

We are closing in on the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Last time we looked at what Paul writes about prayer in verses 2-4 of chapter 4 and we saw how important prayer is for the contribution that individual church members make to the mission of the church. This evening we will hear the word of the Lord to us from verses 5-6 which focus on the contribution individual believers make in commending the Christian faith to outsiders – to those who are outside of the church – to those who according to Paul in Ephesians 2:12, are without “hope and without God in the world.”

Christianity is a missionary religion. That does not make us popular in many settings. A faith that proselytizes is often seen as a threat to people who are in power. Or it is just seen as a nuisance in a pluralistic society such as ours. One of the reasons that Christians are persecuted so often is that making disciples of all nations is a central part of our calling as followers of Jesus Christ. We proclaim that there is only one true God and that all people everywhere are accountable to him. We proclaim that Jesus is Lord and that there is no higher authority than his. We proclaim that there is only one way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and submitting to him. We proclaim that all who reject Jesus as saviour and Lord will be punished eternally in hell.

Of course, the message also includes the fact that believing in Jesus and following him is the very best and most blessed way to live – that it is the way of love and peace and joy and hope. But at the heart of what it means to be a Christian is the task that Jesus has given to the church to make disciples of all the nations and so Christianity is fundamentally a missionary religion. And the verses that we are looking at this evening are a reflection of that fact. Paul here is teaching us here how we are to relate to outsiders – how ordinary believers are to commend Christ and his message to outsiders.

I am using the term “ordinary believers” simply to make the distinction between believers who are called to be missionaries and evangelists and those who are not. The term “ordinary believers” as I am using it is not intended to suggest that those whose main calling is not to be a missionary or evangelist are any less important and significant than those who are. The Bible teaches that we are all gifted differently and every gift is important. But it is necessary to make some kind of distinction between those like Paul who had a special calling to be a missionary and the people in the churches who were called to be tradesmen or mothers or farmers or teachers.

It is clear from this passage that God's expectation for ordinary believers is not the same as it is for those like Paul who had been specially gifted and set aside for that task. The kind of language that Paul uses here when referring to himself is quite different from the kind of language that he uses for ordinary church members. For himself he speaks in terms of declaring the mystery of Christ. For the congregation he speaks in terms of them answering each person. There is a significant difference in emphasis here that reflects the general emphasis of the NT. The NT puts significant emphasis on the role of gifted people set apart to be missionaries and evangelists and the rest of the church supporting those missionaries and evangelists in prayer and financially.

This is in line with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 9:37-38 when he said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

But this is not to say that ordinary church members have no other role to play in bringing the gospel to outsiders besides prayer and financial support. And our text is one of the places where the apostle gives direct instruction to church members concerning how they are to relate to outsiders. He had called them to pray for his mission work in verses 3-4 and now in verses 5-6 he describes how they are to be witnesses for Jesus Christ in their everyday lives.

The first thing that he mentions is their walk. "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time." He is addressing their relationship to outsiders and the first thing he mentions is their walk. "Walk in wisdom towards outsiders."

He is speaking about their way of life. He is talking about how they conduct themselves toward outsiders. Paul had earlier given a rather comprehensive description of this idea how Christians are to walk without reference to outsiders, but it gives us a pretty good idea of what he is thinking about when he tells them to "walk in wisdom toward outsiders. In 1:9-10 he had told them that he was praying that they might "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...."

Now he is saying that with special reference to outsiders. It is not the only reason, but one important reason that believers are to walk in wisdom in a manner worthy of the Lord bearing fruit in every good work is the impression that that kind of life will have on outsiders.

Paul especially mentions wisdom here. Christians are to walk in wisdom toward outsiders. Wisdom is a very important biblical concept. Wisdom is rooted in the fear of the Lord. Wisdom includes keeping God's commandments. But wisdom has to do with the practicalities of living obedient lives and with making the best choices in situations when the best way is not explicitly spelled out in Scripture. God gives us a lot of instruction in the Bible about the right way to live and wisdom begins with following the biblical laws and commands and guidance. All of that gives us a very helpful framework, but the biblical guidance is not explicit about every decision. There are all kinds of choices that we must make within the biblical parameters and wisdom involves making the best choices when there are a number of legitimate possibilities. Wisdom involves things like insight, prudence, self-discipline, understanding, good judgment, and tact.

So what does this look like in connection with walking in wisdom toward outsiders? Remember the goal is to make a positive impression for the Lord. Wisdom would begin with integrity. Trying to make a good impression on others for the Lord might tempt one to some kind of fake religiosity to try to make a good impression. That of course is the opposite of what Paul is talking about here. Wisdom requires integrity – not pretending to be someone we are not. But then also people-skills – tact – sensitivity – thoughtfulness – timing.

But here we are still speaking about our walk – our conduct – how we live our lives before outsiders. What should they see? They should see diligence. They should see moderation. They should see generosity. They should see balance. They should see kingdom priorities. They should see that church is a priority. They should see loving, caring families. They should see joy and contentment and enjoyment of life under God.

