

# Looking Outwards

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Preacher: Simon Attwood

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Excellent. Well, good evening again. My name is Simon. I am the trainee minister here. Let's pray as we start listening to God's word together. Father, thank you that you speak to us through your word.

Would you speak to us this evening by your spirit that we might hear you and know you better. Father, show us how to live for Christ more effectively and enjoy you more this evening. Amen.

When you hear the word evangelism, does your heart sink or skip a beat? I wonder what feelings come to your mind.

For some of you, there will be a real feeling of excitement, the exhilaration of the challenge of sharing the gospel with somebody. A chance with a friend, a chance with a stranger, you'll just jump straight at it.

But for others, the E word kind of brings up a load of anxiety. Here is yet another way in which I don't measure up as a Christian. I know I'm supposed to be speaking to people about Jesus and telling everyone I know about him, but to be honest, I don't even know where to start.

[ 1 : 0 5 ]     I'm just not one of those people who seems to have a gospel conversation on every bus ride, on every walk through the park. Maybe I'm just a second-rate Christian. Let me say that we all feel like that sometimes.

If Jesus really is our Savior, it's absolutely right that our focus must be on telling others about him. So why does that sometimes feel like a burden instead of a joy?

Well, tonight's passage in Colossians helps us think that through. As believers, how will we keep our focus outwards to the world and to making Jesus known?

Paul's going to give the Colossian church six simple instructions that will help them to do that. There's three about prayer and three about how they interact about sliders.

It's nice and easy to follow. So our two thoughts on evening, which are on your service sheet that you have in your hands, are how to speak to God about people and how to speak to people about God.

[ 2 : 0 6 ]     Nice and straightforward. Now, to bring us back to speed with the book of Colossians, Paul has been writing to show them that they are new people in Christ. And as such, they are to live by Christ's wisdom and to put on Christ as a new way of living.

Paul has been detailing what that new life looks like for the last couple of chapters, looking at life inside the church, then out to family life and to work, and then most recently, and in this evening's passage, looking at what it means to live a life with people outside.

If you were to go back to chapter 3, verse 17, you'd find that Paul said this, So all areas of our lives as Christians, we have the privilege of living for Christ in them.

And it's something that should be a joy to us. There is something to be actively gained or lost in every single moment of our lives. Every single thing really is meaningful and significant.

And to Paul, that is a real joy, not a burden. So as we shift our focus beyond life inside the church and in our families to the watching world, we need to remind ourselves that faithfulness is for all of life, not just for Sundays.

[ 3 : 27 ] The very essence of believing in a God who gave himself for us is that we give ourselves for others. And that's what drives this section of Colossians.

Now, as was mentioned in our prayers, and as I'm sure you've seen all over your social media and all over the news and all over everything else in the whole world, it's been quite a big week or two weeks politically and especially in America.

Now, you'd be glad to know that I have no comments to pass on what's been happening in America in the last few weeks. But looking into it for a while did lead me down a Wikipedia rabbit hole about ex-presidents of the United States.

Someone I then found really interesting was Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of America between 1901 and 1909. He was clearly a bit of a character.

His Wikipedia entry said that he enjoyed playing tennis, hiking, rowing, polo, jiu-jitsu, horseback riding, skinny dipping in the winter, and boxing to such an extent that he lost sight in his left eye in a boxing match and didn't tell anyone for about four years.

[ 4 : 34 ] Clearly, he was quite an interesting guy, but also politically, he achieved a load of things. He's known for his conservation work in America and establishing a lot of national parks. He began work on the Panama Canal, brokered a successful peace agreement between Japan and Russia.

He did loads of stuff for his life, and what a man. And early in his writings, he said this, Nothing in this world worth having or worth doing is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, and difficulty.

No kind of life is worth leading if it's always an easy life. I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life, but I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives but led them well.

And I just found that quote really interesting. I don't think it entirely holds up. Let's be honest. Some good things are just easy. That is actually all right. But it's an important thought.

Many of the people that we admire the most have worked very hard for the things that they have achieved. And when we look in tonight's passage, in that first verse in verse 2 there, we see Paul is calling for devotion towards prayer and evangelism.

[ 5 : 48 ] He believes these to be tasks that are worthy of hard work, worthy of taking up our whole lives. We shouldn't be surprised then if we find that these things are actually hard work.

But we must be convinced that they're achieving something worthwhile. So let's start with those first three instructions then on prayer. The first point is that we engage in evangelism by speaking to God about people.

Have a look down at verses 2 to 4, where we find Paul's three instructions to pray, one in each verse. So first in verse 2, devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

One instruction, two different tasks. Paul is empathic that prayers, prayer is something that we should be giving our time and our effort to. We must be speaking to God often about the things that are not in our control, but under his.

