

Ready, Get Set . . . Go!

Selected Scripture

Going Public, Part 3

I came across this picture in a magazine this past week – put up the picture. This photograph was included in a Christian magazine I subscribe to - and I think this picture is telling, isn't it? This stone slab, with the 10 commandments carved on it is literally being chiseled away from the front of the State Capitol in Oklahoma City. The argument of course is that it establishes religion and thus violates our constitution; it doesn't establish religion, but it does acknowledge the existence of God – and even further, the existence of a law giving God.

In our Sunday evening series *Introducing God*, we're going to begin talking not only about the relationship between the attributes of God and communication of the believer to a world that doesn't really know anything God. And we're going to talk about what to expect. I'll say more about that picture tonight.

As we watch our culture erase any sense of connection to our Judeo Christian history; as our country attempts to remove any sense of a positive relationship with God and His word, the Christian has greater opportunity than ever.

In fact, over the past several weeks we've been addressing the covenant we're making with each other as members of this local church as it relates to our community at large.

What sort of responsibility do we actually have to our community at large – in a world which is rapidly becoming, not a post-Christian, but a pre-Christian world?

So far we've highlighted several promises.

- To pursue a good reputation in every aspect of life

- To bless the community through personal labor, talent, investment and skill, reflecting and glorifying the diligence, creativity and excellence of God's character
- To pray for political leaders and all who are in authority over us; demonstrating humility and concern for their well-being as we respect the guidelines of just law.
- To pay taxes and every debt in a timely manner; fulfilling verbal, legal and financial commitments

Now I want to move to the next promise we are making as believers and as members of Christ's church – effectively promising, in regards to our community at large,

To maximize opportunities to authenticate and communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ

For those of you raising children – or chasing grandchildren – you know what it's like for someone to live at full throttle. Maybe your children like ours growing up, have only two gears: wide open and sound asleep. Parenting is often nothing more than a high speed chase.

I've found myself now with a 2 year old grandson repeating many of the games I played with my own kids. And so much of it is where he's running, hiding, chasing . . . he's running . . . I'm watching. And much of it includes me saying, "Ready . . . get set . . . go!" Let the games begin. "Ready . . . get set . . . go!" are words that ought to apply to the attitude of the church as much as they do for kids who are ready to run.

This isn't the time to slow down and count ceiling tiles.

The evangelization of the world is not waiting on a clearer message – it is waiting on committed messengers. I can't think of a better paragraph in scripture that summarizes all the elements involved in keeping this particular promise than a paragraph out of Paul's letter to the Colossians. **Turn to Colossians and chapter 4.**

Let's camp out here in this session . . . with just the first few verses in this chapter. And what I want to do is show you what we could call 6 action points that are necessary for the church – and the individual Christian – to maximize opportunities to authenticate and communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ.

1. First, pray faithfully

Notice chapter 4 and verse 2 – just the first phrase – **Devote yourselves to prayer**

Now Paul is eventually going to get around on how to seize the opportunities and walk through open doors and deliver the gospel to the world – but he begins where we must begin – prayer.

To leap over this step is to stumble at every other step. One author, now with the Lord, put it this way: prayer prepares. It is the beginning and the ending of all effective Christian service; it is not an interlude; it is not an emergency measure only for a crisis; it is not a luxury only a few can employ – it is every Christian's devotion.ⁱ

Which is why Paul here tells the believer here in Colosse that before he does anything publically, he needs to be devoted to something privately.

The word “devoted” means *to be busy* about.ⁱⁱ

And what an insight that provides: it's possible for us to busy about everything else, but prayer.

I want you to know that I personally believe – and I have this sense of anticipation – that this year is going to be one of our most fruitful years at Colonial;

- a year where we reach further, globally;
- where we disciple and strengthen more, internally;
- where we mobilize more of our fellowship, intentionally;
- where we spread the gospel with even greater passion, evangelistically.

I invite you to join me – begin your day with prayer – end your day with it – and interrupt your day often with prayer.

The Apostle Paul considered it paramount to everything else.

