

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians

The Christian's Experience – Putting On: Sanctified Life (4:2-6)

A Sanctified Devotion (4:2-4)

2 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 that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; 4 that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.

In one of the prayers found in the great Puritan compilation, *The Valley of Vision*, is found this provocative statement, “*I wish not so much to do as to be, and I long to be like Jesus.*” The work of grace in the heart of the believer causes him not merely to “do” things outwardly, things that might make him appear to look like Jesus, but actually works on the heart, causing the believer to “be” more and more like Jesus, not only in action, but also in attitude. “*I wish not so much to do as to be, and I long to be like Jesus*” - is the heart’s cry of every believer longing after Christ. Is this your heart’s cry this morning?

While I would suspect that most, if not all of us would agree with such a heart’s cry; why is it that we can struggle so with pursuing all that is necessary to accomplish that end of being like Jesus? What is it that keeps us from striving with all our hearts after being what A.W. Tozer calls “rare Christians”? He wrote, “*There are rare Christians whose very presence incites others to be better Christians. I want to be that rare Christian.*” Beloved, do you want to be that “rare Christian” that wishes not so much to do as to be and longs to be like Jesus? And please, do not suspect or forget that being such a “rare Christian” is God’s will for your life. God desires the body of Christ to be full of such “rare Christians”.

I trust that the connection between being “rare Christians”; those who long to be like Jesus; and what we have been studying in Colossians chapter 3 and now chapter 4 is evident. This longing and desiring after Christ’s character and conduct is simply an expression of living out true Christianity, of being engaged in this process called sanctification; of becoming more and more like Jesus and less and less like the world; of becoming increasingly holy and decreasingly unholy; of making every effort by the grace of God to be uncommon rather than content with being common; of living in and by the power of the Spirit of God rather than giving in to the desires of your sinful flesh.

Beloved, as the chosen of God, as those who have been reconciled to God by the blood of Jesus Christ; we are to put off the old man and put on the new man who is “being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created Him...” (Colossians 3:10). It is God who gives us His Holy Spirit at the new birth for the primary purpose of equipping believers with the power to live a holy, sanctified, Christlike life. We read of this in 1 Thessalonians 4:7-8;

7 For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. 8 So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

And again we read of this purpose of Christlikeness in 1 John 3:24 and 4:13:

24 The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us...4:13 By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.

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This is God’s purpose for you: Christlikeness. This has been the theme of Colossians chapter 3 and now as we are seeing; it is also the theme of chapter 4. But what then of our text, verses 2-4; how do these fit into this context of the sanctified life; of the pursuit of Christlikeness; of being that rare Christian? Colossians 4:2-4 serve as a sort of bridge between two areas of life in which we are to practice Christlikeness. In Colossians 3:18-4:1, we examined Christlikeness in our personal lives and beginning with the statement in Colossians 4:5 we see this pursuit of Christlikeness in our public life. We read in Colossians 4:5:

Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.

Our text this morning, does it belong to the previous verses, 3:18-4:1, or does it belong with 4:5-6? Again, I see these verses as a bridge that links our pursuit of Christlikeness in both our personal and public lives. Colossians 4:2-4 will help us answer the questions, How does the wife properly submit to her husband; how does the husband fervently love his wife even as Christ loves the church; how does the child practice obedience toward his parents and how do the parents not discourage their children from the things of the Lord? How are workers to render their services to their employers as if they were serving the Lord Jesus Christ and how are employers to treat their workers knowing they are accountable to God? But moving to 4:5 we can also ask, “How are we to properly conduct ourselves toward strangers and make the most of every opportunity?” How are we to every do these things in a manner consistent and honoring to the Lord Jesus? Beloved, we must pray. Colossians 4:2 begins with the exhortation and command, “***Devote yourselves to prayer...***” Along with knowing our standing before God as we, “***Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts***” (3:15); and know the will of God as “***Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you***” (3:16); if we are to exemplify Christ in our relationships, both personal and public, we must be diligent in prayer. And if I can say it this way, to get you to think about it; we must be diligent in the habit of prayer. Colossians 4:2-4 has four exhortations we as believers are to consider with regard to this habit of prayer and we will spend the rest of our time looking at these.