Now this entire section, as we said before, is about evangelism, about how we look out. So watchfulness is going to be linked forward into verse 5 later, about making the most of every opportunity, which we'll talk about later on.

[ 6 : 56 ] But this idea of watchfulness in prayer extends beyond that. It's an attitude that looks at the world and asks the question, what do I need to bring before God?

Where do I see needs that I need to bring before him? One of the wonderful privileges of being a Christian is the absolute assurance that I can bring anything I see in my whole life before my heavenly father in prayer and be assured that he hears me.

Every time I see something that troubles me, any time I see an injustice or a sin, any suffering, I can bring these immediately before God in heaven, to a heavenly father who listens and acts.

And that should make me rightly thankful, which is his second instruction in prayer. Now my old boss, Pete Dixon, used to say the words, gratitude is good for the soul.

And he used to say it very often. If you're ever having a bad day, Pete would say, tell me something that you're thankful for. And it's something that's really stuck with me. An attitude of thankfulness is to come before God rightly.

[ 8 : 05 ] There will always be things to be thankful for to him. And sometimes it's when that seems most challenging in prayer. When life is tough, when I'm suffering and struggling, it's those moments when I actually need to be most thankful.

Anyone who's tried to stay thankful in prayer whilst they have been suffering something significant knows that it is a true spiritual discipline. And it's incredibly good to remember that at the moment with coronavirus.

Yes, things are immensely hard in many ways, but we do have much to be thankful for. Some of those things that have been taken away might actually be sharpening us up on being more thankful for the things that we do have.

Just a small thing, but I know I'm so much more thankful for Kelvin Grove Park than I've ever been in my life before. Because actually I get to go for a walk in a beautiful place on a day. Something that back in January really wouldn't have passed from my mind that much.

But now it's something that I walked through thanking God for. Now, as we think about prayer in Colossians, Paul himself was clearly a man of prayer. Close to the start of this letter, in chapter 1, verse 9, he said, Paul knows that the spread of the gospel and that task is one in which only God can bring success.

[ 9 : 36 ] He is totally humble and dependent on God and the spirit for the work to bring Christ into people's lives. Paul can't do that himself. He is absolutely reliant on God for people to bring him to know Jesus.

He can't achieve anything in the lives of the Colossian church for this letter about dependence in prayer. And so he prays for them. But that humility extends even further into asking this church to pray for him too.

So look down at verses 3 and 4. 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. And then secondly, pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should.

Paul is asking the Colossians to return the favor in praying for him. And we might be surprised when we're reminded that he is actually, when writing this, in prison, that his prayer isn't for open prison doors but open doors for the word.

In human terms, really, Paul couldn't be in a worse situation to go sharing the gospel. He's literally locked up. And yet the focus of his prayers is not about that. It's about the gospel going out.

[ 10 : 48 ] He asks the Colossians to pray for doors for the message to go out so that mystery, that open secret of salvation for all and everything in Christ Jesus would spread further and further out.

It's a message that Paul believes is worth being imprisoned for. And so he prays, and this is what he prays for in verse 4, for clear opportunities and boldness to share it, the task that God has gifted him to do.

Now, this isn't something the Colossians, therefore, can choose to just put off to one side. They have a direct responsibility to pray for the ongoing evangelism beyond the gates of the city of Colossae.

Thus, praying for Paul and other evangelists is part of their work in evangelism. They participate in that mission by praying for him. Now, God has called some people specifically to be full-time evangelists, but that doesn't mean the rest of the people don't do any evangelism.

That's just not the case. We'll see that later in verses 5 and 6. But one of the major ways in which anyone in any church participates in evangelism is to be devoted to prayer for full-time evangelists.

[ 11 : 59 ] What does that mean for us here at St. Silas? Well, think through how you pray. Is the gospel going out at the heart of your prayer life?

Do you find yourself in your prayers focusing inwards on yourself or outwards to the world? Prayer like that is actually a real discipline. It's not easy to keep doing, to keep our eyes focused away from ourselves and to not be the center of our own prayer life.

And that's especially hard when you're suffering and when you struggle. Yet when we look at Paul, we see a man in prison whose eyes are firmly set outwards. He's not asking them to pray for anything that he is not personally going through.

So what does that look like for us? What could we be praying that would mirror that? Well, we need to pray for God to raise up more evangelists and to make sure that we're praying for the ones we already have. Our mission partners, which you could see at the back of church and on our website, they need your prayers for their work.

Not just that they would be safe and happy, but that they would have an open door for the word wherever they are. Think about your prayers for them. Are your prayers that they would have a good day and a good week?

