

The Church's Most Important Work

Colossians 4:2-6

A couple weeks ago, about midway through Advent, we finished our series through the Gospel of Matthew, looking at what has come to be known as the Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20:

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”

From beginning to end, the Gospel of Matthew is all about Jesus' identity and authority as the true king of heaven and earth. He proves this preeminently through his death and resurrection toward the end of the book. But he *applies* his authority ultimately by commanding *us* to go into the world and make disciples all nations. These are our marching orders as his church—to help people turn away from sin and follow Christ.

We talked a bit about what that means when we looked at the passage. And as a new year dawns this week, we'll be placing a lot of attention in the year ahead on what it means for us as a church to apply this commission faithfully and practically. Hopefully you received a letter from the elders this past week outlining some of the initiatives and offerings we're looking forward to in 2015. (It came via email; there are also some copies available in the lobby if you missed it or otherwise didn't receive it.) Part of our vision at Westgate is to cultivate a pervasive culture of life-on-life discipleship aimed at fostering maturity, equipping for gospel service, and passing the faith on to the next generation (cf. 2 Tim. 2:1-2; 3:10-17).

There are a lot of things we're already doing with that aim in mind, and several new opportunities we're excited to see develop this next year. But the first and foremost thing that must happen if we are to have any hope at making disciples, any success in seeing the lost reached for Christ, any lasting growth in our own lives spiritually—the first and foremost thing that must happen if we are to *know God* and *make him known*—is that we must pray. Prayer is the church's most important work. That's what we're going to talk about this morning.

Now I have to admit, I'm not particularly excited to preach about prayer. Not because the subject is so hard to understand, or rather unimportant. *It's critically important.* I'm not excited because I don't feel qualified to speak on this subject—at all. I'm not happy with my own prayer life. I feel like this is a lesson I have to keep learning over and over and over again. My default is to presume upon God to show up, rather than to commune personally with him and actually ask him to do it. And frankly that says something about what (or who) I'm really trusting in.

Tim Keller writes in his recent (and excellent) book on prayer,

The Bible is all about God, and that is why the practice of prayer is so pervasive throughout its pages. The greatness of prayer is nothing but an extension of the greatness and glory of God in our lives. . . . To fail to pray, then, is not to merely break some religious rule—it is a failure to treat God as God.”¹

That’s my problem—a failure to treat God as God. When I fail to pray, which is far too often, and choose instead to walk in my own power, my own strength, in my own direction, according to my own wisdom and ability, and for my own ends—I am failing to treat God as God. It’s unacceptable. I want to change. And my hunch is that I’m not alone.

In fact, I would be surprised if anyone in this room was completely satisfied in their prayer life. Keller notes at the beginning of his book, “Prayer is . . . an exceedingly difficult subject to write about . . . because, before it, we feel so small and helpless. [Dr. Martyn] Lloyd-Jones once said that he had never written on prayer because of a sense of personal inadequacy in this area.”² If Keller and Lloyd-Jones feel that inadequacy, I’m betting pretty much everybody does.

And yet, the point of acknowledging that is not to console each other in our mediocrity, but *to change*. We must change; we must *pray*. I am increasingly convinced that this is the church’s most important work. The Bible tells us to pray about everything. There is no area of life that is off limits or too small to bring to the Lord in prayer. Think of Philippians 4:6: “do not be anxious about anything, but *in everything* by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” But the area I want to focus specifically on this morning, in light our recent emphasis on the Great Commission, is the call to *pray for our mission*. If we’re going to be faithful to that call, our most important work in it is prayer.

To help us think about that this morning we’re going to look at Colossians 4:2-6.

Missional Prayer in the Context of Colossians

The book of Colossians was one of the letters the Apostle Paul wrote while he was in prison for preaching about Jesus. It was written to a young church that Paul had never actually met; they first heard the good news of Jesus from Paul’s colleague, Epaphras. Paul writes to this church, as he does to many churches, to both ground them in the faith and guard them from false teaching.

There were some among the Colossians who were unconvinced that Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection really were enough to reconcile sinners with a holy God. They wanted to add to Jesus’ work in different ways—a little pagan superstition here, a little Jewish legalism there. Paul wrote to assure them of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ—that Jesus really is preeminent, sovereign over all creation, and that his blood really was enough to cancel our debt of sin and make peace with God, if we trust and follow him (cf. 1:15-23; 2:9-15).

But Paul also wants to help them understand how to apply the truth of Christ’s supremacy and sufficiency to everyday life. How to apply it personally, and to our relationships within the church and home. But also how to apply it in our interaction with those outside the church, who

¹ Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 26.

