



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## Opening Doors for the Word

Colossians 4.2-6

David Anguish

### *Introduction*

For all the similarities we see between the ancient Greco-Roman culture and modern West, there are still some notable differences. Among the biggest is the fact that Christianity has long held a dominant, insider position in our culture, a significant contrast with their status as outsiders on the margins of society. Though first viewed as a sect within the legal religion of Judaism, from the mid-to-late first century until the early fourth century, Christianity was an illegal religion.<sup>1</sup>

Their marginalized state is given more prominence in some writings (cf. 1 Peter) than others, but it is never far below the surface. With it came a constant challenge to walk in a way that pleased God regardless of their circumstances. Thus, Paul prayed they would “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord” (Col 1.10). He called believers who were tempted by a heresy that apparently blended ideas from multiple religions and philosophies with the way of Christ to “walk” according to the fundamental view of Christ they had received (2.6). Living within the pagan culture of western Asia Minor, they were to refrain from the behaviors in which they had “once walked” and were instead to “set [their] minds on the things that are above, where Christ is” (3.2, 7).

They were also to “walk” in a way that would influence outsiders toward the faith (Col 4.5). As we would expect, they would need God’s help to do that, and it is that to which Paul turns in our text as he offers thoughts on how to influence outsiders.

### *Paul’s Appeal to God’s Power (4.2-4)*

As we make a decision to be more active in the work of influencing outsiders toward the faith, it is possible to move directly to a course wherein we have meetings, formulate plans for specific works, devise strategies, set long term goals, and then begin an outreach program. While we certainly should be discerning in evaluating our audience, opportunities, talents, and strengths, we can focus so much on what we need to do that we forget that it is the Lord and his power that ultimately gives growth (1 Cor 3.5-6; cf. Matt 28.20). But both by implication and direct

statement, Paul calls us to be dependent on God and use our wisdom and abilities in service and submission to his will.

Thus, in verse 2, he begins his call to outreach by telling the Colossians to “continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” His emphasis reminds us that we must be nurturing a relationship with God so that we are growing in our knowledge of him (cf. John 17.3). Being intentional about this is necessary because we can become so busy with life—even life in service—that we fail to nurture our relationship with God. Just as we do to strengthen and maintain any relationship, so in our relationship with God we must determine what is most important and devote ourselves to the time and effort involved to strengthen the connection. Paul saw prayer as vital to that endeavor.

But he also saw that God would ultimately be the one to open the doors of opportunity and empower him to respond to them effectively. So, in verses 3 and 4, he asks the Colossians to “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.”

### *Walking with God's Power (4.5)*

In verse 5, he turns to the wise application of God's power to our approach to outsiders: “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.”

Paul knew that what has been called the power of person (i.e., character) is more likely to leaven society for good. He also knew how to best use that power, wisely submitting to God's different, yet practical way. Verse 5's counsel assumes that the most influential people are attentive to others' needs and are aware of the most appropriate ways to influence them. As he demonstrated in the different approaches he took to different audiences, that attentiveness begins with listening to people to really understand what their immediate needs are (compare Acts 16.16-41 and 17.16-31).

To do this, we must imitate the example of Jesus's interest in and compassion for people. Specifically, we should seek to apply his counsel to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” in our dealings with others (Matt 10.16). In the words I recall from Landon Saunders, we need to “know what time it is in a person's life.” Among other things, this means we will be alert for teachable moments and learn not force things when such moments have not yet occurred.

### *Capable Use of God's Power (4.6)*

Having committed to relying on and walking according to God's power, in verse 6, Paul turns to specific uses of his power to bring about good. “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”

The assumption in this instruction is that, if we are dependent on God's power and alert to the opportunities, we will find occasions to tell the good news. But this verse also shows that Paul was not content to merely live a good life and do good works; he was determined to engage in persuasion (cf. Acts 17.2-4). Put another way, he understood that sharing information about what God has done through Jesus is not the same as inviting others to begin their own relationship with Jesus.

Verse 6 demonstrates three important principles. First, our speech should be gracious. In other words, we should pay attention both to the things we talk about and to the way we talk about them.

---

At the same time, our speech should be “seasoned with salt.” In the ancient world, salt was used as an agent to slow the decay of meat. But the phrase Paul uses had an additional dimension in the pagan world, referring to the wit needed in effective speech.<sup>2</sup> While this includes learning to be “quick on our feet,” it also necessarily involves having something of substance to say beyond trite and pious platitudes.

This leads to the third principle: the goal of gracious, salt-seasoned speech is to “know how you ought to answer each person.” Foremost among the application of this principle is understanding the wisdom of continuing to grow in our understanding of the truth so that we can know and apply it better, including how to apply it to more than one kind of hearer.

### *Conclusion*

At the conclusion of the 1979 edition of his book, *Why Churches Grow*, Flavil Yeakley declared:

We can preach the gospel to every person on earth before the end of the century. We have the manpower. We have the brain power. We have the financial power. We have the communication power. What is most important: we have the gospel power. All we lack is the will power.<sup>3</sup>

What was true at the beginning of the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century remains true as we near the end of the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup>. God’s power to save through the gospel remains available for us. He can do. What we must always ask is whether we will do.

*www.davidanguish.com*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a helpful treatment of just how much the Christians were outsiders through the church’s first 300 years, see Larry W. Hurtado, *Why On Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* The Père Marquette Lectures in Theology 2016 (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 175.

<sup>3</sup> Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr., *Why Churches Grow*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Broken Arrow, OK: Christian Communications, Inc., 1979), 123.