

Pray and Speak

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[0 : 00] Turn in your Bibles, please, with me to Colossians chapter 4. We pick up our reading in verse 2, verse 1 being part of the end of chapter 3.

The natural break does seem to be between verses 1 and 2, so we'll pick it up at verse 2, and we'll begin reading, and we'll read to the end of the chapter.

We come to the end of the letter, and so now hear God's Word. Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

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, that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak.

Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

[1 : 34] Tichikus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts.

And with him, Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you, they will tell you of everything that has taken place here. Orystakurus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions.

If he comes to you, welcome him. And Jesus, who is called Justice, these are only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you always, struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you, and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. Luke, the beloved physician, greets you, as does Demas.

[3 : 03] Give my greetings to the brothers of Laodicea, and to Nympha, and to the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans.

And see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, see that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. Let us pray, and then we'll come back to God's word together in a moment.

Father, we do ask that your word become real to us, that we know the letter was written a long time ago, and written to a particular church, but as we have read, it was to be read by other churches as well.

And in the same way different people in different churches read it then, this same letter today is read by different Christians in different churches, in different parts of the world.

[4 : 15] And so we pray that it edifies us and does us good, in the same way that it's kept your church safe from harm for thousands of years. We ask, Father, now that as we submit our life to your word, for it to bless us with it.

In Jesus' name. Amen. If you were to draw a picture of a church, what would you draw?

Just think about it for a moment. What would you draw? And secondly, where would you draw yourself in that church?

Where would you be? Where would you put yourself? I can't stress how important the church is, but I can stress the length at which God went to to provide and give himself a church, and that was

Jesus Christ dying on a cross.

If I'm to convince you how important church is, I have to convince you and remind you exactly what Jesus did, that the reason we have what we have tonight is for no other reason than Jesus Christ who died on the cross.

[5 : 37] So church is important for that reason. And now that we come to the end of this letter, it might be worthwhile if we remember how it all began. Paul wants us to know that Jesus is Lord.

He doesn't want us to forget that Jesus is Lord, and he doesn't want us to depart, that is, reject the fact that Jesus is Lord. And I've said this before, but I feel that though I've said it before, it may not be sinking in to all of us to the same depth that it really needs to go.

And that is that whatever we're dealing with in life, we are always dealing with God. Perhaps you could write that sentence down and stick it in your Bible.

Every time you read your Bible, read that sentence. That whatever we're dealing with in life, we are always dealing with God. God is always mindful of what we're thinking. God is always mindful of what we're feeling.

And God is always mindful of what is about to happen and how we're going to respond to what is about to happen. But many Christians try and live their life as though this isn't true.

[6 : 53] That actually we can deal with life without having to deal with God. And yet this is the very thing that the Apostle Paul in the letter of Colossians is trying to convince these believers that it just can't happen.

That Jesus is Lord of everything. Now bearing in mind, he's going to tell us in a moment, verse two, to be watchful in prayer and to continue strenuously or steadfastly in prayer.

What does it mean when you pray? How does it affect your prayers to know that whatever you're dealing with in life, you're always dealing with God? Well, the moment that sinks deep down into your heart, you're bound to pray.

And you're bound to pray for this very reason. Because if whatever we're dealing with in life, we're always dealing with God, it's good to know and to steady ourselves in prayer before God.

But many of us can perhaps try and live our Christian life as though that bit wasn't true. And then the only time we pray to God is when we pray to him for why things are not going the way that we thought that they weren't.

[8 : 00] In other words, we have this picture that we've drawn in our mind about what the church should look like and how the church should be and how it should go. In fact, even how my Christian life should be turning out.

And God's not, God's not playing along with my picture. This is what I wanted it to look like, God.

And your picture looks nothing like mine. And what Paul is saying here is that the reality of Jesus being Lord is the only thing that can settle that account.

It's the only thing that can actually deal with your impatience. It's the only thing that can actually steady the ship of your own life. And so imagine it like this.

Each of you have been given a role. It may not be a very glamorous role. You've each been given a script. You've each been given a place in which you are to live and act out that role that God has given you.

And to say the words that are on the script that God has given you. But there's coming a day when the act will be over, when the role will be fulfilled. And you'll step off the theatre.

