

LESSON 7

Grace in Speech

Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us that God may open a door to us for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains, so that I may make it known as I should. Act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person.

— Colossians 4:2-6

We love with our words when we pray before we speak and season every sentence with the grace God spoke to us first.

Introduction

MOST OF WHAT LOVE DOES IN A CONGREGATION, IT DOES WITH SPOKEN WORDS. Colossians 4:6 is one of the most quoted verses about how you use your tongue, and it is almost always quoted alone. Paul didn't write it alone. He set it at the end of a short paragraph that begins with prayer and moves through an open door and a watching world before it ever reaches the tongue. The order is part of the instruction.

The verse also faces outward. Paul is talking about *outsiders*, so it can look out of place in a study of love in the body. But a church has only one mouth. The way it talks to the neighbor across the fence and the way it talks to the brother across the aisle come from the same heart, and the neighbor usually hears both.

This lesson follows the paragraph in three steps: prayer before speech (4:2-4), wisdom toward those outside (4:5), and speech seasoned with grace and salt (4:6). Then it turns to John 4, where Jesus talks with a Samaritan woman at a well.

Colossians 4:2-4 – Prayer Before Speech

Devote yourselves to prayer. The word means to keep at something and refuse to let it go. Luke used it of the first church in Jerusalem: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer,* Acts 2:42.³⁴ That church kept at prayer the way it kept at teaching and fellowship.

Stay alert in it. This is the word Jesus used in Gethsemane. *Stay awake and pray, so that you won't enter into temptation,* Matthew 26:41. The disciples slept through it. Paul asks the Colossians to keep their eyes open.

Then he adds *with thanksgiving*. The word is built on *charis*, the Greek word for grace, and Paul uses that word again in verse 6.³⁵

Now look at whom Paul asks them to pray for. *Pray also for us that God may open a door to us for the word.* He writes this in chains (4:3, 18). You'd expect a man in prison to ask for an open cell door. Paul asks for an open door for the gospel. Then he asks for something more personal still: *so that I may make it known as I should.* The most experienced preacher in the church asks a congregation that had never seen him in person (2:1) to pray that he would say the right thing.

That ought to humble us. Most of our prayers about difficult people run in one direction. We ask God to change him, soften her, make them listen. Paul asks for prayer over the speaker. If the apostle needed that, so do we. Before you have a hard conversation with a brother, pray about it first. What needs to be said? Does it need to be said today? Who is the right one to say it?

Prayer also changes you. It's hard to keep praying for a man by name and keep talking about him with contempt. Once you've been talking to God about a brother, you'll talk to him differently.

Colossians 4:5 – Wisdom Toward Those Outside

Act wisely toward outsiders. The CSB's *act* translates Paul's ordinary word for walking, the same one behind *walk worthy of the Lord* in 1:10 and *continue to walk in him* in 2:6. Wisdom here describes how you live, and how you talk is part of that.

Wisdom is a theme of the whole letter. Paul prayed that the Colossians would be *filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding* (1:9), and he told them that *in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (2:3). What does that wisdom look like in a conversation? It knows whether to speak, when to speak, and how much to say. Sometimes that means a word, sometimes a question, and sometimes a meal dropped off and an hour of sitting quietly in a hospital room.

Outsiders is, literally, *those outside*.³⁶ Paul used the same phrase with the Thessalonians, urging them to live *so that you may behave properly in the presence of outsiders*, 1 Thessalonians 4:12. The church is watched. That's why this verse belongs in a study of love in the body. Outsiders hear more than what you say to them. They hear what you say to your brothers and sisters, and what you say about them, in the parking lot and on the internet. Jesus made the church's love for its own members its public evidence: *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*, John 13:35. If you're warm to visitors and sharp with your own brethren, you haven't learned this verse yet.

Paul has already laid down the rule for speech inside the family. *Do not lie to one another*, 3:9. The rule for those outside is the same rule.

Making the most of the time. It's a marketplace word. It means to buy up, to snap something up before it's gone.³⁷ Paul uses the same verb for what Christ did for us: *When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law*, Galatians 4:4-5. Now he uses it for the opportunities in front of you.