I. Prayer is to be the greatest habit of our lives (4:2a)

Devote yourselves to prayer...

As we have already noted, this exhortation to “devote yourselves to prayer” is a bridge between how we can accomplish Christlikeness in both our private and public lives. Not only are we to avail ourselves to prayer in order to be holy in our relationships with those we know, but we are also to pray that our lives be such examples of Christ to, as verse 5 says, “outsiders” that they might come to Christ and become “insiders.” The great habit and resource of our lives to accomplish this is prayer.

Let me remind you that the apostle Paul was a believer in prayer. He knew that in prayer he was linked to the throne of God. He knew that in prayer he was doing business in the heavenlies. Beloved, of all your spiritual disciplines and habits, prayer is the most vital. Anyone can read a bible, believer and unbeliever, but only the believer, as he begins his reading time with prayer, asking the Lord to give him a fresh delight and understanding of the word, can expect to be illuminated and empowered with the truth. Prayer then is the most purely spiritual of all our disciplines; and yet the truth is this, it is often the most neglected of the exercises. More often than not, people would rather do anything else than spend time in deep, concerted and continual prayer. And here we read, “Devote yourselves to prayer.”

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Why do we struggle so with prayer? I am sure the reasons are many and varied from things like “I don’t know how to pray” to “I don’t know what to pray.” But I am concerned that one of the reasons why we don’t pray is that we have sold ourselves a bill of good; a pack of beautiful and tidy lies regarding prayer. We have abused the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:17 of “pray without ceasing” – making it mean that our lives should be nothing more than these brief conversations with God; that as I wake up in the morning I say, “Thank you, Lord for the day.” A bit later I pray for my breakfast. On the way to work or school I shoot up a prayer, “Lord, help this to be a good day.” As I walk into the boss’s office I pray, “Lord, help him have favor with my project.” Don’t get me wrong, these are good and necessary prayers. But this is not necessarily all Paul had in mind in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and it is certainly not what we find in Colossians 4:2.

The great habit of our lives is to prayer; “Devote yourselves to prayer.” This is a present, active, imperative verb in the Greek text. It reads, “Be continually and always devoted to prayer.” It can be rendered this way, “Be strong toward prayer.” I came across one suggested reading that gets to the heart of the issue, “Be persistent in the siege.” This call to prayer is a call to arms. It makes us think of being soldiers ready to engage in the overtaking of a city. Beloved, we too often think of prayer as guerrilla warfare; we are hiding up in the trees taking pop shots at the enemy here and there. While we may have some of that; the call here is to be engaged in a well-planned, well-executed battle for the glory of God and for the destruction of the strongholds of the enemy. Sometimes to pray this way is a battle in and of itself. Our prayers are to be antiphonies of praise to our God as well as attacks on the powers of hell itself.

You see, the problem with the guerrilla warfare approach to prayer, these small pop shots of praise to God and pokes at the enemy is that we never know when the enemy we are shooting at in prayer is actually a whole garrison that will overwhelm us when they shoot back. Let us not forget that when we pray, short and sweet or long and longing, we are up against the greatest army ever assembled against both God and man; Satan’s invisible powers and principalities. This is why we need the whole armor of God when we pray. In Ephesians 6:11-18 we begin with our need of God’s armor so that we may stand and end with what? We end with constantly, persistent prayer. We read:

11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, 15 and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE; 16 in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18 With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints...

In addition to needing the armor of God when we pray, we also need the Holy Spirit who aids us in our weakness in prayer. In Romans 8:26-27 we read:

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26 In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; 27 and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Beloved, we must be devoted to prayer, committed to prayer, engaged in prayer. We are to have a battle plan for our prayer life. We are to be strategic, purposeful, laboring and continuing in our prayer life. We must fight the enemies of drowsiness, distractions and discouragement when we pray, but pray we must if we are to increasingly possess and practice Christlike character and conduct in both our personal and public lives. Prayer is our greatest habit and our greatest resource to accomplish this end.

II. Prayer is to be the guarded habit of our lives (4:2b)

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it...