[9 : 10] You'll step out of this world and you'll enter into the new heavens and the new earth and be with God. And you're going to look back and go, now I understand. Okay, imagine it, imagine the contrast between you playing the part of just this person who's backstage talking amongst the crowd.

But then the contrast would be on the Oscar night. You step out onto the red carpet in all your glory and you win an Oscar for that little part that you played.

Well, when God says, well done, my good and faithful servant, the contrast between what you are now and what you do now compared to what will happen in the future is as great as that.

So don't ever think that the part that you play before God is somehow insignificant. However, you may not like the part.

You may not like the script that you have been given and you may not like the place where you have to see it out. But let's remember where Paul is writing this letter from.

[10:26] A prison cell. I'm sure he would rather have been somewhere else and doing something else. But that is where he writes this letter from.

And so let's remember that whatever we're dealing with in life, we're always dealing with God. And bearing that in mind, we pray. And if we try and sort of navigate our own way through life without ever bearing that in mind, it's the equivalent of trying to do breaststroke up a waterfall.

You are going somewhere, but it's not where you think. That's the futility of trying to navigate your way through life when God has given you a specific role and a specific script.

This is it. And everything that God does is to bring us back to that point. Why? Because Jesus is Lord. He's Lord of all creation and therefore he's Lord of everything in creation.

Well, what does that mean? Well, if Jesus is Lord of everything in the world, everything in the universe, then that means everything on this planet, Jesus is Lord of. So think about it this way for a moment.

[11:38] Nicola Sturgeon has a Lord and her Lord is Jesus. She may not recognize it. She may not bow down to him, but her Lord is Jesus.

David Cameron, his Lord is Jesus. Osama bin Laden, his Lord was Jesus.

Assad of Syria, the president of Assyria, his Lord is Jesus. Obama, the president of the United States, his Lord is Jesus.

And yet we have got into the thinking that Jesus is only Lord of those who accept him as Lord. But that's not what Colossians says. Jesus is Lord of everything. And if he's Lord of everything in creation, he's Lord of everyone in creation.

And so whatever anybody is dealing with in life, they are always dealing with God, not just Christians. The difference for the Christian is that we understand it.

[12:42] Whereas the non-Christian doesn't yet understand that. This is how God is able to work in people's lives because God is working all the time, everywhere. This is how people are able to be brought to faith because whatever people are dealing with in life, God is always dealing with them at some level.

The Christian understands this, the world doesn't. So Paul comes then bearing this in mind to two points in particular. The first is, verses two to four, these are the two main points, is speaking to God in prayer about people.

So verses two to four is all about speaking to God about people. And of course that means prayer, speaking to God in prayer about people. And then verses five to six, before he gets on to the fellow servants and the final greetings, verses five to six is all about speaking to people about God.

And notice the way that Paul puts it around. First we speak to God about people, and then we speak to people about God. And then he finally finishes his letters with a few final greetings of fellow servants that are doing exactly what we're doing.

Epaphras doesn't have the ministry of Paul, and Epaphras doesn't have the ministry of Onesimus. Onesimus doesn't have the ministry of Paul, he doesn't have the ministry of justice. They each do what they do for the Lord.

[14:16] And so Paul begins then, before he even gets there, with a message to us all that we're all to continue steadfastly in prayer. prayer, that you're to busy yourself with prayer, that we are to devote ourselves to prayer, that we are to persevere in prayer.

Now I guess the reason why he has to tell us to do it is for the same reason we have to tell anybody to do anything. They're not doing it. And even if we are doing it, we need encouragement to keep doing it.

But notice the order. Prayer. Speaking to God precedes speaking to people about God. Okay? Speaking to God about people precedes speaking to people about God.

It seems that if we try and speak to people about God before we've spoken to God about them, then that's a kind of self-effort. It doesn't actually do anything or go anywhere.

All our evangelism will come to nothing if it's not preceded with a conversation with God first before we have a conversation with other people. That's the way that God has laid it out.

[15:32] We speak to God first because whatever we're dealing with in life, as with them, we're always dealing with God. And then we go and speak to them. So we're to pray steadfastly.

And secondly, also in verse 2, that we're to be watchful as we pray. There's a lot of disruption that can happen in the church when people are not watchful in prayer.

