to outsiders.

I think this can only properly flow from experiencing grace ourselves. When we realise that God should have hated us for what we did, but instead he loves us enough to die for us, that has to transform us. And in turn it has to transform the way we treat people especially outsiders.

That's what Paul is getting at when he talks about salt. If you look at the other ways salt is used to refer to Christians, it's used as an illustration of the difference between Christians and the rest of the world. Our conversation should be seasoned with salt – it should be **tasty**. There should be something different about the way we speak which makes it attractive to outsiders. And that difference comes from being transformed by the gospel, and showing it in the way we live and the way we speak.

So what will it look like?

- Speech which is gracious isn't aimed at winning an argument, but about helping people to see the hope you have in the gospel.
- Speech which is gracious isn't about showing how much you know, but about showing people the Saviour you know.
- Speech which is gracious sometimes means being silent and listening, rather than trying to shout someone down.
- Speech which is gracious and seasoned with salt cares more about the person you're talking to than your reputation.

The fundamental point is that with this attitude, you put the person you're talking to before yourself. That's the principle Paul's been trying to get the Colossians to see in the family situations he mentioned, and it's the same here. It's the heart of what grace is all about. The Lord Jesus put our welfare above his own and died for us. That's what will make our conversation gracious. That's what will make our conversation **tasty**.

And this isn't something we just wheel out when we spot a non-Christian in the room. *“Let your speech **ALWAYS** be gracious...”* This should be our default setting. So no matter who we're talking to, whenever the opportunity arises, we'll be ready to respond in the right way.

Is this what your speech is like? Do you need to pray that you'd be more gracious in your speech? Do you need to pray you'd appreciate grace more so that it would overflow in your speech? I'll leave that for you to think about...

We've seen a lot in this passage, haven't we. Be prayerful, Paul says. Be wise in the way you act. And be ready by being gracious in the way you speak. Have you noticed what I noticed? (And I didn't do it on purpose). If you want a summary of this passage, it's basically **“Live for Jesus, speak for Jesus. And pray lots.”**

That was Paul's take home message for the Colossians. That was the cake in their party bag, and I think it can be ours too. **Live for Jesus... Speak for Jesus... And pray lots.**