



SHARING OUR NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

(Colossians 4:2-18; Matthew 5:13-16) Becky Douglass

This past week I came across the story of an elderly lady who was in the hospital with a heart condition. Her doctor was a life-long atheist and not interested in God at all. But he was curious about how she was handling her illness. When he asked, she told him about her relationship with God and how He was helping her. Then she asked him a simple question: “What do you believe?” The doctor realised he had never really thought much about why he was an atheist and her simple question started him exploring his assumptions and this eventually led him to turn to God and accept his salvation. The woman was not a scholar or evangelist. She was simply walking with Christ in the midst of her trials and God enabled her to share her hope when asked about it. As Jesus said in our Matthew reading this morning, her lamp was, *“placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house”*. (Matthew 5:14) This is a natural outcome of our new life in Christ.

As we look back at where we’ve come from in our study of Colossians, you’ll remember that Paul has told the Colossians that He has worked hard on their behalf because he wants them to be *“perfect in their relationship to Christ”*. (1:28) This doesn’t mean that they won’t have anything more to learn, but that they will be all that God desires for them in this season of their lives. So far, Paul has talked about what they BELIEVE, specifically about Christ – who He is and what he has done. He summarised this at the end of the glorious Christ Hymn by saying,

“For God is all his fulness was pleased to live in Christ and through Him God reconciled everything to Himself.” (1:19,20)

Then, Paul goes on to talk about how these truths should affect how we LIVE.

“As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him ... let your lives be built on Him.” (2:6,7)

If you’ve been around our church for very long, you will recognise these two words as the first two words of the focus of our church. We are seeking to BELIEVE in Jesus Christ, LIVE in Jesus Christ and SHARE Jesus Christ. We’ll talk more about this next week as we look at membership in our church, but today we are going to look at the final area, at some pointers Paul has on how to SHARE Jesus Christ. He first addressed this in chapter 3 where he said,

“... and whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus.” (3:17)

Now that we are God’s children, we are to represent Him here on earth in everything we say and do. But how are we to do this? Paul is going to look at the source of our **strength** in sharing, the **substance** of our sharing, the **style** of our sharing and, finally, the **strategy** for our sharing.

Strength: Prayer

He starts by saying, “*Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart.*” (4:2) Paul started out this letter with an account of how he was praying for them. Now he wants them to join with him in prayer – not just occasionally or casually, but to be devoted to it. The word used carries the idea of intentional, persistent involvement in an important activity. It needs to be something we do often, not just when an urgent need arises. And we should persevere in it even when we don’t see an immediate answer. That is what I need to work at – perseverance. It is easy to pray for something once or twice, or when a new issue arises. It is harder to persevere over time and in the face of no immediate answer. We can only pray with perseverance when we really believe that God is listening to us and is at work in the situation, no matter what might seem to be true.

In addition, prayer isn’t to be something we just rattle off without thought. We are called use our minds when we pray and to be thoughtful and aware. We need to, as much as possible, understand the situation we are praying about and be asking God to show us how to be specifically praying for that situation. And we need to pray with a thankful heart which comes from trust in God. We can pray with a thankful heart when our fears have been given to God and we are able to rest in His love for us. It is this kind of prayer which connects us to God and to His power for our lives and our witness as His representatives.

Paul goes on to talk about a particular need for prayer: “*Pray for us too, that God will give us many opportunities ... Pray that I may proclaim this message as clearly as I should.*” (4:3-4) He asks them to be praying for him in his ministry of sharing Christ with others. The amazing thing about this is that, at this point in time, Paul is in chains, imprisoned for His witness. He asks them to pray that God will give him opportunities for him to share the Gospel, even when humans have tried to shut down those opportunities and limit his influence. And, even though Paul is an accomplished speaker and defender of the faith, he still acknowledges his need for help in sharing the message clearly. This is God’s work, and it needs God’s power. It is not about his skill or his passion or his courage. It is all about God’s work in and through him.

Substance: Christ

It is all about God’s work and God’s work is all about Christ. “*Pray for us, too, that God will give us many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ.*” (4:3) In Colossians, Paul has talked a lot about God’s mystery which is God’s plan in Christ. This includes the truth about Christ’s **identity** – he is God, the Creator and Saviour; His role in **salvation** and **reconciliation** – his death and resurrection bringing peace with God; and His **on-going work** in our lives – Christ living in us.

Paul takes us back to Christ again because Christ is what being Christian is all about! This is the focus of Colossians and should be the focus of all we do as well. We are not offering people a program for “How to be the best you can be” or “How to find a new level of

spirituality". Paul warns the Colossians against anything like this as being ultimately worthless and even harmful as it detracts from Christ. No, we are introducing them to the person of Christ and through Him, a new relationship with God – the relationship for which we were made.

Style: Wisdom and grace

Paul goes on to tell them how they can be involved in this sharing as well. He says, *"Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity."* (4:5) Literally, Paul is telling them to "walk in wisdom". Wisdom is knowledge skilfully applied to life. Right back at the beginning of the letter, in his prayer for the Colossians, he said, *"We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honour and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better."* (1:9,10) It is this cycle of growth which will transform our lives so that we reflect His life in us.

