

INI

Colossians 4,2-6

Easter 5 — 10 May 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson from Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians, which was read earlier:

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; ³ praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the Word

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: During the years AD 60-61, Paul was under house arrest in Rome. From what we know of Paul's first imprisonment, his house arrest was not as onerous as being in prison. He could receive visitors. Sometime during this period of time, Epaphras came to visit him. Epaphras probably was the founder of the Christian congregation in Colossae. Now Paul was writing to the congregation in Colossae.

These few verses which we have just read are really the concluding words of the letter before Paul spends the rest of the chapter running through a list of people to whom greetings should be given and others who are sending greetings.

Paul makes it quite clear that the reason that he is in prison – under house arrest – is because of his faithful witness to Christ.

Now Paul directs the attention of the Colossians to what is needful – prayer. While they cannot be with Paul physically, they can be with him in the spirit as their prayers on his and the Word’s behalf rise to the throne of heaven. This is the encouragement that Paul would give to them and also to us. This brings me to my sermon theme for today, “**Living A Life Of Prayer.**” I’ll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Pray In Watchfulness And Thanksgiving**
- 2) Pray That God Would Open Doors; and,**
- 3) Pray That We Would Go Through Open Doors**

1) Pray In Watchfulness And Thanksgiving. One of the things that characterizes the early Church, and should also characterize the Church throughout the ages, is a devotion to prayer.

When Paul tells the Colossians and us to devote ourselves to prayer, he is saying that we should be persistent in prayer. Thus, the life in Christ should be a vigilant life of continual prayer.

Why continual prayer? Or for that matter, prayer at all? As we read in today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus assures us that the Father hears the prayers of the saints that ascend to the heavenly throne in the name of the Son. Elsewhere, we are assured that Jesus stands at the Father’s right hand and personally intercedes for us (Romans 8,34). Jesus Himself taught us how to pray, and the prayer He taught begins with the words, “Our Father” – and He indeed is our Father on account of what Jesus has done for us. Thus, we are invited to pray and assured that in Christ our prayers are heard.

As we continue in prayer we are to be on the alert, or ever watchful. Why on the alert?

Well, speaking personally, it is awfully easy to get distracted. First of all, it is easy to get distracted from even starting to pray. Secondly, it is easy to get distracted while praying. Thirdly, once distracted it is hard to get back to prayer.

So to be on the alert or to be watchful means to minimize distractions and maximize prayer – maximize our concentration. Perhaps that means setting aside some time for prayer. That means making prayer a habit instead of an after thought.

It has happened to me that I have left prayer until bed time. At least for me, any extended prayer at bed time is usually not a good idea. Because as I lie there and pray, my mind tends to drift – after all, it's the end of the day and it's time for sleep and not for extended and concentrated prayer. And then all of a sudden I find myself off in dream land instead of prayer land. This also ties in to the idea of redeeming the time, of which we will speak in a little bit.

Then Paul tells us also to be vigilant and continual in prayer, to be alert or watchful and also to be thankful.

Thankfulness in prayer is a theme that comes up again and again in the New Testament. Again we ask – why be thankful? I suppose that instead of thankfulness, the opposite might be bitterness or resentment. That might have been Paul's reaction to being under house arrest. It might have the reaction of the Colossians when they thought about the injustice of Paul's plight. But rather than be eaten up by the endless injustices of this world, the Lord would have us be thankful for what we have, concentrate on that and leave the rest in His hands.

If we are not thankful, then soon we fall into a snare of being caught up in this world's problems. And the world, our flesh, and the devil would like nothing better than that we get caught up in the injustice

racket instead of the blessings of thankfulness. Injustice is endless and there will be no end to it in this life as it is the product of living in a sinful world. It will take us away from God and we shall wind up in the pit of despair.

Thus, Paul would have us

2) Pray That God Would Open Doors. How interesting that Paul does not ask that we should pray that the doors of his prison should open, but rather that doors would be opened for Word, that Paul and we might speak of the mystery of Christ.

Paul's concern is not about his own self or his own circumstances or predicament, rather, his focus is on how best to be where he is and see that doors might still be opened for him to preach – to those who came to visit, to the soldiers who guarded him perhaps others, and maybe even later the literal prison doors. Indeed, at the conclusion of Paul's last letter from prison in Rome, the Letter to the Philippians, Paul writes,

All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.
(Philippians 4,22).