Sometime ago I came across R. A. Torrey's 10 reasons to pray: Torrey was a former associate of D. L. Moody and also one of the former pastors of Moody Church.

Don't try to write these down – they'll be at Colonial.org next week in full and you can print it out for free. Just listen to his, 10 reasons why we must pray:

- 1) Because prayer is God's way for us to obtain what we need
- 2) Because the apostles considered prayer a priority
- 3) Because prayer had a prominent place in the earthly life of Christ
- 4) Because prayer is the present ministry of our Lord, since he is now interceding for us
- 5) Because prayer is the means to receive mercy from God and help in time of need
- 6) Because prayer is the means of obtaining the fullness of God's joy
- 7) Because prayer with thanksgiving is the means of obtaining freedom from anxiety and peace which passes understanding
- 8) Because prayer is the means by which we are to keep watchful and be alert
- 9) Because prayer is used by God to promote our spiritual growth, bring power into our work, lead others to faith in Christ, and bring all other blessings to Christ's church.
- 10) Because there is a devil and prayer is the God-appointed means of resisting him.

After reading a list like that, the question is not, should we pray, but how can we afford not to!

I wonder if Reuben Torrey was especially passionate about prayer because of his own testimony. As an unbelieving student at Yale University, overwhelmed with shame and guilt, he decided to take his own life.

One night, in 1875, he stumbled to the wash basin in his dormitory room, looking for his razor to cut his wrists . . . he was so completely wracked with guilt over his rebellious life, having rejected the gospel of his mother and father.

He couldn't find his razor and suddenly became overwhelmed with conviction to pray. Unknown to him, his mother, at that very same hour was inwardly compelled to get on her knees and begin praying for the salvation of her son . . . miles away, at the same hour, R.A. Torrey knelt by his bed and gave his life to Jesus Christ.

He went on to become the president of Moody Bible Institute, a pastor of Moody Church and later the founding Dean of BIOLA in Los Angeles.

He would remain passionate about prayer his entire life. This is the first and foundational action point – pray faithfully.

2. Secondly, think gratefully

Paul writes in verse 2b. keeping alert in it with thanksgiving

Prayer isn't complaining about our world . . . it is interceding for our world. And while you're at it, **be alert** . . . in other words, it's easy to slip out of gratitude and develop a *bad* attitude. And if anybody had the right to be angry with the world and upset with God, it might be Paul, who is writing this letter while imprisoned. In fact, Colossians is called by New Testament historians, one of Paul's prison epistles. To put it in our language today, this is a letter from an inmate.

He could have had a list of things he *wasn't* thankful for; instead he exhorts the believer to stay on his toes – to think sharp – to not move away from the grace and sovereignty of God who assigns us to mountain top experiences and the valley of the shadow of death as well. Pray faithfully and think gratefully.

3. Thirdly, cultivate dependency

Verse 3. praying at the same time for us as well, that God may open to us a door for the word so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned.

Paul effectively says, "And while you're praying for me, pray that I'll respond properly whenever God does open a door."

I would agree with New Testament scholars that the phrase here, "the mystery of Christ" is being used by Paul as a synonym for the gospel.ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul wants to be prepared for whatever God has planned for the sake of the gospel of Christ.

And isn't it true that our greater need is in depending on God to provide whenever we discover what He has prepared?

And we're never more aware of our need for Him to provide for us than when we've just discovered what He's prepared for us – and so we cultivate this growing sense of godly dependency.

One author recorded a sweet story of dependency on God in one of his books where he told the story of what happened to a little boy named Gil.

When he was 8 years old, Gil joined the Cub Scouts. He had only been a member of short time and during one of his first meetings he was handed a sheet of instructions, a block of pine-wood and four little tires and told to take it all home and give it to his dad and together they were to make a race car for the upcoming annual race car derby.

That presented a challenge for Gil, simply because he didn't have a dad at home. That block of wood remained untouched for several weeks. Finally, his mother stepped in to help figure it all out and the project began.

Having no carpentry skills, she simply read and explained the directions to Gilbert and let him do all the work – which he was happy to do. They read the measurements – the rules of what could and could not be done and within a few days his block of pine wood turned into a "pinewood derby car." It was a little lopsided, but it looked okay to them. They painted it blue and named it "Blue Lightning."

