

About ten years ago I had a humbling moment with my middle son, Luke. We were at a sporting goods store, shopping for cleats or shoes for school and had a really great experience with the employee. He was extremely helpful, friendly, we had great banter and, as we left, I commended him to his boss. It was a wonderful moment, and one I was glad my son was able to witness. But, on the way out, Luke said “Dad, can I ask you a question?” I said “Sure”, and then the question came. Luke asked, “Why are you so nice to people in stores but so mean to people on the road?” Out of the mouths of babes.

You see, my son was watching. My life was under observation, and on that day he saw inconsistency between my walk and my talk. He saw behavior that matched the beliefs and values I’d been passing on to him over the years, but also heard and saw behavior that were far from it. And my ability to engage and influence this person God gave me abundant responsibility for was compromised in that moment. So, I apologized to him, told him he was right, thanked him for calling that out and, since that day, I’ve gotten...marginally better.

If Christians seek to have influence in others’ lives, to engage this culture with the Gospel, our lives will be under observation to see what our walk and talk communicate and how they show the difference Jesus makes. We can have an eloquent testimony and great depth of theological knowledge, but our engagement will be compromised if our actions and words are inconsistent with one another and the message of Christ. So, how do we walk the talk, live a life consistent with the Gospel, and reinforce the hope we have in front of the people God sends us to?

[Colossians 4:5-6] ⁵ Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Paul is giving some final instruction to the Colossians and tells them to be mindful of how they walk and talk because he knows what we say and how we act communicate something about what we believe. Our actions express our values and, as Jesus said in Matthew 12, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” For everyone we engage, **our actions and words are the measure by which others evaluate our hope in Christ and the Gospel we are inviting them to believe.** What you do and say can move people either towards Jesus or away from Jesus.

There’s a story about an old pastor from the early 1900’s named Dr. Houghton. When he became pastor of the Baptist Tabernacle in Atlanta, a local man hired a private detective to follow Dr. Houghton around and report on his conduct (if you ever did that with me, let me know what was found!). After a few weeks, the detective was able to report to the man that Dr. Houghton’s life matched his preaching. Then that detective became a Christian!

If our walk and talk are inconsistent, we detract from the message of the Gospel and leave people wondering what’s true. But if they are consistent with one another and with the Gospel we preach, others see immediate evidence of the difference Jesus makes, and they can be drawn in.

So how do we live that kind of impactful life? **Our engagement will be effective when directed by the wisdom of God.** V5 is literally “In wisdom be walking...” Paul is emphasizing that it’s only through the wisdom of God that our walk and talk can be effective. Wisdom is more than

knowledge. Knowledge is what we know. Wisdom is the proper application of what we know to particular circumstances. I know heat cooks food. Wisdom tells me what temperature and for how long. I can know good communication skills. Wisdom says which one and how I use it when communicating with Martha (and I get it right every time!) A twist on a meme I've seen around: we are drowning in knowledge, but sorely lacking in wisdom. Thankfully, God says if we lack it, all we have to do is ask for it. And that means prayer.

Paul begins with section with a command. **[Colossians 4:2] ² Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.** Prayer seats us at the feet of Jesus to learn from him and be filled up by him. Think of any mentor you've had: coach, pastor, teacher, parent. They passed on their wisdom through intimate, regular time together. When I started in this role, I had plenty of leadership knowledge, growing understanding of homiletics, but I lacked wisdom. I had the privilege of spending time every month with a groups of guys who had been doing this for 20, 30, 40 years, and I only opened my mouth to ask questions and did a whole lot of listening to soak up with that wisdom. That's what happens when we sit with Jesus.

"The soul flourishes in an atmosphere of prayer...We need to pray as much as we need to breathe. Our souls will languish without it, and our testimony will be utterly fruitless if we neglect it." -Harry Ironside

Are you sitting at his feet? Are you sitting at someone else's feet who may be passing on what they believe is wisdom but has nothing to do with God? Or do you believe you have this wired and need no one's help? If we try to do this on our own, or seek wisdom apart from God, our walk and talk won't be effective.

But Paul says if we are directed by God's wisdom, our walk will follow in the steps of Jesus, and our talk will become salty. Salt was used both as a preservative and a seasoning. Our speech can purify the culture we speak into and it can make our words tasty and appealing. Without the wisdom of God, our words can become spicy and burn people. Our words can become bland and bore people. Ask someone who's had Covid about how uninteresting food became when they lost their sense of taste. When God's wisdom infuses our words and actions, we'll have a winsome witness and attract others to Jesus.

Wisdom also allows us to make the best use of time. Paul uses a word that means "redeem" or "buy back". He's said this elsewhere and added "because the days are evil". In our broken world, our use of time trends towards waste or evil on its own. God's wisdom allows us to buy it back and take advantage of the opportunities he presents to us. You've heard me say I believe we are in a time of incredible opportunity in this pandemic-stricken, divided, post-Christian world. People are shaken and they are looking for answers. We have them. I'm also encouraged by those participating in Next90. They are seeking the wisdom of God to intentionally prepare for the next three months and be watchful for opportunities to live out their God given purpose. When we engage with the wisdom of God, we will be consistent in our walk and talk and attractive to others. But who are those others?