This reflects what Paul wrote earlier in Philippians:

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel,¹³ so that my imprisonment in *the cause of* Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else,¹⁴ and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the Word of God without fear. (Philippians 1,12-14)

Paul's prayers that doors would be opened so he could speak of the

mystery of Christ were answered in ways he could not have imagined. While the doors of prison remained closed at this time, the Lord opened the doors of the hearts of members of the imperial household – and that is what Caesar’s household refers to – and many, even the soldiers of the pretorian guard, came to faith.

Paul now speaks of the “mystery of Christ.” because God’s plan of salvation is completely unknowable to the natural man apart from Christ. God’s plan of salvation is a mystery because it has to be revealed by God Himself. It is as Paul put it in writing to the Galatians,

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, ⁵ so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. (Galatians 4,4-5)

The time was of God’s choosing and the sending was also of God’s choosing. The mystery unfolded in Nazareth and then in Bethlehem. Then about thirty years later it unfolded on Golgotha and then three days after that first Good Friday the tomb opened on Easter morning and Jesus became the firstfruits of those who would rise from the dead. On that Easter, Jesus opened the door to heaven. Where our sins otherwise would have kept that door shut and the gates of hell open, now the forgiveness which Jesus has won for us has shut hell and opened heaven for all believers.

This mystery has opened doors and now Paul and us

3) Pray That We Would Go Through Open Doors. Here Paul speaks about the transition from prayer to life, for life should be prayer in action, so that as we walk through the doors which God would open we might redeem the time and season our speech with graciousness and salt so as to bring the Gospel to outsiders, to those who otherwise are

unbelievers.

The characteristics of prayer – alertness and thankfulness – are to be carried over into our lives as we deal with unbelievers. In addition to this, we are to ask God to give us that wisdom which can only come from above as we deal with those with whom we wish to share our faith.

We need wisdom in order to discern what to say about Jesus, when to say it, and to whom to say it. Our message must be spoken at the right time and be appropriate to the person with whom we are speaking.

When we speak, how shall we speak?

First of all, we must have the opportune moment. Paul literally speaks of this as redeeming the time, or as many translations have it, making the most of the opportunity we are given, or perhaps making the moment count.

When we speak of the mystery of Christ, of God's plan of salvation, we should speak with grace, with kindness.

The early Christians did not have it easy, and it is getting less and less easy to be a Christian in today's world. One commentary put it in the following words:

Early Christians were often viewed with suspicion, distrust, and disdain. They were considered atheists because they would not worship the gods of Rome and Greece. Many labeled them as unpatriotic because they would not burn incense before the image of the emperor. Some accused the early Christians of participating in orgies because of their talk of "love feasts" (Jude 12). Others harbored suspicions that Christians were really cannibals, who ate and drank the Body and Blood of the Lord. With such

misrepresentations of Christian belief and practice running rampant, it was very important for misunderstanding to be dispelled by the virtuous and impeccable lives of Christian believers. (Nelson Study Bible)

Well, some of the charges do not apply today, but certainly the attitude of “suspicion, distrust, and disdain” seem all too common when Christian beliefs and morals are advanced.

So Paul looks and says our speech should be gracious as though seasoned with salt. This means that as we speak of God’s plan of salvation our words should be such that they speak of Christ and what He has done for us and the world, so that the Holy Spirit may use those words to create and preserve faith in the hearts of those with whom we speak. Salt is a preservative, and in effect what we do as we speak of Jesus is to give the Spirit the opportunity to open the doors of hearts of those with whom we speak.

Will we always see immediate results? Perhaps. But if not, then we should continually take the names of those people to the Lord in continual and watchful and thankful prayer. We pray that the memory of the words which we spoke may be preserved in the memory of the person spoken to; or perhaps other Christians may add to or reinforce what we said.

Conclusion: The line between prayer and life is thin – prayer should support life and life should support prayer, for in the life of a Christian the two should be intertwined.

Thus our lives as well as our prayers should be lives of continual devotion to our Lord, and in this staying both alert or watchful as well as thankful.

Even in prison, if Paul's attitude was not one of thankfulness, I do not think that his witness would have gone very far. But as it was, he was always redeeming the time and unveiling the mystery of Christ in ways that were appropriate to his listeners and in language that was salted with graciousness.

I think that we all struggle with having a better prayer life and being able to be better witnesses. We come to Jesus to forgive us our lapses and strengthen our resolve. And we thank God that He has promised to hear us as well as strengthen us. Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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