

Series: Colossians
Title: Be A Witness
Text: Colossians 4:5-6
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Verse 5

After encouraging his readers to be people of prayer, Paul encouraged them to engage in personal evangelism. He said, “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time” (Colossians 4:5). The word for “walk” appears frequently in the New Testament as a descriptor for Christian living (Galatians 5:16; Ephesians 4:1; 1 John 1:7). As it appears in our text, it could be rendered “to conduct one’s life.”¹ Paul used the term to speak of Christian living earlier in Colossians (Colossians 1:10; 2:6). In our current passage, his words can be interpreted as a call for readers to embrace a holy lifestyle.

In the original language of the text, the word for “walk” appeared as a present active imperative verb. Such verbiage called for continual action. Thus, Paul called his readers to engage in an ongoing, habit-of-life walk with God that resulted in a continual bright witness for Christ.

The apostle knew that the way one lives is of first importance in personal evangelism. Too often the world cares little about gospel proclamations because they are not impressed with the lifestyles of those who profess Christ. Libraries could be filled with books telling stories of Christians who have betrayed their gospel professions with lives marked by ungodly attitudes and actions. When speech and behavior of believers are stained and sullied by sin, it is no wonder that the world turns a deaf ear to gospel preaching.

It is worth noting that Jesus taught one’s lifestyle has a major part to play in evangelism. In his Sermon on the Mount, he said, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Peter shared instruction similar to that of Jesus: “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” (1 Peter 2:12). Paul himself gave testimony to his personal perspective on such things in 1 Corinthians 10:31-33.

Paul’s mention of “wisdom” in Colossians 4:5 was important. It revealed a critical issue in evangelism — behaving wisely in front of unbelievers. Wisdom is different than mere knowledge. Wisdom is the ability to apply knowledge to life’s situations. It involves the perception to do what is right in certain circumstances. The Bible regularly speaks to the need for wisdom in Christian living. In fact, the Bible has an entire section on wisdom — “the Wisdom Literature” of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

Wisdom is of special importance in evangelism. Believers need to know the truth, but they also need to live wisely in front of unbelievers. One’s testimony is tarnished when one lives foolishly. It is for this reason that Jesus told his disciples to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). When believers brashly proclaim Christ with little thought of their personal example, evangelistic appeals will falter and fail.

For Paul, the believer’s “walk” and “wisdom” were to be put on display for “outsiders.” While language related to “outsiders” may be regarded as a slight or term of derision nowadays, the term was frequently used in first-century synagogues. It was used to speak of those who weren’t apart of the community of worshippers. It was a label for people who

¹ Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 469.

belonged to a non-Jewish religious group. As used by Paul in our text, the term pointed to non-Christian people.² The apostle used the term to speak of unbelievers elsewhere in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 5:12-13; 2 Corinthians 4:16; Thessalonians 5:12).

The apostle's reference to "outsiders" unearths an important concept in witnessing. The Christian's life, as one has said, is like a "...drama...played out before an audience of 'outsiders' in the watching world."³ The Christ follower can liken his or her life to a television show or movie. Whether it is realized or not, others are always watching. There is an old saying that says, "You are the only Bible some people will ever read." Paul's words in Colossians 4:5 underscore such a reality. Believers should be cognizant of how their lives appear to unbelievers. One's lifestyle provides a powerful platform for representing Christ. One has noted, "Too often it is the case that Christians become so self-absorbed and inward-looking that they are simply oblivious to how they are perceived by their unbelieving neighbors. More than that, it does not seem to cross their mind that the way they are perceived by those who are not yet Christians has a profound effect on how the gospel is perceived."⁴

In their interactions with non-Christian people, Paul wanted his readers to make "the best use of the time." In the Greek language of Jesus' days, there were different ways of speaking about time. The word in our passage did "not emphasize a point of time but rather a space of time filled with all kinds of possibilities."⁵ Paul used language from the first-century marketplace to picturesquely depict how believers should use their time for witnessing. His language was intense, depicting a shopper eagerly buying up needed goods in the market.⁶ One has said, "every opportunity is to be snapped up...like a bargain."⁷

Paul's language revealed that the Christian's daily life is chock-full of all types of opportunities to witness for Christ. To be a faithful and effective evangelist, believers must be intentional to make the best use of such time. Earlier in Colossians, Paul had spoken similarly about Christian living. He encouraged his readers to do everything with an eye on Christ, saying, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17). Applying such a perspective to evangelism, believers will use every normal situation in life as a platform for sharing Christ.

As with many life priorities, a great number of believers excuse themselves from engagement in personal evangelism because of busyness. "I am too busy," may be the most oft-uttered excuse for lack of witnessing. Paul's words remind us, as A.T. Robertson noted, that "we all have the same time."⁸ Before the Lord, each has a responsibility to "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33) and use time appropriately for Christ's purposes. If one is too busy to tell others about Jesus, one is perhaps too busy. Paul encouraged wise use of time in his letter to the Ephesians: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish but

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 469.

³ Johnston, Mark G. *Let's Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 121.

⁴ Johnston, 121.

⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 469.

⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 469.

⁷ Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 153.

⁸ Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 510.

understand what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5:15-17). It is certainly God’s will for Christians to share the gospel (Matthew 28:18-20); thus, each should make time for witnessing.

