

The Push
Colossians 4: 2-6

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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Paul draws his letter to a close with a final section of encouragement to the little church in Colossae. We're going to lift out just three jewels from this treasure trove of wisdom for living in Christ. We'll look at the Push in prayer, the Push outward toward the world and the Push in gracious speech.

1) The Push in Prayer. These are three encouragements Paul gives about praying:
Push hard.
Keep awake.
Constantly thank.

He's saying, "In prayer, push hard." Persist. Keep driving forward. Continue steadfastly. Keep at it. And while you pray, "Keep awake." Stay watchful. Be vigilant. Notice God and notice the world. Hold the two together. As you notice such great need, remember we have such a great God. Constantly thank. Make all your prayers wrapped in thanksgiving. Persist in wide-awake intercession, giving constant thanks as you pray fervently for his will to be done.

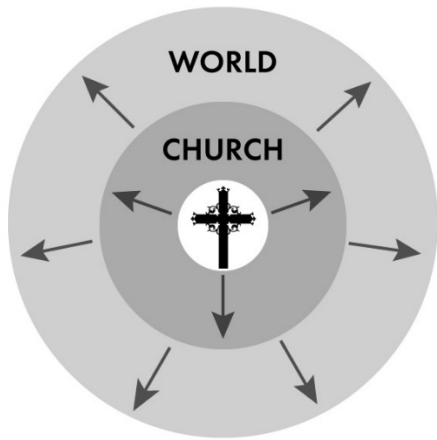
I'm fascinated by the way prayer wakes us up to reality. It's such a silly idea that people of prayer have their heads in the clouds and are out of touch. The exact opposite is true. If I never pray, my whole life is limited just to what I am seeing and feeling. My own perspective is all there is. Talk about narrow minded! But when I pray, I am connecting to the God who sees the whole universe, all at once, and as it truly is. I'm getting in tune with his reality. And the more I know his Word, and therefore know his will for the world, the more awake I am. Prayer wakes me out of myself and connects me to God's love for the world.

The Bible scholar F.F. Bruce writes that "The man of persistent prayer is the man who is constantly awake and alive [both] to the will of God *and* the need of the world..."¹ Praying filled with knowledge from Scripture for the will of God to be done awakens us to the world's longing and to our Father's longing. Such prayer enlivens our emotions. We get higher highs and lower lows. It takes endurance to pray awake the love of God for a world such as this. It takes incredible courage. For it is far easier to just to stay distracted. To go numb to the suffering all around us. Or just to get mad and stay mad that things aren't right.

Prayer pushes straight into the pain of the world. We let our hearts break with our heavenly Father's heart. Then we hold up the gift of his Son for the particular needs of the world. *Lord Jesus, you became an embryo in a womb on behalf of all embryos in every womb. May we see the sacredness of life from the moment of conception. Lord Jesus, you gathered the children in your arms and touched them gently and blessed them. Soften the hearts of fathers and mothers transferring the rage over their lives onto their little ones. Father, we see so many wounded from disordered sexuality, from wanton disregard of your good boundaries. We see vulnerable women and haunted men. Call us back to love and respect and fidelity. Lord Jesus, you fed thousands from five loaves and two fish. But we are so overspent that we cannot even offer you scraps. Free us from our consuming and open our hearts to those in need. Lord Jesus, you went to the place where the man cried out and howled his torment in madness. Quiet again the restless desperation in so many souls. Lord Jesus, you are the resurrection and the life. Speak hope to the grieving and fill the emptiness of the godless with yourself. Lord Jesus, you offered yourself to assuage the world's need. Keep pushing your Word of life to the world's hunger, and use me to do it!*

This is the kind of persistent prayer that transforms us as we pray, for we take the side of Jesus on behalf of a sinful and broken world, praying constantly into the madness: *thy kingdom come, thy will be done*. We push into the world's need and the Father's heart. We come awake, and even in the pain of so much need, we pray in thanks that Jesus promised that every tear would dried and every sorrow filled with joy. We give thanks that Christ is able and he will do it.

2) The Push Outward. Paul goes on to write, "In wisdom, walk toward those outside, making the most of the time." Push out. Push toward others. Do so wisely, not pushing too hard. But do so urgently, knowing that every opportunity is precious. There were only a few thousand Christians in the world at the time Paul wrote. But we were never intended to be an insular community. We have always believed in a Jesus who was not just a rabbi from Galilee but the Lord of heaven and earth. We have always been intent on bringing the good news of Jesus to the entire earth. In this diagram, you can see how the gospel is meant to radiate outwards.



The Son of God stepped into our world as the man Jesus. He was literally the body of Christ in the world. After Jesus ascended to heaven, his body on earth is his church. Each new believer becomes mystically joined to our Lord in heaven. This union is so close that we are said to be of one body with Jesus and one body with each other. We are organically related by the Spirit of Christ in us who unites us.