In addition to prayer being our greatest habit, it is also to be our most guarded habit. We read in our text, “*Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it...*” It does not take a theologian to answer the question as to why we would need to hear a command like “keeping alert” in prayer. The answer is simple, we tend not to keep ourselves alert in prayer, in either the thought or the practice of it. The best way to begin to excel in prayer is to identify and then correct your own weaknesses toward prayer. Most of us share a common problem when it comes to prayer; we simply don’t guard or protect ourselves from the distractions of the flesh and the wiles of the enemy. We find ourselves too tired, too busy, too frustrated, too weak, too proud, too distracted, too discouraged, and too disengaged with God in order to pray. And to this the Holy Spirit says, “keeping alert in [prayer]...”

The idea here is to be ever guarded and watchful. One of your most important duties as a believer; a spiritual exercise that comes before wives submit to their husbands, before husbands love their wives, before all that we read in verses 3:18-4:6 is prayer. “Watch and pray” said our Lord Jesus. Do you remember when He said that? In Matthew 26, while in the Garden of Gethsemane, just hours before His trial and crucifixion, asked His companions, Peter, James and John to be prayer champions for Him while He also prayed for what was about to come about. You know the story however, that Jesus came back to the three finding them what? They were asleep. And do you know what Jesus said to them before returning to His own prayer? We read of it in Matthew 26:41:

Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

In truth, Peter, James and John neither watched nor prayed. Beloved, dead and sleepy prayers from a mind wandering or benumbed neither reach heaven nor move God to hear. Our prayer is a messenger between God and us; but if the messenger loiters or falls asleep, he will neither reach his destination nor effect his business. We must guard our prayer lives from every distraction. If you pray little, then guard your time that you might pray more. If you are wondering what to pray for, make a list before you pray and be determined to pray through that list.

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Let us be guarded in this habit. Charles Spurgeon gave some great advice in this regard. *“For you will be drowsy if you watch not. How many men and Churches are asleep in prayer because they do not watch. For as soon as you begin to pray enemies will commence to attack. No one was ever in earnest without finding that the devil was in earnest too. Watch while you pray for propitious events which may help you in the answer to your prayer. We cannot make the wind blow, but we can spread the sails; and when the Spirit comes we may be ready. Watch for fresh arguments for prayer. Heaven’s gate is not to be stormed by one weapon, but by many. Watch for the answers. When you post a letter to your friend you watch for the answer.”*

III. Prayer is to be the grateful habit of our lives (4:2c)

Devote yourselves to prayer. . .with an attitude of thanksgiving

Our prayer life is to be the greatest and the most guarded habit in our lives; but we also read here at the end of verse 2 that prayer is to be the most grateful habit of our lives. We can read our text this way, **“Devote yourselves to prayer. . .with an attitude of thanksgiving.”**

When our Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross of Calvary, a most unique and dramatic event took place in the temple itself. We read of this in Matthew 27:50-51:

50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. 51 And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split.

Why was the veil of the temple torn in two from top to bottom? First, from top to bottom to reveal that this was done by the power of God. This curtain was so thick that no human hands or even a single sword could have ripped it apart from the bottom up much less from the top down. Second is the picture it presents, that Jesus blazed the way for us to come right into the very presence of God. What had been a place and privilege reserved only for the high priest was now to be the experience of every believer in Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews tells us in 4:14-16

14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. 16 Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

In prayer, every believer in Christ can do what only the high priest of Israel could do once a year and he could not do this boldly; we can come with confidence to the throne of grace, in the most holy place seeking mercy and grace for every need. And beloved, whereas the high priest of Israel could only do this once a year for a moment, we can come to Him anytime, stay as long as we like and speak to Him about anything we like. There are no time constraints in prayer. There are no limits on your minutes and you need no rollover minutes. The blood of Jesus that cleanses us from our sin is also the key that gives every believer access to the great throne room of the universe. There is not a person on this earth that can give you such time and understanding; no counselor, no psychologist, no pastor, no spouse, not even a parent; only God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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When we read that our commitment to prayer is to be done with an attitude of thanksgiving; I do not see this so much as a statement of expressing thanks for all things that the Lord brings by His good providence, although we are to do that, but rather this is being thankful for prayer; that as I come to God in prayer, I need to be reminded of the blessing and privilege I have that God cares and hears because Jesus opened the line of communication between me and my heavenly Father.

