

Praying For Gospel Opportunities

Colossians 4:2–4¹

Introduction

Paul wrote his letter to the church in Colosse while he was imprisoned for preaching the gospel (Col. 4:3). Over the course of his letter he addresses the theology of why believers grow and change and then moves to specific commands that believers must follow. The immediate context of our text for tonight is vv. 2–6 of Colossians 4. In those verses Paul addresses two types of conversation: vertical and horizontal. Vertical conversation happens between the believer and God (Col. 4:2–4); horizontal conversation happens between other human beings—saved and unsaved alike (Col. 4:5–6). The section we will look at is vv. 2–4 which covers vertical conversation (i.e. prayer). I believe that the Lord is teaching in this text that you must pray with persistent and attentive thankfulness as you request that God would give clear gospel opportunities both for yourself and other believers.

Colossians 4:2–4 ² Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; ³ meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, ⁴ that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.

Paul lays out general & specific prayer principles that you should always remember as you spend time in prayer.

Preview Outline:

- 1. General: The Character of Your Prayer (v. 2)**
 - A. Prayer should be with Persistence — *continue earnestly*
 - B. Prayer should be with Alertness — *being vigilant in it*
 - C. Prayer should be with Gratitude — *with thanksgiving*
- 2. Specific: The Content of Your Prayer (vv. 3–4)**
 - A. Pray for Gospel Opportunities
 - B. Pray for Gospel Boldness

Notice with me, first of all, the general principles of prayer, namely—

1. General: The Character of Your Prayer (v. 2)

Paul transitions from his previous section to address the Christian obligation of prayer. He does not define it—he simply mentions it as though every believer already knows what prayer is. Of course, those who have followed the ministry of Jesus know what prayer is because He taught His disciples how to pray:

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations taken from the New King James Version.

Matthew 6:9–13 ⁹ In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as *it is* in heaven. ¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread. ¹² And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. ¹³ And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Notice how Jesus answers these questions about prayer:

- To whom are we to pray? *Our Father in heaven.*
- How are we to pray? *With praise, submission, and petitions.*

So what is prayer? *Prayer is submissive conversation with a sovereign God, expressing your praise, repentance, and requests.* Two comments on that definition: (1) I say *submissive* because we are not on equal terms with God—He is the sovereign and we are not; and (2) I say *conversation* because that is, in fact, what believers do when they pray.

Paul, then, describes three general characteristics of prayer that should be true of you when you pray.

A. Prayer should be with Persistence — *Continue earnestly*

The first principle of prayer is *persistence* (or *consistence*). Paul urges the church in Colosse to “continue earnestly” in prayer. What is translated here in the NKJV as two words is, in fact, one word (Gr. *προσκαρτερεῖτε*). The idea imbedded in this word is (as one lexicon put it) to “persist obstinately in.”² This same word is used to describe how the early New Testament church “continued steadfastly” in the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42). When you continually spend time in prayer, the natural result will be a change in you.

Paul’s teaching on persistent prayer was not a new concept in the New Testament. Jesus spoke of persistence in prayer when he taught the parable of the women and the unjust judge:

Luke 18:1–8 Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, ² saying: “There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. ³ Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, ‘Get justice for me from my adversary.’ ⁴ And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, ‘Though I do not fear God nor regard man, ⁵ yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.’” ⁶ Then the Lord said, “Hear what the unjust judge said. ⁷ And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? ⁸ I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?”

The point of this parable is that if an unjust ruler will eventually do what is right for improper motives (i.e. “because she weary’s me” instead of “I must enact my official and proper duties as ruler”), how much more will a perfect God who loves His elect continue to listen and in His timing answer their prayers?

Illustration: There are many illustrations in Scripture of people who spent time in prayer. James describes that Elijah earnestly prayed to the Lord:

James 5:17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months.

Of course we know how Daniel spend time in prayer before the Lord in spite of the fact that it was illegal (Dan. 6:1ff). Later on in the book, Daniel records his prayer of praise, repentance, and

² Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1515.

request. In his prayer in Daniel 9, he begs the Lord to listen to his prayer “in accordance with your righteous acts” (NASB). Commenting on this very verse, Pastor Gordon Dickson rightly observes that “we can only appeal to our Redeemer on the basis of His righteous and just actions.”³

Jesus spent extended time in prayer on many occasions (e.g. Matt. 14:23; Mark 6:46; Luke 6:12; 5:16; 9:18, 28).

