

Continue in Christ - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Colossians 4:2-18** (#514)

Introduction: In a letter that has been all about identity, perhaps one of the ironic challenges is that we aren't always sure what that looks like when the rubber meets the road. For many Christians, it is easier to describe what is true theologically: that everyone who trusts Christ as Lord and Savior is united with Him in life and death. And that's an amazing truth! But it's also so amazing that we can't just let it sit there, as if knowing this great truth is enough. No, the best things in life are those that we are passionate about, those that we share with others. They are the things where if you prick us, they bleed out from us.

Well then, friends: as we close Paul's letter to the Colossians this morning, I want you to enjoy the feast that he has left for the very end – the practical, soup to nuts, applications of what it looks like to be a Christian in the real world. Join me in **Colossians 4:2** and let's be changed by Paul's letter once more...

4:2-4 Fitting, isn't it, that this letter began with Paul's prayer and now it will end speaking of prayer as well? Among all the other issues and topics that Paul has addressed, make sure that you don't miss out on that one: prayer is not some sort of side-show to our faith, and it isn't something simply to be worked in where there are spare bits of time (though it's great to fill those with prayer also!). No, from Paul's example, we see that prayer from first to last is absolutely crucial – this is how we rely upon the Lord; this is how we call upon His name. So what final truths about prayer does Paul leave us with?

First, it's that prayer should be regular. Think marathon rather than sprint. Think life-long, rather than a practice only to be relied upon during hard times. The Colossians, embattled as they are spiritually, are to "continue steadfastly in prayer." They aren't merely to pray occasionally, but continually.

I suspect some of us cringe a bit inwardly when we hear that. It sounds like one more bit of condemnation, one more area of your spiritual life that doesn't add up. And now you are being reminded of it. But notice that nowhere in this letter

does Paul call out specific people for their prayer life or lack thereof. His point isn't to highlight where they've failed, but instead to light the way forward for where the Colossians – and we – should be heading. If you can't describe your prayer life as "continuous" and "steadfast," what needs to change? What can you do to make time for prayer to be a priority? Put a sticky note on your bathroom mirror, or set a reminder in your phone's calendar. While I am absolutely against turning faithful actions into some sort of dry law, the fact is that sometimes we need helps like these to form new habits. Do what it takes to make time and be reminded so that you can enjoy the Lord and follow Paul's example in this way.

Yet Paul's teaching on prayer doesn't stop there. He also describes the content of how he wants the Colossians to be praying. They are to continue steadfastly; and what is that to look like? It looks like being watchful and thankful. To be "watchful" according to the standard Greek dictionary (BDAG), is to "stay awake, to be in constant readiness, to be on the alert." We are to pray in such a way that our prayers are active, observant of the world around us. Think of a watchman on a wall – they do their job well if they remain vigilant and keep their eyes on the horizon; so it is in prayer: we follow Jesus well when we take what we see, what concerns us, what we think about, to the Lord in prayer and continue to seek Him as an act of faith regardless of whether we see direct answers.

Thankfulness is much easier to understand, but perhaps even harder to practice. It seems that as each year goes on, being a thankful person – having genuine Christian joy – gets harder and harder for some people. If this is a particular challenge for you because of your personality or situation, let me make a suggestion: write down your prayers. It doesn't have to be some fancy journal, just something so that you can remember what you've prayed for. And then, as the Lord answers – whatever answer He gives across time – write down what happened. Take that to the Lord in prayer also. Or, another suggestion: share those answers with somebody else. Thankful people are those who share what they are thankful for with others. What a breath of fresh air that would be, wouldn't it, if we shared good news with one another instead of only bad?

Lastly on prayer, look at how Paul calls for the Colossians to pray for him and those with him. Remember that Paul is in prison at this point. Yet notice the amazing thing that he asks for here: it isn't to get out of prison, or even to have his time be a bit easier. Instead, Paul cares most about glorifying the Lord. If that's in prison, then so be it. So instead, Paul's request – what he wants prayer for – is that he would have opportunities to share the Good News and to declare what Jesus has done for everyone who believes, Jew and Gentile. What's more, he prays for clarity. That should be reassuring to every one of you – whether you speak of Jesus or teach here at church, or whether with your spouse or children, don't we all at times wonder if we are being clear enough? I know I do. What do we need? How should we respond? Let's ask the Lord to help make us clear!

Pray. Pray continually. Pray steadfastly. Pray with watchfulness and thanksgiving. Pray for those in ministry. And now second, live...

4:5-6 We've already spoken about how the Gospel changes everything: marriages, family relationships, even relationships between people in the world at large. These words reinforce those teachings. What the Colossians need most isn't some program to change their government, or to bar their opponents from being able to speak in the public square. No, what is needed most is for the Colossian church to live wisely. Paul uses one of his favorite analogies here: they are to "walk in wisdom." The image of how somebody walks stands in for how they go about their life. What about you? Would anyone say of you that you show wisdom in how you treat those outside of the church? If not, why not? What needs to change? Do you see outsiders as folks who need Jesus? Or do you see them as opponents who need to be gotten over or around? Never forget who you were before Jesus saved you. Outsiders need the same sort of transformation: might you be the one to introduce them to the Lord who has so changed you? The time we have on this earth is short. To live it foolishly not only wastes a precious resource that we can never get back, but it also weakens our witness to outsiders.