And we need God to show us how to live as God's people in the reality of our lives. We saw an example of this in Paul's application of their new life to the realities of the household as it was in their day. What did it mean for them to be one in Christ as husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves? What needed to change? How did they need to work within the social constraints of their day? This took much wisdom for them and still does for us today!

They needed wisdom, but they also needed grace, especially in the things they say. *"Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone."* (4:6) Their conversation with non-Christians was to reflect the reality of God's love and grace, seeking to build others up rather than tearing them down. This does not mean that we don't speak up for what is right, but that we do so in ways which bring life rather than bring death. The word "attractive" translates an idiom which literally means "seasoned with salt". Salt brings out the best flavour in food and makes it more palatable. When our words are seasoned with the salt of God's grace, they will be easier for others to listen to and accept.

When I saw the word salt, I immediately thought of Jesus' words which we read this morning. We as Christians are to be the *"salt of the earth"*. (Matthew 5:13) Salt enhances and preserves and as we are filled with Christ, we should enhance the world around us and preserve what is good. But Jesus' words also come with a warning. If our words no longer reflect the grace and love of God, they are worthless like salt which has lost its flavour. Sometimes I think this can be an issue when we speak up about cultural trends which go against God's truth. If our words are not said with love and grace then our words can turn people away from God and not towards Him. This is not easy, and we must humbly rely on God to give us wisdom in what to say and how to say it. We must not just react in disgust or anger which may be our natural reactions.

Jesus then goes on to say that Christians are *"the light of the world"*. (Matthew 5:14) I think this is such a good illustration of what Christians are like when they "walk in wisdom" and their speech is gracious. They are winsome representatives of Jesus Christ (3:17) who draw people to Him as they show what a difference He makes. We should be the most attractive people in our community. Jesus was when He walked this earth. He did not ignore injustice or hypocrisy, but He addressed in such a way that people saw the truth of what He said and

those who were most vulnerable (and often the most sinful!) found mercy and peace in His presence. Is that what people experience when they are around us?

The joy of this is that anyone, in any circumstance, can be a representative of Christ like this. The story I shared at the beginning showed God can use ordinary people, even in the most difficult of circumstances. I have seen the same thing happen with very young children who have a relationship with God, however simple that might be. One mother with a shaky faith shared that when she was in tears because of a difficult situation, her preschooler came to her, gave her a hug and said, "Its OK, I love you and Jesus loves you. He is here and He will help you." This changed her perspective and caused her to look back to God. Sometimes I think we need to take lessons in pastoral care from our little ones!

No matter who you are or what your circumstances, you can be a representative of Jesus Christ if you allow Him to shine His light through you.

Strategy: Teamwork

Paul finishes this letter with a series of greetings and personal messages. Paul never worked alone, he was always a part of a team. And it wasn't a hierarchy with Paul at the top and everyone else serving him. They were co-workers, fellow-servants, brothers and sisters in Christ. They needed each other and depended on each other as they together depended on Christ.

We won't go through each verse here, but there are a couple of things we can see from this list of people. Firstly, they were a diverse group - Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free. These are not people who usually spent time together or had much in common. The fact that they could work together demonstrated their oneness in Christ.

Secondly, they were not perfect! Onesimus was a runaway slave. Mark had a history of running away from trouble. And although we don't know much about Archippus, it seems he was faltering in his ministry and needed special encouragement to keep going. God was at work in all of these, and Paul was proud to work alongside them even though they were still learning.

Finally, it is interesting that it is not their ministry skills which Paul praises, but their character. He doesn't talk about who was the best preacher or who was the most efficient organiser. What Paul celebrates is that they were faithful; that they had a servant attitude and were willing to work hard for the good of others; and that they were encouragers and pray-ers.. It is people like this whom God used to share Christ and change the world.

Conclusion

The people Paul was working with and writing to were ordinary people just like you and me. Like them, we too can be involved in sharing Christ with those around us. What can we learn from this letter about how we can do this? I think the most important thing is that we need to let our roots go down deep into God. There is no replacement for spending time getting to know God and allowing Him to fill you with His Spirit to make you more like Him. Open up yourself to Him and He will give you the wisdom to live for Him in whatever situation you find yourself.

Then, as Jesus said in the passage we read today, “... *let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father*”. (Matthew 5:16) As you live for God in view of others, pray for opportunities to simply share the new life that you have in Christ. As people were drawn to Jesus because of His grace and truth, pray that people will be drawn to you – not because you are something special, but because they can see God in you and He is amazing! Trust God to give you the words when you need them. They will be the overflow of what God has given to you as you walk with Him.

And know that you are not in this alone! God gave us the church to support each other and work together to be “*the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden*” (Matthew 5:14) I believe God has brought each person here – including those of you at home – each of you has been brought by God to be a part of this church for a reason. We need every one of us – even those who face the limitations of age and illness. Our roles may change as time goes by. As Bob shared last week, we may need to step out in faith and allow God to do something new in our lives, something we would never have dared to do in the past or even thought possible. But together, each contributing something unique, we can let our lights shine and point people to God and His salvation. What a glorious thing is that!