



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 30th November 2003
by Mark Ashton

10p

Colossians 4:2 – 18

How to Win the World

²*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. ³And 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. ⁴Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. ⁵Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. ⁶Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

⁷*Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord. ⁸I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. ⁹He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.*

¹⁰*My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greeting, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) ¹¹Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. ¹²Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. ¹³I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. ¹⁴Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. ¹⁵Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.*

¹⁶*After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.*

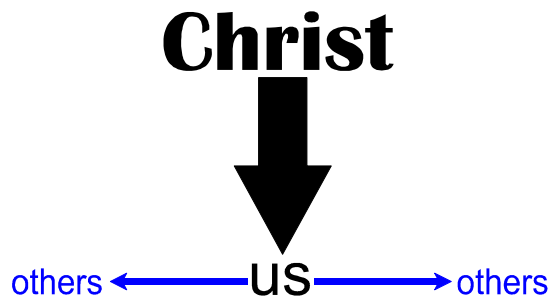
¹⁷*Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord."*

¹⁸*I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.'*

Introduction: Discovering Paul's Logic

When you are reading one of Paul's letters, like this Letter to the Colossians, it is always helpful to try to discover his logic: why does he move from one topic to another at a particular point? For example, why here in verse 2, does he suddenly get on to the subject of prayer? He's been talking about relations in the household between wives/husbands, children/parents, slaves/masters and suddenly he's on to 'Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.' Clearly the NIV translators who insert those little headings into the text had given up on Paul's logic at this stage. 'Further Instructions' – and then you get 'Final Greetings'. Well, it may be that these were just a few extra instructions tacked on the end: Paul thought: *I haven't said anything about prayer yet. I'd better say something about prayer, let's put something in about prayer at this point.* But I don't think Paul's letters usually work in that way. I would encourage us to work a little bit at the logic because working out someone's logic, if we can do it, can be illuminating – if not at times devastating! One Church of England vicar once addressed his congregation by saying: "Isn't it wonderful that we're all Anglicans here in this building at the moment!" Then he asked, "Is there anybody here who is not an Anglican?" One man said, "I'm not!" The vicar said, "Why not?" "Well," the man said, "my father was a Baptist and my grandfather was a Baptist, so I'm a Baptist." The vicar said, "You can't just be a Baptist because your father and your grandfather were Baptists. What if they had been idiots?" "Well," said the man, "if they had been idiots then I'd probably be an Anglican!" I think you'll agree that he had a certain logic!

Paul's logic is revealed when we glance back to chapter 3 verse 17: "***And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.***" Then, as we saw last week, [Fig.1] Paul teaches us to bring that relationship with God through Jesus Christ to bear on



[Fig.1]

all our relationships with other people. Doing all in the name of the Lord Jesus means bringing my relationship with God into every other relationship in my life. And he applies that to these three pairs of relationships from 3:18 through to 4:1. That vertical relationship is to rule our horizontal relationships. But how are we going to do that? How can you and I remember God in all the relationships of our life? Well, it will be by prayer. I think that's why Paul, in verse 2, immediately says, '***Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.***'

1. Prayer (verse 2)

(a) Expressing dependence. You and I will never get our relationships with other people right without praying about them, because prayer is the way that we express our dependence upon God. We bring that vertical relationship to bear on those horizontal relationships; and, of course, it's because prayer is expressing dependence that we actually find it quite hard to do. You and I never like admitting that we are dependent on anybody other than ourselves. '***Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.***' As we pray, we learn to look back with gratitude for all God has done, and forward with expectation to all He will do; but chiefly in prayer we look up, to bring His perspective to bear on our present circumstances and relationships. But as we pray for our own situations, we will also want to pray for others. So, from verse 2: '***Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.***'

Paul went on to write: '***And 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. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should***' (vv. 3, 4).

(b) Prayer for Paul's gospel ministry. '***And 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***' (v. 3). Paul wanted these Colossian Christians to be closely involved with his own ministry. Throughout the letter he has been trying to call them back to his own apostolic authority, and away from the false teachers who had appeared in their midst. Now, as the letter ends, he wants them to identify themselves closely with him in the spread of the gospel. Firstly, by praying – not, notice, that God would open the door of Paul's prison cell, but '***. . . that God may open a door for our message . . .***' God alone can open human hearts and minds to hear the gospel. Those Advent Carol Services tonight will just mean nostalgia and sentiment for any non-Christians who happen to come – unless God works in them. You and I ought to be praying, as Hugh Palmer preaches this evening, that that will be happening: that eyes will be opened to the Christian truth and that someone of those who have come along just to sing 'Hark the herald angels sing' suddenly finds himself/herself being addressed by the living God.