What is walking in wisdom toward outsiders? It is a life built upon the rock of Jesus' teaching. The wise man build his house upon the rock, Jesus teaches us. It is living ready and watchful for the return of Christ at each moment. According to James 1:3:17, "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere..."

So walking in wisdom towards outsiders is living the kind of life that Paul is exhorting us to live in this letter, as an important part of our witness to outsiders. There are all kinds of reasons to live godly and holy lives, but one of them is to commend the gospel. The gospel message says that living the life of following Jesus is the best way to live, and the lives of the followers of Jesus are to be a demonstration of that.

This is a considerable emphasis in the NT. Jesus said in Matthew 5:16, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Paul in Philippians 2:14-16 wrote, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world holding fast to the word of life...." Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:12 "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation."

This is huge. Making disciples is a central part of the mission of the church. That includes more than seeking to convert outsiders to Christ, but seeking to convert outsiders to Christ is a key part of our mission. And a huge part of that is the church as a whole demonstrating the attractiveness of following Christ by the way we live our lives before a watching world. Attractive Christian living is itself an invitation to outsiders to consider the gospel. And it is certainly necessary to support and recommend the message. And its opposite is the great hindrance to the acceptance of the message.

One of the great objections that people have to Christianity is the way that many Christians live. That criticism is not always fair. There is also the truth that the natural heart hates God and his people and so Christians are often judged harshly and unfairly. Some characteristics of faithful Christian living such as sexual purity, for instance, are unattractive to people who dead in their sins. But taking all that into account, there is still some truth to the objection that the lives of many professing Christians are not much of a recommendation for the gospel.

Paul's exhortation in our text is a call for us to seek to live our lives before outsiders in such a way that we demonstrate the attractiveness of following Christ and to seek to exercise biblical wisdom in the way in which

we live our lives before outsiders. That will involve thoughtfulness. We can think about ways that we can relate to outsiders, in our neighborhoods, at work, in society in general that will commend the Lord and his gospel. A call to wisdom is a call to think about the kinds of attitudes and actions and words are more likely to make a positive impression for Christ on outsiders while being faithful to God's commands.

Think of the character traits that Paul has told us to put on in Colossians 3. Compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, forgiving others, love, peacemaking. Think of some of the things that he tells us to avoid and put to death – anger, wrath, malice, slander. There are many things about the kind of life God is calling us to live that are attractive to anyone and there are many things about the sins that God is calling us to avoid that are ugly and unattractive to anyone.

Then there are good works. The term “good works” is a term that is often used in the context of recommending the gospel to outsiders. We can think of good works in terms of what Paul says in Galatians 6:10 where he writes, “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” Good works are doing good to everyone. Jesus is the ultimate example of someone who did good works. Peter in his preaching to the household of Cornelius recorded in Acts 10 described Jesus as one who “went about doing good.”

So Paul tells us to “walk in wisdom toward outsiders” and from the context we understand that this has to do with commending the Lord and his gospel. This is not the only reason that we are to live wise and holy lives. There are many exhortations to living wise and holy lives that do not mention the impression that our lives make to outsiders. But it is one of the reasons and it is an important part of the way in which we are all to contribute to the mission of the church to make disciples of the nations.

The second part of verse 5, adds a note of urgency to the exhortation to walk in wisdom toward outsiders. Paul adds here, “making the best use of the time.” This is intended to encourage us to take his exhortation seriously and it adds a note of urgency. We are to make the best use of the time by walking in wisdom toward outsiders.

This is part of the general urgency that the NT impresses upon us with respect to our lives as followers of Christ. A good example of this for what we are thinking about now is Jesus' parable of the faithful and wise servant told in Matthew 25:45. “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.” One of the things that our master has told us to do as we await his return is to walk in wisdom toward outsiders. And Paul is telling us that we are to make the best use of the time.

We are being called to take this exhortation seriously in the light of the urgency of the great commission. The Lord gave the church the great commission just before he ascended into heaven. And we are to be busy with that task in the light of the fact that the time is limited and the task is great.

This is how we are to think of our time. We are to make the best use of it in light of the fact that we are being called to walk in wisdom towards outsiders. There is an urgency about living the kind of life that commends the gospel to outsiders. As followers of Jesus we have been given the task of bringing the gospel to the world. And that is an urgent task. People are dying in their sins. People being converted to Christ is high on the list of Jesus' priorities. There is the tendency in us to be fully engaged when we are pursuing our this-worldly passions and lethargic when pursuing the great commission. A huge part of every believer's responsibility when it comes to the fulfilling the great commission is to walk in wisdom towards outsiders and Paul is telling us here to think seriously about our use of our time in the light of the urgency of the mission of the church to make disciples of all nations. A huge part of the biblical strategy for fulfilling the great commission is for all believers to commend the gospel by the way that they live their lives before a watching world. And Paul is telling us here to make the best use of our time with this calling in mind.

So, in verse 5, Paul addresses our walk. In verse 6, he addresses our speech. The Bible places great emphasis on the importance of the lives of Christians in the fulfillment of the great commission. But that does not mean that there is nothing for us to say. How we relate to outsiders will also involve our speech. And this is one of the places in the NT which explicitly addresses the responsibility of ordinary Christians with respect to how they are to speak to outsiders.

