

I want to begin with a story from Tony Campolo where he talks about a time he was asked to speak at a Christian college. He remembered that before the service, eight men had him kneel so they could place their hands on his head and pray. He was glad to have prayer, but each of them prayed a long time, and the longer they prayed the more they pushed on his head.

Interestingly, one of the men didn't even pray for Tony, he prayed for a neighbor. He said, "Dear Lord, you know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives in that silver trailer down the road a mile. You know the trailer, Lord – just down the road on the right-hand side." Tony recalls that he wanted to interrupt and tell the man that God already knew where the guy lived and didn't need directions, but he remained silent and just tried to keep his head upright. The prayer went on: "Lord, Charlie told me this morning he's going to leave his wife and three kids. Step in and do something, God. Bring that family back together."

*The prayer time ended, Tony preached, and things went well. After the service, as Tony was headed home, he saw a hitchhiker and he felt strongly compelled to pick him up. Tony, said, "We drove a few minutes in silence and then I said: "Hi, my name's Tony Campolo. **What's yours?**" He said, "My name is Charlie Stoltzfus."*

*Tony got off the turnpike at the next exit and headed back. After a few minutes Charlie said, "**Hey mister, where are you taking me?**" to which Tony replied, "I'm taking you home." Charlie narrowed his eyes and asked, "**Why?**" And Tony answered, "**Because you just left your wife and three kids, right?**" Charlie plastered himself against the car door – he was shocked, for he had never seen Tony before. Then Tony really freaked him out as he drove right up to the silver trailer. When Tony pulled up, Charlie's eyes almost bulged as he asked, "**How did you know that I lived here?**" Tony said "God told me" – and in an indirect way He did.*

When Charlie opened the trailer door, his wife yelled, "You're back! You're back!" Charlie whispered in her ear and the more he whispered, the bigger her eyes got. Then Tony said with real authority, "The two of you sit down. I'm going to talk and you two are going to listen." That afternoon Tony led those two people to Jesus Christ."

That's a great story about conversations – conversations in two dimensions – the vertical and the horizontal. Conversations with God in the form of prayer – that's the vertical, and conversations with those who need to hear about God – that's the horizontal. Both dimensions represent crucial lines of communication, and in the

last portion of this letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul explains how we are to speak to God about people and how we are to speak to people about God.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Colossians 4** beginning with **verse 2** where Paul says,

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.

If you spend any time in the New Testament looking at the life of Paul, you will clearly see that prayer was critical to him, and here he tells these young Colossian believers, and us as well, that we are to **devote** ourselves to prayer – we are to devote ourselves to having heart-felt conversations with God.

That word *devote* or *continue* depending on your Bible translation – in the Greek means *to attend to constantly* and it speaks of one's steadfast dedication to someone or to something. If it helps, think of a husband who is devoted to his wife or a wife who is devoted to her husband. The idea is that one dedicates himself or herself to the other person. It implies there is a strong attachment, an allegiance, an affection for the other, and in the case of **prayer** – there is to be a steadfast dedication to it because prayer is an expression of our intimacy and total dependency upon God.

Jesus told us that when it comes to prayer, we are to be mindful of who we're talking to. We are talking to the Lord God Almighty – He is the God Most High – He is the Sovereign over all, and yet, He has actually invited you and me to call Him "*Father*" which is a very intimate way to imagine and approach God. And when it comes to our dependency, we are a people of great need, and Jesus said our Father already knows what we need before we bring a need to Him. We are never informing Him of anything when we pray – instead it would seem that our heavenly Father just wants to hear our voice – a voice that is intimately and dependently directed to Him.

So, when it comes to prayer, Paul might say it's the most important conversation we could have because God knows us best and He loves us most. No matter what, we need to devote ourselves to prayer – we need to "*keep at it*" – we need to "*hang in there*" and then he explains that in our prayer, we are to keep **alert**.

Now, what does he mean by that? Some commentators have suggested that Paul is saying don't fall asleep when you pray. I have done that, and maybe you have too – I know the disciples fell asleep in the garden when they were praying, but I'm not sure if that's what Paul is talking about here. Instead, I think Paul is telling believers to be *mindful* of God's constant presence, to be *watchful* of His work around us – for God is always at work around us, and to be *ready* to pray anytime, anywhere, for anyone.

In the midst of a phone call – when moved, we are praying, in the grocery store we are praying, while driving on the highway we are praying and probably confessing as well, at work we are praying, in the home we are praying, in this church we are praying – in a nutshell, we are to be alert – constantly on the lookout – and when so moved, even with our eyes wide open, we are to be praying for people.