And being watchful in prayer means watching out for the things to pray for and also being watchful that we do actually pray ourselves. Remember, this comes from Jesus, where Jesus says to the disciples, will you watch and pray with me?

I must point out at this point that Jesus never, in his all-earthly ministry, ever had a prayer meeting with his disciples. You'll notice if you ever read the Gospels, he always goes and prays on his home.

He never prays with the disciples. The disciples pray together, but Jesus never prays with them. There's probably a reason in there for that. But Jesus says to them, will you watch and pray with me?

[16:37] And I'm convinced, as I've heard other pastors say, and Eric Alexander has written a fantastic book on prayer and so have others. His book is both small and brilliant book.

But I'm convinced that the devil laughs at a church that doesn't pray, but yet tries to serve him. I think the devil is just having a well of a time the moment we try and do anything for the Lord. He's just bent over backwards in laughter the moment we try and do something and we've not committed it to God in prayer. And I think it's the same for the Christian life. The Christian life wakes up in the morning, even though we should know that we're always dealing with God, we go ahead and try and live this Christian life and the devil is just sat there with a smug grin on his face knowing that he's just got us right where he wants us because we don't pray.

I would almost like to say, in fact I will say, that ineffectiveness in Christian ministry is due to a lack of prayer.

I'm not just talking about us praying as individuals, but I'm primarily talking here about a church praying together and a church that knows what to pray for, knows how to pray for the work ahead.

[18:07] I mean, I don't know, I mean, we got what leaders here, we got Sunday school leaders here, we got YP leaders here, we got church leaders here in different capacity. I mean, how often do you commit what you do to God in prayer before you go ahead and do it?

Unless, of course, your prayer is, Lord, let it not be a long night. I'm tired. You know, we've certainly, listen, there's nothing wrong with praying that. There's nothing, Lord, you're going to have to get me through this because I am just shot right through and I just, there's just, no, my legs are tired, my brain's tired, I'm just not going to be able to do it and yet for some reason, God, you ask for God to strengthen you and God strengthens you but how often when we're feeling okay do we not commit the same prayer and we just try and, right, you know, I can do it but then boil it down out of ministry into natural relationships.

You know, is it possible for me to fulfill the role is not as a pastor but just as a husband and a father without praying? Well, I could give it a go but I'm pretty sure I'm going to fail more if only I would commit it to God in prayer.

Flip side, what about wives and mothers and so forth? It's all there and I've said this before and this is worth remembering when it comes to prayer, I am convinced according to James or from James that the reason why God doesn't give certain people certain things, I think the reason why he doesn't answer certain prayers or certain blessings in their life is because those blessings can only be handled with a praying life.

They can only be handled with a praying life. We've heard countless stories of people who have perhaps won the lottery and it's destroyed them and it's because their natural character and their natural makeup is not mature enough to be able to cope with that kind of money injected into their life.

[20:12] And in the same way, God blesses us but he knows that some blessings just cannot be handled, they can't be touched unless the life comes under the power of prayer.

It would, because our character and our makeup and our maturity is not quite where it needs to be in order to be able to handle that. And so the blessing, though it be good, would actually be bad for us because it just wouldn't do us any good.

I don't think a single person in the world who has won the lottery and then it destroyed them ever thought that when they won the lottery that it was ever going to turn out in a bad way for them.

I just don't believe anyone thinks like that. I think that they think, I've got all this, and their natural inclination is I can handle it. And then it destroys them. How did that happen?

Well, in the same way, because God is Lord of all creation, not just out there and in here in different capacities, but it's exactly the same for the Christian. Proverbs clearly states that a young man cannot afford to bypass certain growing traits that he has to go through in order for him to have

these things later on in life.

[21 : 29] If he does and he gets those things later on in life, they'll actually end up destroying him because his character is not there to hold them. And so in the same way, Paul is urging this church to pray, not because it just gets the answers that the church needs to have, but because it's fundamentally needed for the person who's actually doing the praying.

Paul then, you'll notice in verse 3, says that not only, end of verse 2, that not only are we to be watchful, but we're to be thankful in our prayers and thankful for everything.

And at the same time, he says, pray for us also, that God may open a door for the word to declare the mystery of Christ, of which I am in prison.