Paul wanted them to pray, notice, for his courage (that he would go on preaching despite his imprisonment): '***. . . that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains***' and he wanted them to pray for his clarity: '***Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should***' (vv. 3, 4). Those are always great prayers to pray for gospel proclamation: that it would be clear and that it would be courageous. But as we pray about evangelism, we will be led into evangelism ourselves. That, I think, is why Paul moves on to our responsibility.

2. Our Gospel Responsibility (vv. 5, 6)

'Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone' (vv. 5, 6).

Prayer has moved Paul's focus away from those relationships within the household, that he was discussing, towards relationships with what he calls outsiders: ***'Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders . . .'*** By outsiders, Paul means those who do not yet share the Christian faith. Forgive me if you are one such this morning: I hope you are not going to take offence as we try to see what Paul is teaching us here. I remember, as a non-Christian student over 30 years ago, that how Christians lived and how Christians spoke made an enormous impact on my life, and challenged me. For, you see, the problem with the Christian life is that we are meant to live it among the non-Christians. It is easy to live the Christian life among the Christians, or to live the non-Christian life among the non-Christians (or, if you will forgive the expression, the pagan life among the pagans). We live like Christians when we are with Christians, and we live like pagans when we are with pagans. But, as believers, we are called to live the Christian life among the pagans. Peter put it like this, in his first letter: ***'Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God . . .'*** (1 Peter 2:12).

So we try to structure our church life, here at St. Andrew the Great, in a way that doesn't allow us to spend all of our time in holy huddles. Or indeed, to think, even when we meet like this on a Sunday, that we are in a holy huddle. Wouldn't it be cosy if we could close our doors and know that there were just believers inside the building at this moment? We can't do it. You see, there are outsiders and there are insiders (we have got to be absolutely clear about that: there are those who are Christians and those who are not – believers and pagans, there are both) but the two are mixed together. And the believers are to act distinctively among the non-believers: ***'Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity'*** (v. 5). Opportunities to tell people about Jesus will come, and we are to seize them when they come. I guess that you are like me: when I pray for opportunities I probably need to ask God not to be too subtle about it unless I miss them. And more pertinently even than that, I need to pray that He will give me courage so that I don't funk them. I am speaking for myself, and it may be that you identify with that.

And notice, from verse 6, I am myself to create opportunities by my speech: ***'Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone'*** (vv. 5, 6). Gracious conversation, seasoned with the salt of the gospel will elicit questions. Perhaps we are aware of questions that we are not very good at answering that come up from time to time about Christian behaviour or Christian belief. Maybe like me, you are alarmed at the prospect of sometimes having to answer some of those questions. "How can you possibly say there is a God of love in a world when things like that happen?" people say as they point to some ghastly tragedy in our world. I wonder if you and I have ever given much thought to how we can helpfully answer that question; and whether we have ever turned to a bit of Christian reading to help us with that – ***' . . . that you may know how to answer everyone.'*** The first time a question comes, there may be plenty of excuses for not knowing the answer. The second time, there are not quite so many excuses, are there? Perhaps you haven't bothered to go away and talk about it and think about it and read about it.

Implicit in verses 5 and 6 is the fact that we need to look and sound different, as Christians. Different races often find it hard to pick up differences between each other. I heard of an interesting murder trial back, I think, in the 1950s in London, where a man had been murdered in a Chinese restaurant. The chief prosecution witness was the Chinese waiter who had been serving the table at the time. The prosecuting counsel got him into the dock, and he duly identified the murder weapon, the place, the time and everything. And then the prosecuting counsel reached the climax of his case by saying, "And is the man standing in the dock before you now the person who committed the crime?" The Chinese waiter said, "I'm very sorry." "You're very sorry?" said the prosecuting counsel, "What do you mean?" The waiter said, "I'm very sorry: I can't be sure." "You can't be sure? You were only standing four feet away!" "I'm very sorry," said the Chinese waiter, "but all you English look just alike to me."

Well, we can have that problem between races. But I wonder if you and I are distinct as Christians. I wonder if they would say that of us, "Well . . . you all look alike." An alien visitor from afar might listen to our conversation and conclude we sound alike. He watches our behaviour – we seem just like those we live amongst. "No, I'm sorry. I couldn't spot the Christians. You all look alike." You look just like the people you are living amongst. Your rooms are the same, your lifestyles are the same, your values are the same, the cars you drive (or you want to drive) are the same. How you go about your careers is the same. "Sorry, I just couldn't tell the difference. You all look alike." ***'Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the***

most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone’ (vv. 5, 6).

