Steadfast in Prayer, Living Wisely
Colossians 4:2-18

A couple of weeks back we looked at Paul's instruction to set our minds on things above, and see the lordship of Christ over every aspect of our lives. And last week, Colin told us that thinking like that has the power to transform our relationships from power struggles to ones of sacrificial love. Today we're going to see how that Lordship of Christ, and the sacrificial love that flows from it, extends outwards, beyond the boundaries of our immediate families and church family, to those outside.

Be Steadfast in Prayer

In his book *Orthodoxy* GK Chesterton argues that a Christian is a peculiar person – because he or she is neither an optimist nor a pessimist. You see an optimist loves the world as it is, and thinks it's great, so why change it? Whilst a pessimist thinks the world is terrible, and nothing can make it any better, so why try and change it? But the Christian, Chesterton says, is altogether different. He loves the world so much he wants to change it.

But these young Christians in Colossae have come under the influence of people who are telling them that the physical world is bad, and if they really want to experience fullness of life, they need to *escape* it. Which is what religion often says, doesn't it? To really flourish, you have to live on a higher plane than what's around you, that in some way you must withdraw from the world. But Christianity says something very different. It says that God so loved the world that he sent his son into the world to save it, and that now, the fullness of life that we're all looking for, and that only Jesus can give us, doesn't lead to a life withdrawn from the world, or even semi-detached from the world. Instead, it renews your mind so that just like God you so love the world you want to change it.

So, Paul says in v2, 'Continue steadfastly in prayer.' You know that the world is not as it should be, you know that your life and others' lives are not as they should be, and you love the world and you love them, so you pray. Now maybe you've heard the expression that 'lots of people want to serve God, provided it's in an advisory capacity!' They want to serve God by telling him what he should do. But when Jesus taught us to pray he didn't say, pray, 'my kingdom come, my will be done' did he? He said, pray, 'Father, your kingdom come, your will be done'. And prayer is not us trying to twist the arm of a reluctant God to do our will, but to lay hold of the powerful hand of God to do his will.

And Paul says, continue steadfastly in prayer. Now, why 'continue steadfastly'? Why does he feel the need to say 'don't give up praying, keep going'? Because as one writer [Storms] puts it, the easiest thing about praying is quitting. The easiest thing about praying is stopping praying.

Now, why is that? Why might you go days without praying? Why might you start praying for something but after a while give up? Well, there are a whole load of reasons. Maybe life is just busy, and prayer gets pushed out. You wake up and, before you have time to draw breath, the day is already crowding in, and in terms of our priorities, prayer gets squeezed. But think about it, the real fullness of life that you and I are looking for doesn't come by filling our lives with so

much busyness that we don't have time to press pause. Real fullness of life is in Christ Paul has been telling us. So as someone has said, and I think Paul would agree, if we're too busy to pray, we're too busy.

But a second reason you might stop praying is that you feel slimed by sin. You feel guilty and unworthy to draw near to God. And you enter a downward spiral. You feel guilty and separated from God, and so sin becomes easier, or more attractive, or it promises to numb your pain, so you give in to temptation, down you go. And you're left feeling more guilty and more alienated from God. But as Paul has been telling us, when you become a Christian you're united with Christ. Christ's death was your death – your sins have been paid for. Your guilt has been washed clean. And when Jesus rose to new life, so did you. That means when God sees you, he sees Jesus – and welcomes you into his presence as a dearly loved son or daughter. That's who you are. That's why you can approach God's throne of grace with boldness. Not because you've had a sin free day, but because you're in Christ.

Or thirdly, maybe you stop praying because the fire of your faith has burnt low. You pray but nothing seems to change – so what's the point? Why continue? And the temptation to quit comes in.

So why doesn't God just give us what we want when we pray for it? Well, think back in your own life – and the various things you've wanted at various times. Like when you were a teenager, or maybe even later. And is there anything where you now think, with the hindsight of maturity, 'man, I'm so glad I didn't get what I wanted!' That body piercing, or that girlfriend. So it's just possible isn't it, that God keeps us waiting because he knows better than us what's best. Maybe he really is working in our waiting.

Or maybe he asks us to persevere in prayer because by doing so we have to work through why we want this thing – and when it's not coming you have to wrestle with the question, do I want this for my glory, or his? Or maybe perseverance deepens our dependence on him. And you realise, with this growing certainty, that only God can give the answer you're asking for.

So, how can you persevere in prayer, how can you can stay steadfast in prayer, when you feel like quitting, or wonder if God cares? By remembering that Christ prayed and prays for you. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, 'not my will but yours be done' and that meant bearing your greatest burden at the cross, and doing the most costly thing he could, for you. And now, the Bible tells us that he is sat at God's right hand praying for you. And when you know that, you know he loves you and wants the best for you, even in your waiting, so don't quit on the one who never quits on you.