The New Testament church spent time in prayer:

Acts 1:12–14 ¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey. ¹³ And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James *the son* of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas *the son* of James. ¹⁴ These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

Paul exhorted the church in Rome about continuing in prayer:

Romans 12:10–12 ¹⁰ *Be* kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; ¹¹ not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹² rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer;

He echoed this idea in another letter to the church in Thessalonica when he told them to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17) and in the letter to the church in Ephesus “praying always” (Eph. 6:19). He was not saying that people should constantly walk around mumbling to themselves; instead, he is urging believers to have a moment my moment recognition of their heavenly connection and destination, and thus must remain in a mindset of prayerfulness.⁴

Application: Scripture records over and over again that followers of God spent time in prayer. Scripture does not say that every believer must get up at 4:30am every morning and spend 2.5 hours a day wearing holes in the knees of their pants. Instead, every believer ought to be spending their days bringing their requests to the Lord. Some people spend more time on their social media account(s) and entertainment than they do with their God. Oh that Christians would return to the One to Whom they owe their spiritual life and spend consistent time in prayer to Him!

B. Prayer should be with Alertness — *being vigilant in it*

This phrase is interesting. What we can say with definiteness is that believers should pray with an alertness. However, the exact meaning behind this phrase is not entirely clear. There are several possibilities:

³ Gordon Dickson, *Seasons of Prevailing Prayer: A Study from the Book of Daniel*, (Calvary Baptist Church: 2017), 27. I encourage you to read through this excellent treatment of Daniel 9. You can access a free downloadable pdf copy of this booklet here: <https://www.cbcbfindlay.org/seasons-of-prevailing-prayer/>

⁴ John MacArthur says essentially the same thing when he writes “praying at all times is not necessarily limited to constant vocalizing of prayers to God. Rather, it refers to a God consciousness that relates every experience in life to Him” (“Colossians and Philemon” in *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* series [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 179).

1. *It could refer to simply being awake while we pray.* Remember, the disciples struggled with this while Jesus prayed in the Garden on the eve of His passion (Matt. 26:40–45). Matthew uses the same word as Paul does (Gr. γρηγορέω).⁵
2. *It could refer to being alert to the needs about which believers should pray.* There is a sense in which this could be true. As MacArthur notes “we will never persistently pray for something we are not concerned about. And to be concerned, we must be alert to specific needs.”⁶
3. *It could refer to being alert for the coming of Jesus Christ.* This is, of course, an emphasis within the New Testament (e.g. Matt. 24:42–43; Matt. 25:13; Mark 13:33; 14:37–38; 1 Thess. 5:6).

Whatever Paul’s exact point may be is not entirely clear. However, I am inclined to believe that it is a combination of all three. Paul quite possibly was intentionally vague so as to cover every area in which believers are to be alert (or, to borrow the metaphor, it could be a Holy Spirit inspired “killing three birds with one stone” type of usage).

C. Prayer should be with Gratitude — *with thanksgiving*

This final characteristic of prayer is consistent with the rest of Paul’s letters. Thankfulness is a characteristic of true believers who recognize the immense weight of sin from which they have been rescued. When we recognize that we are forgiven to much, our prayers become saturated with thankfulness to the One who has showered us with undeserved blessings.

The theme of thankfulness fills the pages of Scripture. Consider these brief examples from Paul’s writings:

Ephesians 5:1–4 Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. ² And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. ³ But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; ⁴ neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.

1 Timothy 2:1–3 Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, *and* giving of thanks be made for all men, ² for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. ³ For this *is* good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Philippians 4:6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;

Even in the book of Colossians Paul weaves the topic of thankfulness (Col. 1:12; 2:7; 3:15–17). Someone who is unthankful is someone who spends little time in prayer.

After describing three general characteristics of prayer, Paul lays out his own personal prayer request, modeling for us—

2. Specific: The Content of Your Prayer (vv. 3–4)

⁵ Peter uses this same word (Gr. γρηγορέω) in his first letter to exhort believers to watch out for the Devil who walks around like a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8)

⁶ MacArthur, “Colossians and Philemon,” 182.