Our engagement will be effective when directed towards those who need what we have.

Paul says, “In wisdom, be walking *towards* outsiders... so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” Cultural engagement doesn’t happen by accident. It is intentional motion *towards* unbelievers, those outside of the faith, that engages intimately enough for us to contextualize our answer to each person specifically.

There are only two groups here: Insiders, believers, us. Outsiders, unbelievers. That’s who we’re sent towards and we’re supposed to get to know them well enough to be able to talk about Jesus impacts their lives specifically. Simple enough? Yes, but we still struggle.

First, how many nonbelievers do you move towards regularly? At work or in your neighborhood. I’m asking myself this too. I work with Christians, I live with Christians, I even have a son NAMED Christian, and if I’m not intentional, I’ll find myself living in a Christian bubble.

In my business days, I spent a bunch of years in a company with almost all believers and I forgot what it was like to work with nonbelievers. Then one day I switched companies, didn’t know where people stood, so I decided to put myself out there by doing a Bible study in the kitchen. And a guy walked in, looked at my book and Bible, and uncomfortably said “Oh, you doing your...church...stuff?” Ah yes. This is why I’m here. **You are surrounded by people who do not know God and he is asking you to intentionally engage them for the sake of the Gospel.**

We can also forget what we are primarily insiders of. If we are anchored in our identity in Christ and Kingdom “insiderness”, we’ll go with security and compassion. But if we confuse what we’re insiders of, we’ll be confused on who the outsiders are, and instead of being our mission, they now become a threat.

I see this happening in two major ways in the Church. For many, there has been this merging of faith, politics, and party. I’m not talking about your faith informing your politics. That’s good and right, and we need more devoted Christians voting and running for office to bring Kingdom values to government. I’m talking about politics informing your faith, that Scripture is read through the lens of political ideology, that it’s easier to tell your political affiliation than your spiritual affiliation. In politics we want to beat the other side, and you can’t win over someone you first intend to defeat. If your insider identity is a combination of Kingdom of God and political party, how likely will it be that you engage the other side well?

For others, there’s the influence of Critical Race Theory. Parents from all races, classes, political affiliations are pushing back on it. It’s too complex to unpack it all here, and it addresses some issues we need to keep discussing, but some of the main tenets of it do not agree with the Gospel. It identifies people primarily by their demographics instead of being made in the image of God. It’s hard to have a shared humanity if that’s the starting point. It condemns someone as either a victim or a victimizer, rejecting the idea that God’s grace can overcome any obstacle and injustice and rejecting the idea that God’s grace can produce in anyone things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And because of the first two, it holds out no hope for unity, reconciliation, and peace...only division. But Ephesians 2 clearly says Jesus broke down the wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, and

he can do the same for any disparate groups. But if my insider identity is in a group that can never find peace and unity with another group, how well am I going to engage?

If we struggle to see ourselves primarily as insiders of the Kingdom, we'll struggle to see others as outsiders God wants to make insiders. Our ideology will prevent us from seeing the humanity and infinite worth in the very person God sends us to, and we'll freeze. It's like holding onto the wall at an ice skating rink. We hold onto that wall for safety and security. We don't want to go onto the ice where it's unsteady and uncomfortable and you might fall flat on your face. If we identify ourselves through that other stuff, we're going to hold onto that wall. We're going to convince ourselves that if we leave that wall to engage, we are compromising or betraying that insider identity, or we're afraid we're going to fall flat on our face.

If we're holding on to any of that stuff we're holding onto the wrong thing. If you are a follower of Jesus, there's one thing we are all to hold onto, and that's the cross. The cross reminds us Jesus, the ultimate insider, moved towards outsiders to save us. The cross reminds us our identity and security are in the finished work of Christ so we can let go of the wall and step towards others because he's got us. And the cross reminds us we were all outsiders once, so we can go with compassion because we want for them what we've been given ourselves.

At the end of last year, the elders told you we were seeking a relationship with a predominantly African American church and I'm thrilled to announce that is finally beginning this coming Wednesday. Mike Webster and I will be meeting with this church's senior pastor. And you know what we're going to do? I have no idea! But we are taking a step out in faith, stepping onto the ice, trusting God to lead us, and being ok if we fall on our face. Yes, spiritually, they are insiders, but as we learn from one another it will allow us to engage culture and be better prepared to give an answer to each person we encounter. It was time for us to get off the wall and go, and it's time for you to get off the wall and go.

Evaluate your walk and talk. We've got to regularly pause and evaluate how our life matches up with God's Word and what it's communicating to the world about Jesus. **[Colossians 4:3]** **Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word.** If God opened the door and someone observed your life right now, would they be drawn to or pushed away from Jesus? Ask God to help you see the truth. And, if you are courageous, ask someone who knows you and loves you (spouse, Life Group member) to help you see the truth. And, if you're really really courageous, ask a nonbeliever what your life is telling them about the God.

Center yourself on your identity in Christ. If your identity is in anything else, you will not engage well. When you're centered on Christ, he's the one you want to please. When you're centered on Christ, he's the one you go to for wisdom. When you're centered on Christ, you remember who you belong to, what you are a part of, and what you've been called to do. You are saved and you are sent, and your life is a testimony that allows us to show people Jesus before we ever say his name.