² Keller, 18.

do not yet know Christ. And that's what Paul turns his attention to in our verses this morning, Colossians 4:2-6.

The way I want to organize our time is to let v. 2 shape the conversation. We'll of course look at vv. 3-6 as well. But in v. 2 we have Paul's general call to pray, which he then applies to mission. And he tells us three things about how we should pray in v. 2. "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving" (4:2). So, "continue steadfastly" or "devote yourselves to prayer." In other words we are to pray *loyally*. Second, "being watchful in it"—we are to pray *watchfully*, expectantly, with both faith and focus. And then third, "with thanksgiving." We are to pray *gratefully* as well.

Our prayers, generally speaking, but also as they are applied to mission, should be shaped by these three qualities: loyalty, watchfulness, and thanksgiving. First, let's think about what it means to pray loyally.

Pray Loyally

The call to pray loyally, or steadfastly or with devotion, gets at the heart of why we even pray in the first place. Because God is God and we are not.

J.I. Packer writes,

In prayer, you ask for things and give thanks for things. Why? Because you recognize that God is the author and source of all the good that you have had already, and all the good that you hope for in the future. This is the fundamental philosophy of Christian prayer. The prayer of the Christian is not an attempt to force God's hand, but a humble acknowledgement of helplessness and dependence. When we are on our knees, we know that it is not we who control the world; it is not in our power, therefore, to supply our needs by our own independent efforts. Every good thing that we desire for ourselves and for others must be sought from God, and will come, if it comes at all, as a gift from His hands. . . . In effect, therefore, what we do when we pray is to confess our own impotence and God's sovereignty.³

This is, I think for most of us, what makes prayer so hard. It begins by admitting that *we're not in control of the world*. That there is someone over us, above us, stronger than us, wiser than us, someone who is in control of us and the world around us, and if something is going to happen, it will only happen according to his will and power. That's humbling for many of us. Because we're afraid that if we hand over the reins, our world will all of a sudden spiral out of control. We know what to expect when we're in control. We know how to measure performance and generate results. And we know who to blame if something doesn't work. If we pray, we come at it from a kind of neo-paganistic angle, where we recognize there's a higher power at play, but our goal is simply to manipulate him to our own ends. We start bargaining with God—"if you do this for me, I promise I won't miss church again, at least for another month. Unless that year-end bonus comes through and we get to take that vacation . . . Okay, starting in February, I promise I won't miss for a month (it's a shorter month, anyway, right?)."

³ J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1961), 11-12.

But this is not real prayer, because it fails to treat God as God. Real prayer, loyal prayer, begins with humility, even brokenness. Ole Hallesby, a Norwegian author, says, “As far as I can see, prayer has been ordained only for the helpless. . . . Prayer and helplessness are inseparable. Only he who is helpless can truly pray.”⁴ Or as Jared Wilson has said, “When I don’t pray, I’m basically saying to God, ‘I’ve got this.’”

We pray loyally because we recognize that God is God and I am not. And if we’re praying to the God of the Bible, think about who we’re really praying to. Turn back a page to Colossians ch. 1, vv. 15-20. Speaking of Jesus, Paul writes: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him” (1:15-16). Prayer is not messing around; it’s skipping middle management and going straight to the top, bringing our cares and concerns to the one who can actually do something about them. Yet it recognizes that what he does will be done in accord with his plan and glory, since creation exists by him, through him, and for him. There’s a boldness and humility in prayer.

Then look at v. 17, again speaking of Jesus: “And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Because Jesus is holding all things together, that means we don’t have to. We can trust God to do what is right. Prayer expresses that trust.

And look at vv. 18-20, once more speaking of Jesus: “And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” God was pleased to make himself known to us through Jesus his Son; he was pleased to reconcile us to himself through Jesus’ death and resurrection, wherein he dealt with the greatest problem in this world—sin—your sin, my sin, all sin. In Jesus God has done everything necessary to redeem this fallen world and make it whole again, bringing peace. Who else can we trust to do that? Who else is preeminent, sovereign over all creation and sufficient to put it back together? Only God can do that. You and I cannot do that. And so we pray. We pray *loyally*—with consistency, because we recognize our need for his grace daily. “Prayer should be done regularly, persistently, resolutely, and tenaciously at least daily, whether we feel like it or not.”⁵ We pray loyally with allegiance to him, recognizing he is God and we are not. Prayerlessness is a failure to treat God as God.

Pray Watchfully

God calls us to pray loyally. He also calls us to pray *watchfully*—that’s our second point. “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it . . .” (Col. 4:2).