Part of how you "walk" is how you speak. Sometimes I think we misunderstand what our words are supposed to accomplish when it comes to sharing Jesus. Too

often we take a combative approach, as if we have to “win” arguments with atheists or somehow use our words to shut down or shut up those who oppose Christianity. Don’t misunderstand, there is a right time for defending the faith. But much like Peter in the garden, I think we are too quick to draw our swords in attack, and too slow to take the long view of helping those who oppose Him to see Christ’s love and mercy for all who turn from their sins and trust Him.

So, Paul’s commands when it comes to how you and I speak? Your speech must always be gracious. Not just sometimes. Always. Online or when texting or on the phone as well. You must take the time to be gracious. If you can’t, if your temptation is to think that responding quickly is better than responding in a Christ-like manner, then it would be better for you to bite your tongue and not respond at all. The world has too many ungracious people already, let’s not add to them. At the same time, your words aren’t to be bland either, just giving in to the world’s ways of thinking or trying to get along. Note Paul’s reference: salt isn’t the opposite of grace, as if these two have to be balanced. Instead, think of what salt does to food: it preserves it, and it enhances it. Do your words do that? Do they uphold what Jesus has said? Do they flavor your conversations in a way that makes folks want to talk with you? To trust you? To open up to you? Take the time to figure out how best to communicate with each person you come across. You are an individual and so are they, so don’t take a one-size-fits-all approach, but instead look for an opportunity to genuinely communicate about Jesus. This, by the way, would be another great entry on your prayer list: that your speech would be gracious and that you would know how to appropriately connect with each person you come into contact with, whatever the situation.

Walk in wisdom, use your time well, speak graciously. These are Paul’s last commands in this letter. Or are they? Let’s keep reading...

4:7-14 I want you to notice something which is common to the majority of Paul’s letters: these final verses that seem so odd to us, so irrelevant to your life and mine. Why does Paul devote such time, during a day when letters were hard to send and parchment was expensive, to sending greetings back and forth? One

reason, of course, is that in a time before the internet, telephones, or even cheap and easy access to mail, it was hard to pass word to anybody that you didn't see personally. Remember that a large part of what Paul is trying to do is not just plant a bunch of churches who exist apart from one another, but instead to develop networks between these churches – networks of support and prayer and care. Far more so than we often think of today, what Paul intended was for each church to be an expression of Christ's body. And by grasping that, they were each to also realize that they needed the other faithful churches to help minister and serve in ways and in places that they themselves could not.

If the mission is to spread the Gospel to the whole world, then no one church is going to make much progress in the grand scheme of things. But if those churches are united together in Christ, then wow, what a difference!

Friends, when is the last time you prayed for another faithful church? Or prayed that an unfaithful church would be convicted by the Gospel? First E-Free of Sioux City doesn't have the monopoly on faithful teaching in this town, and there are other churches doing wonderful work among the poor, with children, with adults. There might be very real reasons why we can't join with them or worship alongside them, but that doesn't mean we can't at least pray for them.

And observe in Paul's comments the relational warmth here: do you think of other believers in this way? Is there anybody you would call a "beloved brother and faithful minister"? Are you actively thinking of how you can encourage somebody else, if not through your actions, then by helping one of your friends to see how they might be able to be an encourager in your place?

On a related note, what are you doing to keep on top of the Lord's work around the world? Brothers and sisters, so many of our squabbles here in the States come because we have such a narrow and small view of Christ's work worldwide. The church in the United States is not any more faithful than other Gospel-preaching churches around the world. In fact, we have just as much to learn from them as they do from us. Read those missionary prayer letters and emails when

they come – they are like gold to your soul, giving you opportunity not only to pray and have an impact for the Gospel in far off places through your prayers and support, but also opportunities for you yourself to be changed and molded as well.

Pray for Gospel ministry. Take interest in what is happening in the Lord's church around the world. And now, finally, take an interest in those nearby...

4:15-18 Make it a point to greet one another. I realize that seems almost too obvious, but to greet somebody else in a meaningful way – moving beyond the “hello, how are you?” to genuinely caring about them, looking for how you can pray for them and encourage them and letting them pray for and encourage you – those things are the bread and butter of living out our Christian faith. There are many teachings in this letter, many things for the Colossians to apply, to live out. This last one is not to be missed: the people of the Lord must be relational. Far too often we independently-minded Americans think that it's really all about “me and Jesus.” But you aren't Christ's bride – the church is. The only organization that the Lord has promised to preserve and bless is the church. Not any parachurch ministry. Not a bunch of individuals whose care for others is nonexistent. If you aren't developing relationships with other Christians, then your Christian life is out of balance. You need to know other brothers and sisters. You need to laugh with them. Cry with them. Joke around with them, even! Our shared church life cannot just be sitting together in a room and learning. It must not be less than that, but it should also be more than that. We learn together so that we can do life together. Who in this room can you honestly say you are doing life together with? Would they say the same about you? If you are having trouble coming up with some names, then I think you already know what needs to change. “Waste” some time with other believers, you'll be glad you did.

Pray steadfastly, live wisely, speak graciously. Care about Christ's church. Build relationships. Give yourself to these applications, and you'll be amazed at how the Lord will use you in ways large and small in the coming years. I can't wait to see His work... will you join me in it? Let's start by praying...