And I think that is one of the best sentences in the whole of the book for this reason, because I wouldn't have prayed that. I think if I was in prison, the only door that I would ask for God to open would be my prison door.

I mean, wouldn't you? Think about it. Here we have Paul in prison, praying to God that he would open doors, but the very door that he doesn't even mention to be opened is his prison cell door.

[22 : 59] In other words, he's speaking to God in prayer about other people, and yet he begins to understand that his role to be fulfilled is right where he is. I mean, how else could prisoners hear the gospel unless a Christian was in prison?

Now, I know today we have in some prisons, we have chaplains who may or may not proclaim the gospel. We have some where you can actually go in and take books in and, you know, be a visiting guest and so forth, but here in Paul's day, that wouldn't have been the case.

And so how, without that kind of set up, can anybody in prison hear the gospel unless God purposely puts a Christian in prison? Not because Paul has done anything wrong, but because he's fulfilling the role that God has for him.

It's part of God's script. He may not like the role, he may not like the part that he has to play at this age and stage in his life, but we don't get that impression.

He simply asks us to pray for him that God would open doors, that he may proclaim the gospel to others, of which I am account in prison. So I'm in prison on the account of the gospel, and I'm asking you to open me a door so that I can what?

[24 : 24] Continue to preach the gospel on account that I'm in prison for. I mean, you can't get in any more trouble, can you? Think about it this way. You've preached the gospel, and now you've been put in prison for preaching the gospel.

What are they going to do to you if you preach the gospel in prison? Put you in another prison? Right? You see the point? So Paul is coming before God here in prayer, speaking to God that God may open doors so that he can speak to people.

Secondly then, speaking to people about God. First we speak to God about people, and now we speak to people about God, verses 5 to 6.

You'll notice that Paul begins in verse 5 with an issue of conduct more than he does speech.

Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, making the best use of your time.

There was a famous magician called Penn Jillette. I think, well, he's still famous. And a big guy with a ponytail, got a strange sense of humor, but brilliant magician nonetheless.

[25 : 37] I mean, I don't know how he does this stuff. There's another guy that goes, Penn and Teller, I think is, Penn Jillette made a YouTube video. This is about 15 or maybe 20 years old by now, at least 15 years old.

And he said, even though he's an atheist, he says that if Christians really believed what they did, then why aren't they bothering me more?

If Christians really believed that God is coming back and God is really going to judge the world in righteousness and that God is really going to sort everything else out, then why aren't Christians coming up to me more often than what they are telling me this?

In other words, he's looking out into the Christian world, verse 5, and noticing that these Christians are not necessarily making the best use of their time as they should from their point of view.

Then he says, verse 6, let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. And I think this is the answer to Penn Jillette.

[26 : 52] I think verse 6 is the answer. Because you'll notice that Paul does not say, go out, he more or less says, stay right where you are. In other words, this is not a message about being proactively evangelistic.

This is more a message of about living your Christian life in the role that God has given you, right where you are, and then when somebody says to you, why do you believe what you believe? Why do you live the way you live? Paul then says, you're able to give an answer. I think verse 6 releases the burden from your heart.

I think it releases the burden from your minds and the burden from your shoulders that, I don't know if I've got the energy to go out and be an evangelist. I don't know if I can keep going out.

Well, Paul says you don't have to. Just live out the role that God has given you. Live out the role that God has given you, and when somebody noticed that you don't live like they live, and that you don't believe what they believe, and they then ask you, verse 6, know how you ought to answer each person.

[28 : 10] Don't get me wrong, I do believe that God has given evangelists to the church, that there are some people particularly gifted by God to proclaim the gospel in which men and women, boys and girls, seem to come to faith to. Billy Graham would be the obvious answer, or the obvious person like that, and there are many others. So God does give evangelists.

But for the large majority of us, the way we evangelize is reactively. We're not doing the questioning, we're doing the answering. We're not initiating the conversation, the questioner is initiating the conversation. Why do you live the way that you do? Why do you believe the things that you believe? And so there you go, you go and you give an answer.

And so if you're sat here thinking, do you know what, I'm really not very good at speaking to people about the gospel, I don't go and knock on my neighbor's door and tell them, you know, I don't go in any groups and tell them, okay, okay, well let's just, let's just get rid of that unnecessary burden. There is a place for that in the church, and we ought to be doing that. But the issue here is whether or not when someone comes up to you and asks you about Jesus, what do you do then?