What does Paul mean by “watchfulness” here? Some suggest that he’s talking about praying with an eye toward Christ’s return.⁶ While that’s a good thing, and something we’re encouraged to watch for in passages like Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians 5, that seems overly specific for the context here. I think Paul is simply telling us to pray with alertness and expectation. In other words, *don’t be asleep at prayer*. Think about what you’re praying—pray with focus. And watch

⁴ Ole Hallesby, *Prayer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), 89-90; cited in Keller, 128.

⁵ Keller, 122.

⁶ For a summary of this discussion see Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Pillar; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 319-321.

for God to show up in answer to your prayers—pray with faith. Praying watchfully means praying with *focus* and with *faith*.

So what so what should we focus on in prayer? What it is that should guide us? For most of us, the two things that shape our focus are our desires and our circumstances. We want things—often good things—and we pray for them. A promotion, a new job, a good grade on the test, a lead role in the play. Or we’re faced with certain circumstances that we would like God to change—financial difficulties, health challenges, a child who sleeps through the night at least once a week.

Now there’s nothing wrong with praying for our desires and circumstances. God wants us to bring every care to him in prayer (cf. 1 Pet. 5:7). And Jesus’ model prayer in Matthew 6 includes things like praying for “daily bread” and against “evil” (Matt. 6:9-15). But if the only thing that guides our prayer life is our own desires and circumstances (or the desires and circumstances of others), then we are missing out on most of what God calls us to in prayer.

It’s interesting that of all of the apostle Paul’s prayers throughout his letters, not once does he pray for a change in the circumstances of the churches he’s writing to.⁷ The thing we pray about most often, Paul never prayed about. Again, it’s not wrong to pray that way, but it certainly is interesting to notice that. Instead, Paul focuses his prayers on asking that the gospel of Jesus bear fruit whatever the circumstance. Listen to his prayer for the Colossians in ch. 1:

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. (Col. 1:9-12)

Paul prays for change. But he’s far more interested in our hearts being changed than our circumstances. A heart tuned to the knowledge of God and his will. A heart that bears fruit in obedience, that grows in knowing God, that depends on God, gives thanks to God, that hopes in God. This is Paul’s desire for the Colossian church, and all the churches (e.g., Eph. 1:18-23; Phil 1:9-11). And his desire doesn’t stop there—he wants the hearts of those who are yet outside the church to change too, to experience the same knowledge of God through faith in Jesus Christ. This is how he applies his instruction to pray in ch. 4. This is one of the ways he wants us to focus our prayers—praying for our mission. Now we finally come to vv. 3-6.

After his general instruction to pray in v. 2, he makes a specific prayer request in vv. 3-4, namely, for his own mission to make the gospel known. Verse 3: “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should” (4:3-4). Because Paul recognizes that God is God and he is not, even when it comes to the salvation of others, he asks for prayer for his mission. Tom Wright explains, “He can talk all he likes, but unless God opens the door for the word to go through . . . he will simply be making a useless noise. Paul was under no illusions.

⁷ Keller, 20.

You can never take it for granted. The door doesn't open automatically. What opens the door, again and again, is prayer."⁸

Yet even as he asks for them to pray for his mission, he reminds them of their own mission in vv. 5-6: "Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders [that is, those outside the church, outside of faith in Christ], making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." We too are entrusted with the Great Commission. To engage our friends, family, and neighbors who do not yet know Christ with wisdom and the gracious speech of the gospel.

And if Paul asks for prayer for his own mission, we're foolish not to pray for our own. That's because, as we pray for our mission, we acknowledge that God is sovereign even over the salvation of others. Yes, we have a responsibility to proclaim, to explain the message of Jesus. And yes, they have a responsibility to believe, to turn away from sin and trust in Jesus. But none of that will happen unless God shows up.

J.I. Packer captures this tension quite helpfully:

It is right to want one's presentation of the gospel to be as clear and forcible as possible. If we preferred that converts should be few and far between, and did not care whether our proclaiming of Christ went home or not, there would be something wrong with us. But it is not right when we take it on us to do more than God has given us to do. It is not right when we regard ourselves as responsible for securing converts, and look to our own enterprise and techniques to accomplish what only God can accomplish. To do that is to intrude ourselves into the office of the Holy Ghost, and to exalt ourselves as the agents of new birth. . . . *Only by letting our knowledge of God's sovereignty control the way in which we plan, and pray, and work in His service, can we avoid becoming guilty of this fault.* For where we are not consciously relying on God, there we shall inevitably be found relying on ourselves. And the spirit of self-reliance is a blight on evangelism.⁹

If we love our friends and family who do not know Jesus, and if we want to share Christ with them and see them come to saving faith, if we want to be found faithful before God and his call for us to make disciples, then we must devote ourselves to prayer. It is our most important work.