Perhaps Paul’s marketplace language was intentional for more than one reason. On top of pointing to the way believers are to eagerly redeem opportunities for witnessing, Paul also meant to point to the public nature of witnessing. The marketplace is often the best place of sharing Christ. Believers can find great opportunities for evangelism in the course of their daily business and affairs. Visits to shops, restaurants, barbers, hairdressers, repair shops, banks, doctor’s offices, and more present all types of occasions for representing Christ.

Verse 6

Ultimately, one’s lifestyle isn’t sufficient to lead another to faith in Christ. Speech is also required. One must share the truth of the gospel verbally. Paul continued his appeal for personal evangelism by saying, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Colossians 4:6). What was meant by Paul’s appeal for readers to have speech that was “gracious?” Did he mean to speak of grace in a gospel sense; that is, did he mean to call his readers to speak about God’s grace when evangelizing? Or could it be that Paul called for his readers to rely on the grace of God in their souls? Was his intent for his readers to rely on Holy Spirit powers so that they might find the right words to share with others? A third option could be that Paul called his readers to have a disposition of graciousness and kindness as they shared the gospel. One has suggested that Paul’s words could have more than one meaning.⁹

All things considered, it seems best to regard Paul’s call for “gracious” speech as a call for believers to have a kind and congenial tone in their gospel presentations. Believers are called to speak “the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Contrary to the opinion of some, there is no room for the militant, activist spirit found amongst some modern Christians. Many seem prone to the attitude that marred James and John’s witness — an attitude in which they desired for the Lord to send fire from heaven to consume unbelievers (Luke 9:54). Others seem given over to a politically-charged perspective that prompts them to unsheathe swords in a proverbial sense. Like Peter prior to Pentecost, some seem more zealous for physical warfare than spiritual warfare (Mark 14:47). Paul’s words in Colossians 4:6 reveal that believers are to exhibit the same spirit of “compassion” that Jesus exhibited toward people during his earthly ministry (Mark 6:34).

Paul’s reference to “salt” was surely based on the teaching of Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet” (Matthew 5:13). In the ancient world, salt was often used in a figurative sense to speak of compelling speech and conversation. Plutarch used the metaphor to speak of wittiness that flavored speech, appealing to ancient Attic salt as an example.¹⁰ In the Hellenistic world, salt thus represented “sparkling conversation, speech dotted with witty or clever remarks.”¹¹

Jesus and his apostles borrowed an earthly metaphor and sanctified it for Great Commission purposes (Matthew 5:13; Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34). In witnessing, believers are to make their speech “salty.” They should work to not be boring, canned, monotone, impersonal, dry, flippant, trite, or stiff in their gospel presentations. They should pray for grace that they might be creative and compelling, all while maintaining a consecrated and convictional

⁹ Wright, 226.

¹⁰ Robertson, 510.

¹¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 469.

commitment to gospel truth. One has said, “Christians are to work at making their winters interesting, lively and colorful; and, at the same time, to ensure that they have thoroughly mastered the rudiments of their faith....”¹²

In Colossians 4:6, Paul used a perfect passive verb to speak of the salty speech of believers. The verbiage revealed two important realities about speech in evangelism. First, the passive voice indicated that the saltiness of speech is produced by an agent outside of the believer. More specifically, salty speech is created by a work of grace in the believer’s life. When an effective speaks for Christ, it is not just the person speaking. The Holy Spirit empowers the faithful Christian witness to speak in a “salty” way. Jesus taught on the way his grace transforms the way one talks (Luke 6:45). Second, the perfect tense of Paul’s words pointed to a complete transformation. When a believer allows the grace of God to transform his or her speech, God does a perfective work to create an otherworldly saltiness in the way one talks.

The Bible’s salt metaphor for evangelism reminds us of an important need in evangelism. In applying salt to food, one knows it is important to avoid two extremes. One must not apply too much, but one should avoid applying too little as well.¹³ Good cooks seem to have a special touch with seasoning. Likewise, good evangelists have a special touch with their speech. They avoid being too strong, but they also avoid being too soft. They are on guard against saying too much, but they are also on guard against saying too little. As an expert chef applies just the right amount of seasoning to food, faithful evangelists know how to say just the right thing at the right time. In all of this, the Holy Spirit provides wisdom and discernment to his evangelists. He also takes their feeble attempts at gospel proclamation and makes them effectual in human hearts and minds.

After speaking about salt, Paul expressed a desire for his readers to “know how...to answer each person.” His words revealed that gospel proclamation “...must not only be opportune in regards to time; it must also be appropriate as regards to the person.”¹⁴ Commenting on Paul’s words, Calvin said that a witness must “acquire for himself expertness in making proper and suitable replies” to gospel opponents.¹⁵

When Christians live holy lives that are different from the lives of unbelievers, people will take note. Eventually, some will ask about the reason for the difference in one’s life. According to Paul, it is at that point that believers have a prime opportunity to witness. Each should be prepared to give an “answer” for the questions they receive. N.T. Wright has rightly noted that the word “answer” in Colossians 4:6 “implies that outsiders will ask Christians about their new life.”¹⁶ In God’s divine design, this is how witnessing works: Christians live the Christian life, outsiders notice a difference in Christians’ lives, outsiders ask the reason for such a difference, and Christians then give an “answer.” Too many overcomplicate witnessing, overlooking God’s plan for evangelism. Others cheapen and profane Christian evangelism, perverting it into little more than a crude sales pitch. The Lord’s intent is for the gospel to spread through the witness of lives that have been transformed by Christ.

¹² Wright, 153.

¹³ Robertson, 510.

¹⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 469.

¹⁵ Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 226.

¹⁶ Wright, 153.