But the next thing Paul says about prayer is: v2, 'Being watchful in it with thanksgiving.' Now, have you ever experienced the opposite of being watchful in prayer? Like being sleepy in prayer, and you close your eyes to pray and 5 minutes later your head jolts back and you think, 'this isn't going so well!' And whilst Jesus was pouring out his heart in prayer in the garden, what were the

disciples doing? Sleeping. And in response he said, Mark 14:38, '*Watch and pray* that you may not enter into temptation.' And to be watchful in prayer is to be alert to the fact that your praying in this moment matters. It's to realise that there are multiple temptations to you living faithfully as a Christian, stuff that puts you to sleep spiritually, that distracts you.

As Peter writes, 'Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour' (1 Peter 5:8). And he may not try and devour you in a great trial of faith – he may do it by giving you what you want, by smothering you with comfort and ease. It's why when Paul speaks about the battle we're in he says, we should be 'praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance' (Ephesians 6:18). In other words, your enemy wants to anaesthetise you, so be watchful.

And then, he says, pray 'with thanksgiving' (v2). Because thankfulness defeats despair, doesn't it? Thankfulness reminds us, God, this is who you are, thank you! This is what you have done for me in Christ, thank you! This is what you have promised to do in Christ, in the world, thank you! And thankfulness turns us outwards, from ourselves and towards God. It takes our focus from off of ourselves and on to God, and his character and his faithfulness and his promises.

But then Paul does something remarkable. He asks them to pray for him specifically. Verses 3-4: 'At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison – that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.'

And I think that's remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, think of this man, Paul's experience, think of his track record; think of what he has seen God achieve through him; think of his intellect; think of his gifting. He's at the top of his game, and here he is asking normal, everyday Christians in a down-on-its-luck town to pray for him – mums and dads, businessmen, shop-owners, cleaners, slaves. Why? Because he knows that on his own he's nothing. He needs God's power and God's provision, and he knows those come through God's people's prayers.

But the second thing that's remarkable is what he asks them to pray for. Because it's not his personal liberty. He's in prison because he's been proclaiming the good news of Jesus. And you might think that he'd be justified in asking for things to go well for him for a change. I mean, 'I've done what God asked of me. I've kept my side of the bargain. I've lived a good life… so now it's time for God to keep his side of the bargain… so pray that these prison doors would be opened for me.' But that's not what he asks them to pray. He doesn't ask them that his sufferings would end. He asks them to pray that God would open a door, not for him, but for the word, for the good news of Jesus – that got him into this trouble in the first place - would spread even further. He doesn't ask for a release from prison, but for a release of power, and God's power in evangelism.

You see, Paul knows that opposition, and hardship, and cost, and even loss, are not reasons to stop doing what God has called you to. They're reasons for courage and perseverance. So be steadfast in prayer.

Walk Wisely

Verse 5: 'Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.' So you're in Christ, Paul says, so you're going to see the world, and life, and what it means to flourish in life, differently. But outside, others won't. And in Paul's day, Christians were called atheists, because they refused to worship the gods of the day. And today, if as a Christian you refuse to worship the gods of the day, you too will increasingly be viewed, as extreme, or intolerant, because you're out of step with the world.

So to live in the world is going to require wisdom. To explain and live out what it means to flourish and thrive as a human in Christ – at school, on campus, in the office, with your circle of friends, is going to require you to think some stuff through. You're going to need God's wisdom for when to speak and what to say when you do speak. When to confront and when to let something pass. When to be bold and when to be tactful. When to be courageous and when to be creative. And we don't have that wisdom on our own. But Christ does. Which is why we are to set our minds on him, and pray.

And part of this walking wisely, Paul says, is *how* you say what you say. Verse 6: 'Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.' So, far from the difficulties we face as Christians in a post-Christian world being a reason to disengage from the world, and withdraw to the ghetto, we're to take the opportunities God gives us, and whether someone's questions are positive, or neutral or hostile, we're to answer them. And do so graciously.

Pretty early on in our marriage I learned that I could win an argument with Su, but lose my wife. And you don't want to do that, do you! And the same is true for our interactions with others. The way you say something is just as important as what you say. At least it is if you want them to hear it. You see, you can be passionate for Jesus. You can have your theology nailed. You can be zealous for the truth. But if you don't live wisely, if you don't speak graciously, you'll end up isolated, and no one will want to hear your answers to their questions. So, Paul says, 'let your speech always be gracious, *seasoned with salt*.'