Those opportunities are usually small. A coworker mentions a diagnosis. A brother lingers in the parking lot after everyone else has gone. Those openings don't last long, so watch for them.

Colossians 4:6 – Grace and Salt

Let your speech always be gracious. Paul's phrase is *in grace*. The paragraph that opened with prayer *with thanksgiving* (*eucharistia*) closes with speech *in grace* (*charis*). Prayer comes first, and grace shapes the words that follow. Gratitude toward God and graciousness toward people grow from the same root. If you're thankful to God, it'll show in how you talk to people.

This is the same grace we traced in Lesson 1 through Ephesians 4:29, where the right word *gives grace to those who hear*. Gracious speech sounds like the way God has spoken to you: patient when He had every reason not to be, kind before you deserved it, honest without contempt. And notice *always*. That includes the bad days.

Seasoned with salt. The word *season* appears only three times in the New Testament, and Jesus used it the other two times.³⁸ One of those times, He was talking to His disciples about how they treated each other. On the road to Capernaum the Twelve *had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest*, Mark 9:34. Jesus sat down and called the Twelve, and the conversation in that house ended with this: *Salt is good, but if the salt should lose its flavor, how can you season it? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with one another*, Mark 9:50. Jesus tied salt to peace, and He said it to men who had been arguing all the way to Capernaum.

Salt gives food its flavor and keeps it from spoiling. Speech seasoned with salt has substance. It tells the truth, and it says hard things when they need to be said.

Paul wants both in every word, every time. Most of us lean one way. Maybe you're always correct and seldom kind, and people have quietly stopped bringing their troubles to you. Or maybe you're always kind and never say anything that costs you, and nobody near you is ever helped to change.

So that you may know how you should answer each person. Two things stand out. First, *should* is the same word Paul used of himself in verse 4, *as I should*.³⁹ Paul and you stand under the same obligation, and you both need God's help to meet it. Second, *each person* means there's no script. The grieving widow and the angry teenager need different words. So do the brother who drifted and the brother who was hurt. You'll find the right words by praying first, paying attention to the person, and speaking with grace.

Looking to Christ

Jesus was tired. *Jesus, worn out from his journey, sat down at the well. It was about noon*, John 4:6. His disciples had gone into town for food. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and by every rule of the day she was an outsider to Him. She said so herself: *How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?* (4:9).

Look at how He opened the door. *Give me a drink* (4:7). He didn't start with a lecture or an argument. He started by asking her for help.

Then came grace. He offered her *living water* (4:10), a gift she didn't know to ask for. Then came salt. *Go call your husband* (4:16). He knew her history: five husbands, and the man she lived with was not her

3. The word for *stay alert* is the one Jesus used in Gethsemane. What causes your prayer life to fall asleep? How do you stay awake in it?
4. *Thanksgiving* in 4:2 and *gracious* in 4:6 come from the same root. How does gratitude toward God shape the way you speak to people?
5. Wisdom knows whether, when, and how much to speak. Describe a time when silence or a question would have served better than an answer.
6. How does the way you talk to your brethren affect the way outsiders hear the gospel? Read John 13:35 as part of your answer.
7. *Making the most of the time* is literally *buying up the opportunity*. What small openings for a gracious word are you most likely to miss?
8. Read Mark 9:33-50. What does salt have to do with being *at peace with one another*?

³⁸ *Artyō*, “to season,” BDAG, s.v. ἀρτύω, occurs only at Mark 9:50, Luke 14:34, and Colossians 4:6. *Gracious* in Colossians 4:6 is the phrase *en chariti*, “in grace.” Compare Ephesians 4:29, *so that it gives grace (charis)* to those who hear.

³⁹ Both verses use *dei*, “it is necessary, one must,” BDAG, s.v. δεῖ: *hōs dei me lalēsai*, “as it is necessary for me to speak” (4:4), and *pōs dei hymas heni hekastō apokrinesthai*, “how it is necessary for you to answer each one” (4:6).