For those who struggle with prayer, why not begin with simply thanking God every day for the blessing that you can come before His throne, that you can pour out your heart before Him and bare your innermost soul. Spurgeon noted, “*We should not go to God as mournful beings who plead piteously with a hard master who loves not to give. When you give a penny to a beggar you like to see him smile, and you give at the next application because of previous gratitude. So go to God with a thankful mind.*”

IV. Prayer is to be the grandest habit of our lives (4:3-4)

...3 praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; 4 that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.

I wish we had more time to consider these next two verses, but here we see that prayer is the grandest habit of our lives. Notice the progression from verse 2 into verses 3-4. In verse 2 we have considerations of prayer concerning ourselves. Beginning in verse 3 and into verse 4 we have considerations concerning prayer for others. Here is a call to pray for others. We read in verses 3-4:

...3 praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; 4 that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.

Just how powerful is prayer? Beloved, the prayer of the saints is what God chose to open up prison doors. In Acts 12, Peter had been arrested for preaching Christ. And look at what we read in Acts 12:5, “***So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.***” And a short time afterward we read in Acts 12:7-11

7 And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." 9 And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. 11 When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

It is the power of prayer that opened a sinner's heart in Acts 16:14 or opens the apostle's mouth just as God wills in Ephesians 6:14. Consider that after the Lord Jesus Christ, the greatest of the messengers of God is Paul and he certainly was proclaiming the greatest of all messages.

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But Paul had spent two years in prison in Caesarea and now he was imprisoned in Rome, all for preaching Christ. But did Paul stop? No, for he saw opportunities to proclaim Christ in every circumstance. Because of his chains, Paul preached before kings; Felix, Festus and Agrippa and we believe that he even proclaimed the gospel before Nero, the Emperor of Rome. Paul was a spiritual father to many in the royal palace itself. By God’s good grace, Paul had visitors, men like Onesiphorus and Onesimus, the runaway slave of a member of the church at Colossae, Philemon. These men heard Paul’s message and carried it out.

And let us not forget Paul’s pen. What other’s saw as a dingy hold up to the progress of the gospel; Paul saw as a sort of corporate headquarters for the proclamation of the gospel. With ink and pen and voice and preaching, writing or speaking only to one or to a church, or even chained to a Roman centurion, Paul made Christ known. What a spiritual powerhouse! Truly a “rare Christian” whose very presence incited others to be better Christians. But how did he do it? Was it a God-thing, only to be experience by Paul? It was a God-thing, but we can all be rare Christians. The often missing ingredient is devoted prayer for one another to that end.

Paul was human and like us he needed the Holy Spirit to fill his heart and to loosen his tongue. And he pleaded for the prayers of the saints. Colossians 4:3-4 is his plea. He says in effect, “Come, join with me in this great opportunity I have in proclaiming the truth to those here in Caesar’s Palace.” Paul needed their prayers. This prayer of Paul says, “It is only as you pray that I will know what I need to say when I need to say it.” This is the mystery of prayer, that God works through the prayers of His people to accomplish His sovereign will. Beloved, when we pray for one another, not just for our sicknesses and weaknesses, but for one another to boldly proclaim the gospel, we are sharing in the ministries of one another. When I pray for June or for Jim to have the words to speak to Robert concerning Christ, I am participating in their ministry. And if I dare give up, if I stop devoting myself to such a prayer, it is akin to getting up and leaving during the sermon. It is like interrupting a prayer to say something frivolous; it is like leaving your job early before quitting time.

Beloved, the grandeur of prayer is that it is God’s gracious provision for us not only to help one another in our service to God, but also then to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven. How can we tolerate anything less of ourselves than such devotion to prayer. Let us truly “persist in the siege” and know that in prayer “we are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Let us be long not simply to do, but to be and to long to be like Christ; being those rare Christians, like Paul, who are devoted to prayer.

Soli Deo Gloria

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