The prayer requests in the American church are not surprisingly related in some way to health or wealth. Sit in a typical prayer meeting and you will hear requests concerning various health needs in the congregation (and of course, believers should be in prayer for those things!). It is a rare moment to hear someone ask for prayer that he or she would grow in cultivating gentleness, or kindness, or humility. Yet I think the examples in the New Testament of prayer requests frequently have a spiritual emphasis. For example, earlier in this letter to the church in Colosse Paul wrote:

Colossians 1:9–14 ⁹For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; ¹⁰that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; ¹²giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed *us* into the kingdom of the Son of His love, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

I think Paul's prayer requests in Colossians are instructive for us today.

A. Pray for Gospel Opportunities

Paul asked the church in v. 3 to “[pray] at the same time for us as well” (NASB). He desired that the church in Colosse pray for him and his associates (“pray for *us*”). This is a specific request. The principle Scripture teaches here is this: as we pray with persistence, alertness, and gratitude, we bring specific requests to God. What was Paul's specific request? “That God would open to us a door for the word.” Put simply, Paul asked that the church in Colosse would pray for an opportunity to preach the gospel, even while being imprisoned. There are two things I would like to note: (1) Paul asks prayer for *divine appointments* (“that God would open...”); and (2) Paul wants the gospel opportunity to be clearly and readily evident (“open to us a door...”).

Paul made a similar request to the church in Ephesus:

Ephesians 6:18–20 ¹⁸praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—¹⁹and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

The metaphor of “an open door for the word” seemed to be a favorite of Paul's because he uses it on two other occasions:

1 Corinthians 16:8–9 ⁸But I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost. ⁹For a great and effective door has opened to me, and *there are many adversaries*.

2 Corinthians 2:12 Furthermore, when I came to Troas to *preach* Christ's gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord,

The phrase “the word” corresponds to the “mystery of Christ”—this is the gospel. David Pao, a Bible commentator, elaborates further when he writes “the opening of a door ‘for the word’ (τὸ ῥῆμα) reminds the audience of the powerful ‘word of truth, the gospel’ in 1:5, the ‘word’ that can ‘come’ to the audience while ‘bearing fruit and growing’ (1:6).”⁷

Application: Just as Paul prayed for gospel opportunities, so ought you and I. The proclamation of the gospel is not optional—it is our orders from the highest authority in the heavenly kingdom

⁷ David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 292.

(Matt. 28:18–20). Do you ever have those moments where you feel a tugging on your heart to share the gospel with someone but you don't? It is in those moments that the Lord may be "opening up to you a door for the word so that you may speak forth the mystery of Christ (i.e. the gospel). Do not waste those opportunities!

B. Pray for Gospel Boldness

Finally, Paul asks that the church in Colosse would pray for him to boldly proclaim the gospel (v. 4). He was already imprisoned because of the gospel (v. 3; see also Eph. 6:20). It would seem to me that he already exhibited boldness—and he was suffering the consequences because of it! But Paul prayed for more boldness.

I have heard on many occasions people say "we should preach the gospel by the way that we live." This especially is the rhetoric you hear from Christian social justice advocates. And on the one hand, I do believe that our lives display *the result of gospel change*. But on the other hand, I know that Scriptures teach that people will only trust Christ by the verbal preaching of the gospel. Paul, in essence, says that in v. 4. He recognized (1) the fact that people will only be saved by means of gospel preaching and not by any other means ("as I ought to speak"), and (2) that gospel preaching is the only way to effectively and clearly preach the gospel ("that I may make it manifest").

When leaders demanded that they stop preaching the gospel, Peter replied:

Acts 5:29 But Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men.

I am convinced that we will face this same dilemma very soon. The call for every believer is the same: preach the gospel with boldness! And pray that God would grant supernatural boldness that will not bend at the resistance of men who do not wish to hear it.

Conclusion

You and I must pray with persistent and attentive thankfulness as we request that God would give clear gospel opportunities both for yourself and other believers. When we spend time in prayer, God will grant boldness for gospel preaching. Instead of spending long amounts of time on mindless things, why not spend more time in prayer to God. No one who has submissively approached the throne of grace has ever found the Lord an unwilling listener.