Now, salt can make bland food taste amazing, can't it, and you go back for seconds. And it's not that Paul is saying the gospel is bland, it's that you and I can make it sound bland. So, season it, Paul says. Season it with your life story, with the joy, or the enthusiasm, or the healing, or the forgiveness, or the love, or the acceptance that you have found in Christ.

And when it comes to making the best use of the time, and walking in wisdom with outsiders, think of the big decisions before us as a church. When we met as a search committee a couple of weeks back to think through what we're going to be looking for in a replacement to Andy, one of the things we all agreed that

we're looking for is someone who loves Jesus and knows that young people *on the outside* need Jesus, and does something about it.

But also, think about our building campaign. Paul praying in prison for an open door for the word, and making the best use of the time isn't about prioritising comfort, is it. It means looking for a place that will best serve the mission of Christ to reach outsiders. And I don't know about anyone else, but when I stand at the door of any potential venue and think, 'could this be it?' I want to spend more time looking outside – who can we reach from here? How will this help spread the message? Than looking inside.

Our lives are short. So let's make the most of them, in steadfast prayer and in wise living and gracious speaking that God might use us in others coming to know him.

And as Paul ends this letter, he names just some of the people whom God has used in his, and these Colossians lives.

Be a Messenger of God's grace

A couple of years back we had some guests over as a family, and the conversation turned to friends. And our guests asked our girls if they had many friends here, and they said yes and listed them. And then one of the girls said, 'but Dad's only got three friends in the whole wide world'. To which our guest replied, 'Three? As many as that? Well, for a man he's doing very well!'

But it seems as if Paul was doing even better, because as he ends he names 11 people involved in his life. And so, starting with the end, we could talk about Archipus in v17, and the need to keep going in what God has called you to; or about Nympha, opening up her home in v15, and the power of hospitality to spread the gospel; or Demas in v14, a man who would later desert Paul, because he was in love with this present world; or Luke the beloved physician, who didn't desert Paul. But instead, starting at the top, I want to just highlight some of the others.

There's Tychicus, who in v7 Paul calls 'a beloved brother'. There's Onesimus, the runaway slave, who in v9 he also calls 'our faithful and beloved brother'. Then Paul lists three men: Aristarchus, Mark and Jesus called Justus. And he calls Aristarchus, v10, 'my fellow prisoner', literally, my fellow prisoner of war – now was Aristarchus actually in jail alongside Paul, or is Paul speaking metaphorically? We don't know, but Paul knew this man was in it together with him. We know from Acts that Aristarchus had risked his life for Paul in Ephesus, and was with him in the boat when they were shipwrecked. So these two men had history together – risking your lives for one another kind of history. Then there's Mark, who Paul reminds them in v10, is the 'cousin of Barnabas.' The same Mark who years before had deserted Paul but, through the ministry of Barnabas, that ultimate encourager, had been restored, and here he was, once a cause of division, now with Aristarchus and Jesus called Justus, one of three men who Paul says in v11, 'have been a comfort to me.'

And then there's Epaphras, and what a joy he must have been to Paul: v12, 'Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus… always struggling on your behalf in his prayers.'

So, as Paul sits there in jail, how is God demonstrating his love and care for Paul? It's simple isn't it: through his people – through beloved and faithful brothers, through fellow prisoners of war, through friends who are a comfort. So, when life is hard, when everything seems broken, look out for God's messengers of grace, because they'll come. Look out for his ministering angels – they might not come in blazing white, they might just be your friend who sticks with you – and they'll minister his grace to you.

And be that faithful friends to others. Be a Barnabas to a Mark who's failed; be a comforter to the one who's in a hole; be a fellow prisoner of war to the one who's going through something you know the pain of only too well. Look out for and be God's messengers of grace.

And finally,

Receive God's Message

If you're going to keep praying and cultivate this outward looking mentality that seeks to engage those around you with the gospel; and be a giver of grace, you're going to need fuel on the fire of your heart. So Paul tells this young church in v16, 'And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.'

Now, no one really know what the letter to Laodiceans was. It could have been a letter like this one that's been lost to history, or it may be what we call Paul's letter to the Ephesians, because in some of the earliest manuscripts Ephesians doesn't mention Ephesus and may have been a circular letter sent first to Laodicea. Whichever, Paul is clear isn't he: Christians in Colossae, you need to be reading and hearing God's word. It's why he said back in chapter 3, 'let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.'

So, meditate on God's word. Don't just speed-read it, let the gospel sink in. Ponder it. Take a verse, or a passage, and chew on it. Let the Spirit take it and speak it to your heart, and let it become fuel for your life. And then pray, and live and speak for Christ, and spread his grace around you.