Finally, the big night arrived. With Blue Lightning in his hand and excitement in his heart, he and his mom headed to the race.

Once there, it was obvious to Gil and his mother that his was the only car that had been made entirely by a Cub Scout. All the other cars had slick paint jobs and sleek body styles - all designed for speed. Some of the other boys laughed when they Gil's crude, lopsided blue car.

Gil was undeterred however and waited his turn. The race was a process of elimination. You kept racing as long as you were a winner. And Blue Lightning kept winning. In the final run it was Blue Lightning against the sleekest, fastest looking car Gilbert had seen that night. The fans that surrounded the race track had been packed into the stands and they were beginning to cheer for this kid with his lopsided blue car.

Just before the championship race began, Gil asked the Scout Master if he could have a moment to pray. The race stopped. With a wrinkled brow,

clutching his little derby car, Gil bowed his head for just a minute and prayed to his Heavenly Father.

Then he announced, "I'm ready now." The crowd all cheered with anticipation. And really, to the surprise of everyone, Gil's block of wood raced down that ramp and crossed the finish line a fraction of a second in front of the other car. The crowd erupted in approval.

The Scout Master, with microphone in hand, asked Gil, "Son, God heard your prayers . . . you prayed to be the winner, right?" To which he responded into the microphone, "Oh no sir; that wouldn't be fair. I asked God to help me not to cry when I lost."^{iv}

That's going to be one of the best prayers I've heard – and with the right perspective.

Not to win, but to respond well if you lose! A lot of Packer fans are learning to pray like that today.

I wonder how much of our praying is motivated by a desire to win in life, rather than to respond well in life. There's this same sense of dependency in Paul's prayer . . . in fact, if you look closely, Paul isn't praying that his chains fall off miraculously – or that he gets released through the turn of events and an order from some sympathetic judge.

He's actually assuming he's going to remain imprisoned – *verse 3, the latter part* – but he wants to pray that in whatever way God opens a door to witness, he'll be able to effectively walk through that open door, perhaps chains and all.

He's not really expecting life to get more comfortable – but he is showing us how to cultivate dependency.

Here's another action point: pray faithfully, think gratefully, cultivate dependency

4. Fourth, behave wisely

Paul writes in verse 5. Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders.

The word *outsiders* refers to those outside the body of Christ; those in the community without saving faith in Christ alone; those yet to be won through the gospel of Christ alone.

And here's the implicit warning behind the action point – the gospel of Christ is judged by the world not by what it reads in the Bible, but by what it sees in the believer.^v

To conduct yourself wisely means exactly what you probably think it means. It means tact and

common sense and respectability and self-control and with insight and sensibility and discretion.

There's a woman in our congregation today who is a believer and now a part of our fellowship because she watched her co-worker's life and finally asked her, "Listen, I've just gotta know – what is your source of joy?"

One of the men in our fellowship told me that he had a co-worker call him at home some time ago and ask him, "How do you become a Christian – I know you're one of them; and you've got something I don't have . . . what is it?"

Listen, our conduct in the midst of *outsiders* is the most compelling advertising campaign for Christianity there is on the planet.

I mean, think about these believers here in Colosse – they are in the minority; in fact, their numbers are so small compared to their city, I don't even think you can call them a minority – they're more like a focus group. They have no church building; they have no printed New Testament to show people; they have no gospel tracts to give people to read; they have no schools; they have no missions organization . . . they have no budget or paid staff. Now go reach your world! How?

Start by praying for open doors – depend entirely on the Holy Spirit in and through you – and conduct everything you do with integrity and tact and discretion and self-control and discernment and common sense and a grateful spirit – and the word is going to spread.

And then get ready . . . the next action point will follow:

5. Number five, maximize opportunity

Notice again verse 5 – the latter part, making the most of every opportunity

In your cross references or study Bible, you'll probably see a reference to the phrase, *redeeming the time*.

And that's because the original participle here means – rather woodenly – to buy at the market place; and the preposition carries the idea of *eagerly* buying.