[ 13 : 14 ] Or are your prayers for them that they would have the boldness and the opportunity to share Jesus with people who don't yet know him? If you're a family here or maybe a flat of students here, why not adopt a mission partner?

Pick one that you're going to pray for and get in touch with and ask for prayer points for really often. Let me also say on behalf of the staff team here, please pray for us.

We need your prayers to get the message right and for opportunities for people to hear it. And pray for more ministry trainees to come and join us on the team as well.

We need to be training up more people to take this message out. So as a church, we help one another to keep the focus on the gospel in this way, in our prayers. And this is absolutely a task worthy of our devotion as new people in Christ.

So that's the first way that we're called to engage in evangelism. It's through prayer, speaking to God about people. Now, for a while after university, I worked for ASDA.

[ 14 : 20 ] I was stocking produce at 6 a.m. four mornings a week, and it was a pain because my flat was really far away. So I had to get up at 4 a.m. to travel across town to only do a three and three quarter hour shift so they didn't have to legally pay me for the 15 minute break.

Suffice to say, I didn't love it. It wasn't my favorite. But I did have a team and I got to know them a little bit. To be honest, having just come off four years at university, having been in a church where I'd kind of grown up as a Christian for the first time ever, and being part of a Christian union and focusing on the mission that we had at our university, I was absolutely raring to go, thinking, right, give me a team at ASDA.

I'm going to tell them all about Jesus. But do you know where it's not a good place for a conversation about Jesus? Stacking cucumbers at 6 in the morning. Turns out people don't want to chat. And actually, I found that really distressing.

There was no break on my shift, so I didn't really get to know people that well. I could barely find opportunities to talk about Jesus. And I remember feeling, about two months in, like I was just failing miserably to do evangelism.

I was so excited coming out of university to go tell people about Jesus at my first workplace, and it just felt like I'd fallen at the first hurdle. So let me ask, was I right to feel that?

[ 15 : 41 ] Well, let's take a look at what Paul says in our second point. The second way we participate in evangelism is speaking to people about God. Paul gives the Colossians three more instructions about how they interact with people outside the church in verse 5 and 6.

To be wise in the way that you act towards outsiders, make the most of every opportunity, that your conversation always be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Well, let's take this one at a time. First, be wise in the way that you act. The Colossians have already heard a lot from Paul about being wise. The wisdom that we heard about back in chapter 3 is that which we get from Christ rather than the world.

Chapter 2, verse 3 said, Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures, of wisdom and knowledge. As new people in Christ, then, our lives are on display for him.

All of our actions say something about the God we believe in. We have a real need for wisdom because all of our conduct, big or small, has something to say about Jesus.

[ 16 : 51 ] Every single thing is a battle to be won or lost for him. Now, there are so many different ways in which that works out. We couldn't even scratch the surface. It would take forever and a day to go through those things.

But let me just ask you, if someone spent a week in your workplace or in your class or with you in a sports team, would they know that you were a Christian? Would they see any difference from the people around you?

Because, according to Paul, your new life in Christ should be visible. So does the way you conduct yourself visibly set you apart from a crowd? Paul envisages that the way that you live creates the gospel opportunities.

And therefore, Paul's second instruction is that when those opportunities come up, you would make the most of every single one. Now, that just assumes that we are praying watchfully and living wisely, trusting that opportunities will come as we live for Christ.

And thankfully, I would like to say for me, they even did in that team in ASDA as they built up relationships and it was surprising because I remember praying for that quite a lot. So we must keep our eyes open and be ready.

[ 18 : 04 ] But then that final instruction is about how we speak, making the most of the opportunities through our words. Talking to a Christian shouldn't be the same as talking to someone else.

Paul says that our conversation should be full of grace as if seasoned with salt. If our eyes are focused outwards in our conversations, then we will be people who listen well, who ask good questions about other people and put them at the center of our conversations.

They won't be competitive or self-justifying conversations or ones where we merely go with the flow, but know as new people we will have new speech. Now, don't fear because I think that when you hear that, the temptation is just to think that means shoehorning Jesus into every crack in every conversation.

But no, speaking as a new person in Christ means making conversations flavored with grace and through that learning to answer people about what we believe because they'll be getting some sense of it from the grace that they experience in our conversations if we're seeking to do that well.

So think tomorrow morning or tomorrow afternoon when you're in a breakout room on Zoom or at the break room at work with friends or just walking to Tessos to get your meal deal and someone asks, well, how was your weekend?

[ 19 : 24 ] You've got two options, haven't you, if you're a Christian? You can go, yeah, it was fine, I guess. I mean, you know, to be honest, coronavirus just means there's nothing really going on, eh? Great.

Or you could reply differently. Yeah, it was really good, thank you. Actually, being at church on Sunday was really encouraging to me this week. The opportunity is then open for someone just to say, well, why is that?