Praying watchfully means that our prayers must focus in part on the mission God has given us to make disciples, right here in the MetroWest. It also means that we pray with faith—that when we ask for God to move in the hearts of the lost, we watch for him to show up and do it. The results are in his hands—but that's exactly where they need to be—in the hands of the one who can do something about it. So we pray with humility and boldness, we pray with focus and faith.

Pray Gratefully

Finally, and much more briefly, we pray gratefully. "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it *with thanksgiving*" (Col. 4:2). We pray gratefully because it's by God's grace that we even have an audience with God. Only through the work of Christ on the cross are sinners like us able to approach a holy God and not only be spared from annihilation, but invited to bring

⁸ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Louisville: WJK, 2002, 2004), 188-189.

⁹ Packer, 28-29.

our deepest cares and concerns before a loving Father (cf. Eph. 2:18; Heb. 10:19-25). And we pray gratefully because our Father loves to answer our prayers. Jesus says in Matthew 7:7-11:

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Do we believe that when we pray for the lost? If we believed that, would we pray more often? And if we prayed more often, would we find ourselves being used by God more consistently?

Pray for the Mission

To say that prayer is the church's most important work is perhaps a bit of hyperbole. How do you rank the importance of God's commands—worship vs. evangelism vs. Bible reading vs. prayer? But what I mean is simply this: Since the only way that gospel change can happen is if God shows up, and since the way we express our dependence on God and thereby treat him as God is through prayer, nothing we do in his name or service will amount to anything if we are not first and faithfully devoted to prayer.

Moreover, it's very easy to serve somebody without praying, or to preach without praying, or to talk to others about Jesus without praying. It is much, much harder however, to pray for someone's needs and not also serve them when given the opportunity. Or to pray for someone's salvation and not also proclaim the gospel to them when given the chance. Prayer aligns our hearts with God's heart and moves our hearts in the direction of God's will. And if it's God's will for us to love others and to share the gospel, as we pray, so we will find ourselves taking God at his word and doing what he calls us to do.

We've seen a living example of this in our prayer team right here in this church. Every Thursday morning Bruce and Karen Daggett open their home for people to gather and pray. And the people who gather consistently to pray together, as you might imagine, have become a rather tight-knit group. But more than that, as they have set their hearts to praying for lost friends and neighbors, time and again they've found themselves moved to serve and witness to those neighbors. Prayer for mission begets service in mission. And that's something we want to see on a broader scale basis as a church.

In your worship folder this morning is an insert—an invitation, really. To come together monthly to pray for the mission God has given us. You don't have to wait for this meeting to pray. (I hope you don't.) It's certainly not the only opportunity for prayer among the church. But it is something we want to prioritize this year as a way of taking seriously the fact that God is God, and we are not, combined with the fact that we have been called to make disciples of Christ right here in the MetroWest.

The goal of this meeting is not to pray for our circumstances (that's a good thing, and we pray for them in several other venues). The goal of this meeting is to pray loyally, watchfully, and gratefully for the mission God has given us to make disciples. To pray with focus and faith, that God would open a door for the gospel here in the MetroWest. That his Spirit would go before us

to open blind eyes and unstop deaf ears. That men and women would see clearly the ugliness and danger of sin, and be compelled by the love of Christ who has dealt decisively with our sin. And that God would *use us* in that process of making his name known. We want to pray specifically for friends and family, for neighbors and colleagues. We want to pray that men and women would be snatched from the gates of hell and know the lasting joy of forgiveness and new life in Christ.

And I want to ask you to join me in that prayer. Join me in praying for God to show up. He is sovereign. He is supreme. Jesus' blood is sufficient. But we need him to show up.

And as we close this morning, I want to invite you to pray right now. If you are a believer in Jesus, think of three people you know who don't know the Lord, and pray for them. Doesn't have to be a complicated prayer—you can pray quite simply, "Gracious Father, open their eyes to see you and trust you and find life in your name. Give me an opportunity to share. Change their heart. Save them, Lord." Pray for three people.

If you do not know Jesus personally, whether you've grown up in the church but never personally seen your sin for what it is and placed your faith in him, or whether you're visiting and checking this Jesus stuff out, I invite you to pray as well. Ask God to show himself to you. Ask him to show you your sin, the ways you've let him down. And ask him to show you his Son, who paid for your sin on the cross that you might be forgiven and have life in him. Ask God to show up in your life. He loves to answer that prayer.