This is the attitude at Walmart on Black Friday . . . the day I refuse to go shopping. People are eagerly buying, to put it mildly and I'm just afraid I'll pick up something 200 other people want who are bigger than I am.

But that's almost a good illustration of Paul's attitude toward buying up the time and not wanting an opportunity for the gospel to slip through your hands.

There is a sense of urgency. Now is the time and we don't want to miss it! I remember being in the car many years ago with the president of an amazingly fruitful mission agency – and personal life; he'd just flown in to preach at Colonial and he said to me with great passion as we were driving here to church, "I just don't want to miss anything today!" He said to me, "I pray that every day. Lord, please don't let me miss anything for You!"

This is the attitude of Paul – in *1 Corinthians 16:9*, Paul uses this image of an open door as he writes, *For a wide door for effective service has opened to me.*

He writes later to this same church in Corinth, *Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord . . . I went on to Macedonia (2 Corinthians 2:12-13).*

Paul's the kind of man who listened for the sound of proverbial doors opening – always on the lookout; always alert in prayer and thanksgiving and dependency so that when the door opened, there he was, Ready, Get Set, Go . . . and by the way, just try and keep up!

Look, if it was urgent 1900 years ago in Colosse, can you imagine how urgent it is today in Cary and this surrounding region of cities and towns?

If we're really going to keep this promise as a church to our community and ultimately to Christ – to take the gospel to our world, then we need to actually pray for God to give us some kind of opportunity for the gospel, right?

We need to be willing, with an eagerness to capitalize on every opportunity for the gospel, right? One of the men in our church told me some time ago that he had literally begun asking the Lord for some kind of opportunity to deliver the gospel to someone . . . he worked in IT and really didn't come in contact with a lot of people in conversation – people usually left their desk when he arrived to work on their computer.

He didn't have a lot of experience in witnessing because he was a relatively new believer, but he had that genuine desire and so he just began asking the Lord to open the door and if the Lord did, he'd go through it and speak about Christ.

A couple of days later, one of the sales people was working near him while he worked on his

computer. He was talking to a customer, trying to interest him in buying and offering him a free product if he'd buy in. It was a really strong incentive to buy.

But the customer didn't buy into it and left. The salesman was really put off by it and turned to him and said, "Can you believe that someone would turn down a free gift?"

This believer responded, "Well . . . people actually do that every day". "They do?"

He told me with great delight that he was able to walk through that door and begin to introduce this man to the gospel of Christ.

Maximize every opportunity – and while you're at it – Paul adds one more action point:

6. Communicate Graciously

verse 6. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person.

The context would indicate that these people to whom we respond are outside the church.

How do you talk to people outside the church? It's interesting to note that our English ancestors had an idea. The Middle English word for sanctuary was fane, taken from the Latin word, fanum. In the middle ages a church or a cathedral was called a Fane. Later on the prefix, pro, was added to create the word profane, which literally meant, out in front of the cathedral, or church. Still later, somewhat tongue in cheek, the word profane came to represent language that belonged outside the church and not inside the church. And that language became known as profanity.

I mean, you'd never talk that way in church, but you certainly can talk that way when you leave. Our speech is not only an identification of our nationality and our locality, but it also reveals our spirituality.^{vi}

Listen, there is simply no excuse for a dirty mouth; an angry mouth; a slanderous mouth, an unkind mouth.

You want to make a difference in your world? Paul writes – *let your speech always be with grace.* It might be tempting to give the meaning of grace here some sort of theological meaning and just tell people "Well, God bless you . . . I know His grace is sufficient." And then hide from the implications of what Paul's driving at.

Give the added expression of seasoning our speech with salt, Paul isn't speaking so much theologically as he is practically.

One New Testament author wrote, more than likely, the idea here in Paul's mind is the idea of beauty and winsomeness.^{vii}

And maybe you'd be tempted to think that people inside the church are just going to know better, right? Evidently not! One of the major problems in the church at *Corinth* was a problem with their angry, divisive speech.