Paul also says that our prayers should be given with an **attitude of thanksgiving**. I going to tell you that I wrestled with this because I know there are some who are grieving over a loss. I know there are some who are living in loveless relationships. I know there are some who are fighting serious diseases. I know there are some who are enduring chronic pain. I know these things about you – and in all honesty, the thought of praying with an attitude of gratitude and thanksgiving might be the farthest thought from your minds, and so the last thing I want to do is to toss out some weak explanation about thanksgiving that really doesn't help.

I know that in Paul's first letter to the **Thessalonians**, he said that *in* everything we are to give thanks – and everything means everything – but just for clarification, Paul did not say give thanks *for* everything because some things are horrible and evil and it would be unreasonable to give thanks *for* these things. Instead, Paul said *in* everything – not *for* everything – but *in* everything give thanks – *in* the midst of your situation give thanks to God. **How can we do that? How is that even possible?** Well, there are probably several really good answers to those questions – and surely the work of the Holy Spirit in one's life is crucial here, but I think our thankfulness tends to boil down to a matter faith and a matter of perspective.

I think we can be thankful when we pray because we have faith that God is doing what is best even though it may not seem like it or feel like it at times. We can be thankful when we pray because we believe that God is for us – not against us, and ultimately, He is working for our good. When we pray, we can be thankful because we trust that God has a purpose and a plan, and He is doing something in us and through us.

I learned this the hard way. For years, Trish suffered from terrible face pain – a pain that feels like a dentist is drilling your teeth without an anesthetic, and to some degree this pain still lingers with her. At its worst, for eight long excruciating years, Trish suffered greatly and all I could do as her husband was watch and pray – and at times, watching and praying were almost unbearable.

I was scrambling for answers – desperately searching for a remedy – looking for anything that I thought could help her. I asked God to take away her pain and give it to me if that would work. I frequently asked God why. Why her? Why doesn't He take this away? Many times, being honest, I was angry with God. How can God turn this into something good? How can this be helpful to Trish? How can this be helpful to anyone?

One Sunday morning, at another church, I was helping as a greeter and a lady I had never met walked in. I engaged her in a conversation and learned she had been attending a Mormon church but wanted to give us Baptists a try. As we continued to talk, I asked her to tell me a little more about herself. She mentioned she suffered from great pain – a pain I would not understand – a pain that no one seemed to understand. She felt all alone. I asked her to tell me what was going on, and as she explained, I knew right off the bat that it was the same condition that Trish had, and I connected them together. I believe she still attends that Baptist church and her son serves on the worship team.

You see, God knew what He was doing all along and I should have trusted Him. God had a purpose and a plan, and unbeknownst to me, He was going to work through Trish to make a connection with a desperate woman in pain who did not know God and thought she was all alone.

We can be thankful because God is faithful and we can trust Him, and I also believe we can be thankful with a change of perspective.

When asked to list what he was thankful for, one little boy wrote, “My glasses.” “That’s good,” said the teacher, “they help you to see better.” “No,” responded the boy, “I’m thankful for my glasses because they keep the other boys from hitting me and the girls from kissing me.”

With a different of perspective, this little guy had an attitude of thankfulness. As the old hymn goes: “*count your blessings – name them one by one*” but so often that’s not what we’re doing, **is it?** Instead of *counting* our blessings and *clinging* to God’s promises, we are *consumed* with our problems.

Listen, I know that life can be hard – in fact, Jesus said we would experience trouble in this life – it’s a forgone conclusion for all of us, but be that may, for those who know Jesus Christ, we have a heavenly Father who loves us, a Savior who died for us, a heavenly home prepared for us, an inheritance reserved for us, and everlasting life secured for us. And to really put this in perspective – we don’t deserve any of it. Everything we have or have ever had – has been a gracious gift. We did not earn it, we were not entitled to it, and we had to right to it.

We are unworthy, and yet God is faithful – we can trust Him, and He has graciously given us and promised us so much, and it’s with that understanding I think we can pray with an attitude of thanksgiving.

Okay, let’s move on to **verse 3** which I find pretty interesting. Paul asks the Colossian believers to pray for him and his coworkers, specifically that God would open the **door for the Word**. I find this interesting because Paul says, *“Pray for us – not that we’ll get out of here, but that the Word will go forth from here.”* Remember, Paul is confined in Rome as he writes this – and he will be in confinement for two years, but in his difficult situation, his prayer was for an open door to share the **mystery of Christ** – to share the Gospel with people – the very thing that Paul is in confinement for in the first place – sharing the Gospel. And just so you know, Paul would write four letters while in confinement – **Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon**.