What do you do at that point? And this is where we go back to prayer. Because if you've not spoken to God about people, you're not going to be ready to speak to people about God. You're just not going to be ready for it. It is absolutely necessary that we do what Paul does, verse 3. Understand that God is the one who opens the doors. That God is the one who opens the doors in order for the gospel to be heard. We don't open doors.

We cannot create an opportunity by which people can hear the gospel effectively. The only person who can do that, as Paul says in verse 3, is God. Because not only does the door need to be open, not only does the opportunity need to be opened, but their ears and heart also have to be opened in order to hear the gospel effectively. So let me say, there is a place for both. But what Paul is saying here is that a vast majority of Christians fall into this category. That while some have been gifted to go out on the streets, and we thank God for people in this church who do that. And while some are gifted, simply able to start a gospel conversation under any circumstances, we thank God for the people in this church who can do that. But for the vast majority of us sat here, we're probably not like that. But we can all be in the place where God opens the door and someone who you never thought would ever speak to you about the gospel does. And it's at that point that you need to ask yourself the question, are you ready to give the answer in the right way and the right answer? That's the issue that we have here. And so to finish, to conclude, Paul reminds us that we're not in it on our own. But there's a whole bunch of us doing the same thing. Now bearing in mind that the church is full of people who don't all do the same thing in the sense of what we do on a daily basis, he is pointing out that we're all involved in the church serving God in some way. Some of us may be in Onesimus. Okay, our background is that we've stolen from our employer and then all of a sudden we've got converted and now we find ourselves serving the Lord. That's Onesimus' story, isn't it?

[32 : 12] If you go read Philemon. What about justice? What does he do? Well, we don't know anything about him other than the fact that he serves the Lord. What about Epaphras? Well, we know in verse 12 that he is one who's basically on his knees, struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. In other words, he is the local minister in the local church whose biggest struggle is his prayer life, but his prayer life for the people in the church. That's his biggest struggle. The thing that he struggles with the most is not the conflict it seems, or else that might have been mentioned. It's not necessarily his own personal life and what he does and what he doesn't do, but the struggle that Paul mentions here of this service is the struggle that he has on behalf of praying for others that they may stand mature and fully assured in the will of God. And what about Demas? Well, Demas, unfortunately, is the one that we should feel incredibly sad for, because if any of you have read 2 Timothy, you'll know that

Demas didn't continue in the faith, but he left it. He didn't leave it immediately. He served the Lord. He fellowshiped with God's people, but there became a decline. And as the decline happened, Paul mentions to Timothy, he's no longer with us, for he's loved the world.

And so which of us are the justice in this fellowship? Who amongst us is the Onesimus? Who amongst us are the Epaphrases? Who amongst us are the Demases? Though we never like the fact that people can depart from the faith, the church is full, unfortunately, of people departing from the faith. So Paul, with all this in mind, encourages us with the sense that we're together in it. In other words, as you continue in the faith, you don't continue on your own. Think about that. I don't know how hard you're finding your Christian life at the minute, and I don't know how hard you're finding it to serve Jesus at the minute. I just don't know. If you come and told me, I could pray for you. I probably couldn't make it better for you, but I could certainly pray for you.

But I don't know. But the one thing you must know is that you're not in it on your own. Everybody else has to live the same Christian life as you do here. Everybody has the same demands from Jesus that you do. The difference here is the role.

We all have a role. And there's coming a day when we're all going to step out onto the red carpet. And we're going to look back and understand why we were given the role that we were given. And the answer is really quite simple. It is because nobody else could play the role but you. You have been handcrafted by God to play that role out in this world. Nobody else but you could do it.

[35 : 56] And so don't ever think for a minute that somehow some people in the church have a more important role or a more important position or a more important part. Okay? When the credits go up on this film, though it's a real one, okay, everybody's name is first. Nobody's name is bigger than the other.

And so we sit here tonight thinking, or we ought to be thinking, you know what? This is true. I have a role to play. And my role is the same that is mentioned in verse 17. That we are to see to it that we are to fulfill the ministry that we have received from the Lord.

I'll leave you with that. Amen.