Scripture speaks in many ways of this union. Joined to Jesus, we become a new creation (2 Cor. 5: 17). We are born anew, from above (John 3: 3). Our point of origin is no longer the earth, but heaven where Christ is. We are no longer citizens of a particular nation, but our fundamental identity is that we are citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20), residents of the Kingdom of the Beloved Son (Col. 1:13). We are “in” Christ. Something fundamental changes about a person who is in Christ. For his Spirit is in us. And we reside in him. Suddenly, then, as we find ourselves inside Christ, we realize that the world at large is *outside* of Christ. The person who is not in Christ does not share his Spirit as we do. There is a reason people hated Christians from the start. We declared, “We are inside something that you are on the outside of. We are in Jesus our Redeemer. And you are not. But we would like to invite you to come on the inside of this circle with us.” That can make people sort of crazy toward you if they sense they’re not in on something that you are. But the good news is that our inner circle is always an open circle. Our circle can expand to include the whole world. And Paul reminds us to push outward. Propel towards those outside our circle of being in Christ. Your goal is to bring more and more people inside Jesus, inside the Kingdom of the Beloved Son.

3) The Push to Answer Well. Paul tells us one of the main ways we push toward the world, expanding the circle of those in Christ is through our speech. Push by conversation. Speak in grace. Paul writes, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so you may know how to answer each person.” Literally, he

says, “Let your speech always be *in grace*. His meaning cuts both ways. Your speech towards those outside our circle should be gracious: welcoming, full of mercy and kindness. But also, your speech should be in grace. Filled with the story of the grace of Jesus who came to us, who lived for us and died for us, who rose for us and now reigns over us. This story, the free gift of God in Jesus Christ, should season all your speech. Christians are to be conversant in the gospel. Able to tell Christ’s story and our story in a way that adapts to each individual we meet. The Bible does not give us packaged formulas. It does not say “Use these phrases like a salesman with his best lines.” Paul tells us to make our interaction with the gospel so alive and current that we can freshly about Jesus. And to make our regarding each person so personal that we can speak to the questions they ask and the circumstances of their unique lives.

Paul wants his people to be ready with answers for those who wonder why they are part of this tiny new religion of Jesus. I know that many people get the heebie-jeebies over this. We worry, “Well I don’t know enough to answer people’s questions! I can’t give five proofs for the existence of God. I don’t know how to defend the resurrection. I don’t know how to explain the existence of evil. Or prove that the Bible is God’s Word. I’d better just keep my mouth shut.” Now all those are important questions and God’s people do need to study the available answers. But I don’t think those are the questions that are most urgent on people’s minds right now. What people today are asking has much more to do with the heart. They ask some poignant questions. Here are three:

“Are you mad too? I mean, everyone I know is angry. Everybody is just peeved. On the right, on the left and in the middle. I’m angry all the time too. I don’t really enjoy anything because everybody is just so mad about it all. Are you mad too?” The only answer to that question is the reality of joy in your life. If I am in Christ, then Christ’s Spirit is in me. I have the source of joy residing in my life. I am in the circle of life, where I know how the story ends. Evil and anger and despair do not have the last word in this world. Jesus does. But here’s the question: do I let the joy inside me come out? Or is it muffled by distraction, covered over by my worry over circumstances, muted by my steady diet of news programs designed to keep me mad all the time? Christians, it’s on us to recover our joy and to choose to rejoice in Jesus. We alone have the alternative to the anger all around us.

“Do you feel bad about things you’ve done? Do you feel bad about yourself? Just this sense that you’re not right? Do you find that no matter how much people tell you to look within and celebrate how glorious you are that you actually feel

like trash?” The only answer to that question is the reality of Jesus’ forgiveness in your life. If I belong to Jesus, then his sacrifice has forgiven my sins. His blood has washed me clean. He has reconciled me to God his Father. The foulest stain has been cleansed by his cross. But here’s the question: even though I know that, am I still living as if what I do is what makes me ok? Am I telling myself stories of my own worth, achievement and goodness to make me feel right about my life? Am I still assuring people that they’re ok because they’re successful and nice and do the right things on the outside? That is to leave them in the guilt that comes out as the epidemic of anxiety all around us. Christians, it’s on us to live from the bracing but wonderful truth: I am not OK in myself. But I am OK in Jesus. I am more sinful than I can ever describe, but more forgiven in Christ than I could ever imagine. People want to know how we know we’re all right because Christ gives us his rightness.

“Do you feel alone in the world? Do you feel like no one really knows you and no one really cares?” The only answer to that question is the awareness of the Holy Spirit’s presence in our spirits. The Holy Spirit fills believers with a sense of God’s presence. In the deepest darkness, we know that we are not alone, for Christ Jesus is with us, and even more, within us. At the same time, Christian fellowship allows us to feel connected to one another in a mysterious depth. We share joy, share sorrow, share failure and share hope for forgiveness and life in such a way that we experience a depth to relationships that others do not know. But here’s the question: are we entering that deep communion with others? Or are we staying in isolation? Not daring to risk confessing our sins to each other? Not finding the companions given to us? Are we welcoming others into our circle of communion so they can know the fellowship we have? The world longs to know true human connection can be made. Christians, it’s on us to live authentic fellowship that assuages loneliness and then to open that fellowship to others.

The world outside the circle of union with Christ has questions for us. They want to know if we are any different than they are. They want to know if Jesus is real to us, and if we are real about Jesus. And every Christian must be able to speak what makes Jesus true and real in our lives. That means that for the sake of the world we are called to passionate, authentic lives in Christ. So Paul urges us to get in on the great Push. The Push in prayer, the Push out toward the world, the Push to answer well.

¹ F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on Colossians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 297.