Before we leave those verses, notice again the way Paul links prayer and evangelism: *‘Devote yourselves to prayer . . . pray for us . . . Pray that I may proclaim it clearly . . . Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders . . . Let your conversation be always full of grace . . .’* (from verses 2-6). I meet with two other members of the congregation for half-an-hour every week, to pray for one another’s evangelism. And without that accountability I think I would do even less evangelism than the feeble amount that I do at the moment. I need to pray with other Christians about these differences in this world; about preaching to this world; about the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s half-an-hour a week; and I’d love to commend that idea to every believer here today. Just make yourself accountable and pray weekly that you may speak to the non-Christian world about Jesus. I certainly need that help very much indeed.

And so, as Paul brings the letter to an end he has partnership in gospel ministry topmost in his thoughts. That is undoubtedly what connects us right through this afternoon’s passage.

3) Paul’s Gospel Partners (vv. 7-18)

We’re going to catch a glimpse here of Paul as the team player, to whom his fellow labourers were hugely important.

(a) First, in that first paragraph he talks about the messengers who brought this letter to the Colossians: Tychicus and Onesimus, *‘Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts’* (vv. 7, 8). Paul knew that they would be encouraged by hearing about him, just as he was encouraged in the gospel by hearing about them. And I have to say that the half hour of prayer together with one or two others is very encouraging, as well as very challenging in my own life. And then he goes on: *‘He is coming with Onesimus,’*. Now Onesimus is a slave who had run away from his master in Colossae, and is now returning, converted. It was quite an ordeal for him: *‘He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here’* (v. 9).

(b) Then, there are those with Paul who send their greetings to the Colossians: *‘My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greeting, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas’* (v. 10a). Mark had run away, on an earlier missionary journey with Paul. And it seems that he has now been restored to the fellowship and to ministry. That may explain that little parenthesis: *‘(You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him)’* (v. 10b). And then verse 11: *‘Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me.’* Knowing what a heart Paul had for his own people, we are not at all surprised to hear that. Then verses 12 and 13, about Epaphras (he was the one from whom they had first heard the gospel): *‘Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.’* Obviously Epaphras was a great warrior in the gospel, but I don’t think I have time to spend any longer on him.

‘Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings’ (v. 14). This is the place in the New Testament where we learn that Luke was a doctor. He was the one who wrote one of the gospels (the gospel called Luke), and who wrote The Acts of the Apostles. He was that extraordinary rarity: a doctor who can also write! And Demas, sadly, was later to desert Paul (as we know from 2 Timothy) – in love with this present world.

(c) Then some instructions for the Colossians: *‘Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea [the little city of Laodicea was about ten miles or so away to the west], and to Nympha and the church in her house. After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn*

read the letter from Laodicea’ (v. 15). The letter from Laodicea could possibly be the letter we know as Ephesians because many of the early manuscripts don’t say ‘Ephesians’. But notice that Paul expected his letters to be circulated among the churches and to be read publicly in the services – just as we still do today, and just as they then would have read the Old Testament Scriptures.

Look at verse 17: **‘Tell Archippus: “See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.”’** We have no idea what work that was. It might be something to do with Onesimus being restored to his master Philemon, because Archippus is mentioned in that letter as well. But we don’t really know, but notice that Archippus is told to stick at it and complete it. It’s that “I’ve started so I’ll finish” mentality. As Spurgeon said, ‘By perseverance the snail reached the Ark.’

(d) Finally, verse 18: **‘I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.’** Remember my chains – why that sudden interjection here? We were thinking at the beginning about understanding Paul’s logic. Why does he suddenly throw that in right at the end? A final surge of self-pity and an emotive bid for their sympathy? Well, despite what most of the commentators say, I think not. I don’t think Paul was that sort of person. We know Paul was accustomed to authenticating his letters with his own signature at the end. And I think that it’s more than possible that as Paul reaches for the stylus or the pen or whatever it was, to write in his own handwriting, the manacles on his wrists hindered him from doing so. And all he is saying at this point is, ‘Please excuse this poor handwriting. Remember I am chained up at this moment.’ But what a note to end on: **‘I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.’** You and I may not know anybody who is locked up for talking to others about Jesus – at the moment. But there are plenty of people in our world today who are. And it’s the blinkered view that you and I have, here in the comfortable West that we don’t know many people who are in chains at this moment because of speaking about Jesus.

How little my comfortable preaching about Christ here from this pulpit in Cambridge costs me! How little I pay to get up and preach like this on a Sunday, compared with Paul – compared with so many faithful ministers of the gospel throughout the ages and throughout the world! But at the end of the day what is it that unites Paul and us and all those who are in prison at the moment for their faith? It is a message about a death: a death that saves you and me and brings us back into relationship with God.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)