And then you're an opportunity to speak about Jesus. Look, the words aren't magic. They're just answering honestly as a Christian. If you don't feel confident about talking about Jesus, then just start by being gracious in your conversations.

Make them warm and inviting. Live out your new status in Christ by making the person that you're talking to the center of the conversation and not yourself. And trust that this is something in which you will grow.

If I had to give one big tip on this, it would be, maybe try asking one more question than you think is socially acceptable about someone's life. Sometimes people are just so unused to someone asking about how they really are and really making an effort to care for them that they're just genuinely surprised.

[ 20 : 35 ] Sometimes they don't expect it to the point where actually they'll be incredibly excited just to tell someone about what's really going on. Now we see in those three instructions that Paul isn't calling every single Colossian to turn into a street preacher at the marketplace.

The Lord has sent and equipped Paul and his fellow workers to do that. God doesn't call and gift every single person in the same way. Yet every Christian does have the responsibility to do what they can to speak about Jesus.

Let me say that should liberate us from some false expectations in evangelism. You don't have to be the office Billy Graham preaching a sermon in the break room and holding altar calls at the reception desk in order to be faithful.

I mean, how would that ever be wise? It would just not land with anybody. There's making the most of opportunities and then there's just coercion and we're not about that.

No, instead the way that we live along people is to be gracious and distinct in the way that we speak and the way that we act. Looking for those opportunities for the gospel to come up. Being prayerfully watchful to notice them and take them.

[ 21 : 50 ] There's just no point worrying that you haven't given a word perfect three point sermon to someone you work or study with. An important part of evangelism is speaking the gospel to people who are actually listening to you.

Not just throwing Christian truths across an office and watching them bounce off people. So I think a good question to ask yourself is not how can I speak about Jesus in this conversation but instead how can I act wisely making the most of this conversation for Jesus.

It's just a slight mental shift but it really helps us think about what we're doing when we live for Christ. And sometimes that just means knowing the difference between a good and a bad opportunity.

Cucumber stacking at 6am bad opportunity. But maybe after you've known someone for a couple of months and you know about their life chatting to them in the break room and saying you know you told me about that thing about last week about your family do you want to tell me some more about that?

I'm really interested to hear that actually. It's not that hard but there's a good opportunity to show someone that you care about them that there's something bigger in your life that you want to tell them and one day maybe you'll get an opportunity to share the hope that you have in Jesus and we do pray for that.

[ 23 : 03 ] And when we do have those opportunities they are real joys to us. So now let me say if you're here and you're not a Christian or you're watching online and you don't believe in Jesus this might seem like a bit of an odd sermon to you possibly.

This is all about how people who are Christians go and try and tell you about Jesus so maybe it's been a bit strange to listen to but let me say notice what the focus of the Christian faith is.

It's on serving Jesus by going out and telling people about him. It's all about serving other people outside of the church not ourselves inside.

Someone once said of a church that it is the only group of people that exists for the good of its non-members. Why is Paul telling people to lay down their lives to serve Jesus and tell other people about him?

It's a lot of activity for 2,000 years isn't it? To make people know Jesus. And a good question to then ask would be well why? Why are people so invested in this?

[ 24 : 11 ] Well let me say if you don't know Jesus we do believe he is just that important worth giving our whole and entire lives for. And if you think that sounds either ridiculous or impossible or intriguing maybe well come and ask us.

I can't explain how much we would love to talk to you about Jesus. If you have a friend or flatmate who brought you here why don't you ask them? If you came here off your own back and you don't know any Christians well come and talk to us we'd love to meet you or contact us through the church website.

We would love to tell you about who Jesus is because we think it's worth living our entire lives for him and we think it'd be worth you living your entire life for him too. But finally if you are a Christian here already when you think of evangelism remember that it isn't something only for the especially gifted but it's a gift that God himself has given to us to share him with the people that we meet and that we know and as we step out in our efforts in evangelism we become stronger and stronger in our faith.

Like the people of the Colossian church we're reminded that we are made to be new people in Christ and with that outward focus being a joyful thing living that out in prayer and action and speech as humble people we're called to do what we can for Jesus and just keep at it.

It's not beyond any of us so the last thing to do is to pray for God's help to grow out and do that. Let's pray together. Father thank you that you've shown us Jesus.

[ 25 : 50 ] Thank you that we have come to know you and that we can trust you. We pray that you would give us wisdom in the way that we act towards people who don't yet know you that through our evangelism and through our mission as a church you would bring other people to know your saving grace your goodness and your kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

All this we ask and pray in Jesus name. Amen. I'm now going to hand over to Warren and Catherine for our final song. Amen.