This is what he says: "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." The difference between how Paul speaks about his own calling and that of ordinary believers is significant. Regarding himself he speaks of himself declaring the mystery of Christ and speaking as he ought to speak. Regarding ordinary believers he speaks about answering each person.

Dick Lucas in his commentary on this passage expresses the difference like this: "We may describe this difference by saying that while the apostle looks for many opportunities to *direct* evangelism and teaching, the typical Christian in Colossae is to look for many opportunities for *responsive* evangelism." (p. 173) The language that Paul uses here suggests that the calling ordinary believers is not as aggressive as the calling of an evangelist. An evangelist seeks to connect with people with the purpose of presenting the gospel. Ordinary believers have contact with outsiders for all kinds of other reasons. Ordinary believers work with outsiders, do business with outsiders, interact with outsiders in the course of being their neighbors.

Paul here is assuming that we will interact with outsiders as we live our lives from day to day. He is assuming conversations with outsiders. And in those conversations questions will come up that can be answered from a Christian perspective. I don't think we can restrict what Paul says here about answering each person to explicit questions. A conversation can raise questions that Christians can answer. In a conversation with an outsider you are Christ's representative and you can answer the question – "What does the Bible say about this or that."

This is not to say that ordinary Christians should never seek to initiate a conversation with a view to presenting the gospel. We are all gifted differently and that difference matters. But we all are called to “know how [we] ought to answer each person.” Confessing Christ before men means being public about our allegiance to Christ. The text assumes that believers will interact with outsiders in their everyday lives and the explicit call to all believers is to be able to answer questions that will come up.

That requires preparation. Paul had been praying that the Colossians might be “filled with the knowledge [God’s] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” and that they might be “increasing in the knowledge of God.” There is a lot in the Bible about the importance of knowledge. There is a lot in the Bible about the importance of teaching and learning. And here is one of the reasons that we should be knowledgeable Christians ... so that we can answer questions about Christianity in conversations with outsiders.

Paul does not only tell us that we must be able to answer outsiders; he also tells us how we are to speak to them. “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” We need to be gracious in the way in which we speak with outsiders. That means being kind and gentle and wise rather than harsh and arrogant and insensitive. In speaking about God’s truth with outsiders we are dealing with truth and falsehood, right and wrong. We are dealing with people’s deepest beliefs. We are speaking about matters that people have strong feelings about. There is an aspect of confrontation when presenting God’s perspective on things because outsiders have their own perspective on things. And so there is great need to be gracious – to be firm, but gentle, firm but humble – seeking to say things in ways that do not unnecessarily give offence. There is an offence that is inherent in the gospel that cannot be avoided, but Paul here is calling us to avoid any unnecessary offence.

He also says that our speech with outsiders must be “seasoned with salt.” Jesus says that Christians are the salt on the earth. The ESV Study Bible says, “As salt is beneficial in a number of ways, so are disciples of Jesus who influence the world for good.” That is a good way to think of how our speech towards outsiders is to be seasoned with salt. Our speech should be beneficial towards outsiders. Our influence should be a good influence in the light of the biblical worldview. When we have the opportunity to speak with outsiders, we should use that opportunity to speak in a way that does good in the light of what is truly good and upbuilding.

So ordinary Christians have a very significant role in the church’s task to bring the gospel to the world. We are not all called to be missionaries or evangelists, but we are all called to support missionaries and evangelists as we are able financially. We are all called to pray for the coming of God’s kingdom. We are all called to walk in wisdom toward outsiders. And we are all called to interact with outsiders and give answers and to speak in a way that is beneficial in the light of the truth of the gospel.

And we are to do this making the best use of the time. We are to remember that we are people who are called to be the light of the world reflecting the light of Jesus. We are people who have been saved by grace through what Jesus has done for us and that salvation includes being called to represent God in the world. We are a

people who belong to God's kingdom which growing until one day it will fill the earth. We are people who have a mission to seek first the kingdom of God. We are people who have a mission to make disciples of all the nations. And we are to think of our lives in these terms.

Thankfully everything that we are called to do is part of the gospel message. Our tasks are not given to us in order to earn or merit God's favor. Jesus has done that on our behalf and so through faith in him we are made right with God. In Christ we are beloved by God. His favor rests upon us. His love upon us. And his Spirit dwells within us. And as part of the blessings of salvation we are enlisted the great task of proclaiming the good news of Jesus to the world. It is the most worthwhile of tasks. It is about the glory of God. It is about love for sinners who will perish apart from the gospel.

And God calls us to engage in this task together as a church. Through supporting those whom God has called to be missionaries and evangelists. Through continuing steadfastly in prayer. Through the way we live before outsiders and through the way we speak to outsiders. In Romans 12:6, Paul writes, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them" And in our text he call us to make "the best use of the time."

So let us consider our lives in the light of these verses. Let us consider whether we are making the best use of the time. Let us consider if we feel the urgency of the task that we have been given. Let us confess our sins and repent of them. Let us rest in the grace of God in the gospel and with renewed enthusiasm and zeal embrace the calling of these verses in our lives.