Secondly, in **verse 4**, Paul asks for prayer for himself that he makes the Word of God – the truth of God **clear** to people. He wants to bring clarity to it, and if you pray for me as your pastor and if you pray for our teachers, that’s the kind of prayer we need. That we make the Word of God clear to people.

So, this is how we talk to God about people. Now, Paul shifts to talking to people about God. Look at what he says beginning with **verse 5**.

⁵ Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. ⁶ Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.

Now, we’re in the horizontal dimension – having normal conversations with people – conversations that lead to a discussion about God, and Paul says the first thing that matters is our **conduct**. The first thing that speaks to **outsiders** – referring to the lost, is our walk, our manner of life, our lifestyle, our behavior. Before we open our mouths, the lost take note of our conduct. They watch what

we do. They watch how we treat our spouses. They watch us with our children. They watch us at our places of work. They watch us under pressure. They watch us when trouble comes.

So, here Paul says, if you want to speak to the lost, then first consider your conduct because your conduct can nullify your conversation. **Can you really tell someone else how they are to live when you aren't living that way? Why would anyone listen to you?**

We bring our family to church on Sunday – we're acting all Christ-like – we're walking around like Jesus is our best bud, but then during the week it's complaining and cussing and losing our temper, and making life miserable for everyone around us. That doesn't make any sense, **does it?**

Paul is saying, first let your life speak before your mouth does. Your walk comes before your talk. The lost are watching you so be careful that you don't do anything that would make it difficult to share the Gospel. Yes, they may hassle you and make fun of you because you are different, but when all hell breaks loose in their lives – don't be surprised if you're the first one they call.

Paul continues and he tells us to make the most of our **opportunities** when it comes to having conversations with people about God. We need to recognize the opportunities that are placed before us and we need to take advantage of them. Listen, when someone asks you a biblical question – a spiritual question, that is a clue that God is at work in their lives – He's doing something, and they are put in front of you for a reason, so take advantage of it.

Now, here's another opportunity we often miss. Just like that lady who told me about her pain, I am of the opinion that, in general, people have no problem when it comes to telling others about their problems, and when they do, that is an open-door invitation to get involved – to share, and at the very least, to offer to pray for them.

And when we open our mouths, look at **verse 6 – let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt.**

That's a little command with a big challenge. Our conversations are to be controlled by **grace** – our words are to *build up* rather than to *tear down*, or we could just as well say that we are to talk to others better than they deserve – always with grace, because God is gracious to us.

In our normal conversations, speaking with grace is one way we pay God's grace forward to others, and this is also a way we can tell if we are on the right track in our walk with God. As we have already learned, what comes out of the mouth finds its source from the heart, and if our words are routinely rude and critical and arrogant and abrasive, if we are swearing and lying and gossiping, then we need to really examine our hearts.

When we walk in grace – when God's grace is a spiritual reality to us, then grace is what comes out of our mouths, even though the truth might be difficult to hear. In sharing the Gospel, I want to explain to a lost person that they are a sinner in desperate need of a Savior – I want to do that, and I don't expect them to like that, but I can share that truth with grace.

Our words are to be gracious as though **seasoned with salt** – and let me say that some of you might have that backwards – your words are salty seasoned with a little bit of grace. Just wanted to point that out.

Anyway, what does Paul mean by seasoned with salt? Well, in his day, salt was used for several things. It could be applied to a wound to help in the healing process. It could be used as a preservative so things wouldn't spoil, or like today, it was used to make food taste better. So, in that context, our conversations should be wholesome and pleasant and tasteful. Now, John MacArthur said something I had never heard before, and he explained that in the context of conversations, the Greeks had another idea. Salt was used as a figure of speech to describe one's *wit*, and one's *wit* was the ability to say the right thing, in the right way, at just the right time. I think that's what Paul is telling us here.

Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.

I'm really glad Paul brought up that last part, because some might read this and think we need to have all the answers to all the questions asked of us, but fortunately, that's not what Paul is saying. His point is – and this may be hard, but here it is anyway – in our conversations, we need to listen, we need to be sensitive, and we need to interact with people as individuals so as to know how to respond to them. That's what he is saying to people who like to hear themselves talk.

So, that's a good place to stop, but before we do, I want to say something really quickly. If you are walking with Christ, He absolutely is going to lead you the lost, **so what are you going to do? What are you going to say?**

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