Listen to the great, fearless Apostle Paul write to them some time ahead of his next visit to their city. He writes, "For I am afraid that when I come . . . there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders . . . and disturbances." Really? *Tempers, disturbances* . . . is he writing to hockey players? That would be more fitting!

No, Paul is writing that to the church (*2 Corinthians 12:20*).

Paul says to the local church in Colosse – speak to your world with the winsomeness of grace . . . then he adds this phrase in *verse 5* – ***let your speech be seasoned as it were with salt.***

I like what one author wrote when he put it this way; those who are the salt of the earth should have some seasoning to their language.^{viii}

As I've mentioned before, salt was valuable in the ancient world – often used as currency. An article I've had on file for years and only found it recently – I had clipped from the Smithsonian Magazine on the ancient uses of salt, recorded that:

- Marco Polo in his travels during the 13th century discovered that Tibetans had compressed salt cakes stamped with the imperial seal of the Kublai Khan used as money.
- Civilizations grew up around salt mines; in fact, the first step of Rome toward building their empire came out of the first Roman colony built at the salt marshes at Ostia;
- The first Roman road created was called the Via Salaria (The Salt Road) – and it became the first of Rome's renowned highways.
- The Roman empire imported salt from France and North Africa and Asia Minor. Officials were appointed to tax and monitor the trade.
- Roman soldiers were often paid in salt; for centuries salt was traded for gold.

- Someone or something 'not worth its salt' came out of the ancient practice of bartering and buying with salt.
- Go back even farther and salt played a role in Israel's sacrificial system as God ordered salt to accompany it's the offerings (Leviticus 2:13) – as a symbol of purity and also covenant faithfulness.
- In fact, Jewish temples would build indoor salt chambers; the Biblical covenant of salt was a binding covenant (2 Chronicles 13:5).
- Even Arabs who made peace treaties and declared their loyal friendship would say, "There is now salt between us".

Of course, numerous legends and superstitions arose from this valuable commodity that seasoned and purified and preserved. Swiss grooms would put bread in one pocket and salt in the other to signify a long and prosperous marriage, while German brides would sprinkle salt in one of their shoes.

And spilling salt of course became a symbol of something bad that would happen in the near future because of wasting such a precious commodity.

That particular superstition would be immortalized in Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Lord with His disciples at The Last Supper, where, if you look closely – and I did this week to make sure it wasn't an urban legend – you will notice that Judas Iscariot has knocked over the salt shaker (bad luck for him)^{ix}

Legends and superstitions aside . . . for Paul, the metaphor was simple enough. Salt was valuable – it symbolized purity – it seasoned food and, by the way, it also created thirst.

In other words, speak in such a way that your vocabulary is seasoned properly; don't waste your words; don't throw them around; don't dirty them; and most importantly – in the context of this challenge to reach our world for Christ, use your words to create thirst.

Talk to people out there in such a way that God might use your words to create thirst for Jesus Christ, who is the living water of life (*John 4:14*).

Let's maximize every opportunity to authenticate and communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ.

How? By:

- Praying faithfully
- Thinking gratefully

- Cultivating dependency
- Behaving wisely
- Maximizing opportunity
- Communicating graciously
- One more note on that last point. There's a prayer I read from a book I can't remember . . . but I wrote it down and it goes like this:
Lord, fill my mouth with worthwhile stuff.
Then nudge me, when I've said enough.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/17/2016 by Stephen Davey
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ⁱ Adapted from Roy L. Laurin, Colossians: Where Life is Established (Kregel, 1988), p. 172

ⁱⁱ Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 583

ⁱⁱⁱ Everett F. Harrison, Colossians: Christ All-Sufficient (Moody Press, 1971), p. 195

^{iv} Adapted from Steve May, The Story File (Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), p. 243

^v Adapted from Laurin, p. 176

^{vi} Laurin, p. 180

^{vii} Harrison, p. 107

^{viii} Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, General Editors; The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 12 (Zondervan, 2006), p. 348

^{ix} Above comments on salt adapted from Steve Kemper, *Salt; We Can't Live Without it*, (*Smithsonian* magazine, January 1999), pages 70-78.