

Colossians 4:1-6

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Paul instructs masters to treat their slaves fairly, because God is the true Master of all men to whom we are accountable. The Colossians are urged to continue to pray, to be thankful, and to pray for the effectiveness of Paul's preaching. Furthermore, they ought to treat non-believers with wise, gracious language, to win them over to Christ if given the opportunity.

Chapter four begins with an instruction aimed squarely at those who hold positions of authority over others. Paul tells these *Masters*, *grant to your slaves justice and fairness* (vs 1). The Greek word for *Masters* here is the word “kyrios,” which is the same word that is translated “Lord” when the context is referring to God. This section, like so much of the Bible, is imploring people to steward their hearts well. To not be lulled into a false sense that a position or circumstantial setting is the key to one's identity.

The plea here is to use one's position, whatever it is, as an opportunity to steward life well; not to take advantage of others. This is consistent with the essence of the Mosaic Law and its teaching, as well as the teaching of biblical wisdom literature such as Proverbs. Both the Law and Hebraic wisdom literature hold forth that life is full of binary choices, each a choice of life versus death. To choose life is to choose to love and serve others. To choose death is to take the path of exploitation of others. Paul urges the Colossian believers to choose life.

The Greek word translated *slaves* is “doulos.” In the Roman era it could mean a slave in our traditional understanding, someone retained against their will. It could also apply to people who voluntarily entered an economic contract to serve a person for a period of time, perhaps in exchange for discharging a debt that was owed. This voluntary case is the sense in which “doulos” is often used to refer to Christians who are described as being servants (“doulos”) of God.

So these terms, *Masters* and *slaves*, are broad terms that could cover any number of scenarios wherein one person is in positional authority over another.

The instruction here is directed toward the *Masters*. The Greek word translated *grant* is “parecho.” It literally means to reach out and hand something to someone. So, there is a proactive inference to this. Don't just passively dispense *justice and fairness* when it is asked for or demanded. Rather, actively seek opportunities for *justice and fairness*. Reach out. Don't wait until someone else reaches out to you.

So, what is it the *Masters* are to hand over to the *slaves*? It is *justice and fairness*. The word for *justice* here is “dikaios.” It is most often translated in the Bible as “righteousness.” It could be thought of as right living, acting in a way that aligns with God's design for the world. The Greek word for *fairness* is “isotes”; it is translated “equality” every other time it shows up in Scripture except here. So, what Paul is suggesting is that masters give those they oversee equal opportunity to live life well.

Obviously, nobody is responsible for the choices of another. What Paul is commanding here is that the masters do not, through misuse of their power, become a stumbling block, an obstacle, or a hindrance to others. We should all be given a fair shake, an equal chance to make our choices and steward our character well.

Paul reminds the *masters* to do this *knowing that you too have a Master in Heaven* (vs 1). One of the great dangers and delusions of power is the idea that we can attain positional authority to the point that we are not subservient to anyone or anything. Paul's reminder here is that all of the created order is under the authority of The Creator. We ought to treat others, therefore, the way we want to be treated; love others how we'd like to be loved. We should bear witness of the ultimate Lord, remembering that He provides *fairness* and *justice* for all. Further, if we create an obstacle for others, we will have to answer to Him who rules over us.

Verse two begins with another command. It seems Paul has transitioned from speaking directly to a specific group, *Masters*, to speaking to all. The command is this: *Devote yourselves to prayer* (vs 2). The Greek word for *devote*, "proskartereo," literally means "continue." A devotion, or spiritual practice, is dependent on consistency.

So, Paul is instructing the Colossians to be consistent in their walk. In a technique Paul often uses, there is an element of encouragement here. To continue doing something presumes you are already doing it. Paul doesn't tell the Colossians to start praying. He tells them to keep praying. It is an effective way to encourage and instruct others, to call out, celebrate, and reinforce what people are doing well.

Prayer is communication with God. Paul's instruction is to be committed to this practice of personal interaction with the Divine. This would include speaking to God as well as listening to Him.

Paul stretches this instruction further, telling the Colossians to *keep alert in it* (prayer) *with an attitude of thanksgiving* (vs 2). The fact that Paul encourages alertness suggests prayer is not just a one-way street, where we present our requests to God. It is a dialogue, a line of open communication. Prayer helps reveal God to us; it pushes us into peace and draws us into joy. Paul is asking the believers to not miss what prayer is providing, to listen to God. Hear what He has to say. Perceive the effect it has and the opportunity it presents.

This goes hand in hand with the second half of this extended exhortation, adopting an *attitude of thanksgiving*. A disgruntled posture of prayer suggests that we think we know better than God and are upset He is not doing the things the way we would like. This is a dangerous perspective to adopt, a cancer that erodes our relationship with God and one another. Gratitude is not about putting on a false sense of positivity. It is not about being polite. It is about appreciating the reality of living in God's world, even when we do not understand why circumstances are as they are.

Gratitude is an active choice, a perspective we decide upon regardless of the circumstances. It is choosing peace within ourselves because we trust that God is good and He is in control. To choose an *attitude of thanksgiving* is to engage in prayer in such a manner as to recognize that

God is in control, and knows what is best for us. We can see this modeled by Jesus in His prayer in Gethsemane; there Jesus expressed confidence in and deferral to His Father's way (Matthew 26:39, 42).

Now, Paul invites the Colossians to participate in his own journey, *praying at the same time for us as well* (vs 3). Paul is inviting them to pray not only for the things within their own story, but also for Paul, his companions, and their mission. He is empowering the Colossians, showing them that it is not just he who has influence over them and their endeavors; they also have influence over Paul and his efforts.

Paul gives them a specific prayer request: *that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ* (vs 3). Paul is working to spread the message of Christ. The open door metaphor is familiar to us; Paul is asking that God provide an opportunity for *the word*, the message of *the mystery of Christ* to be proclaimed, heard, and accepted.

Paul is looking for an open door so that he and his companions may speak forth *the mystery of Christ*. There is a paradox here, because the word for *mystery* (Greek, "mysterion") has a root meaning of "to shut the mouth." So, Paul is talking about speaking the unspeakable. This kind of language (*the mystery of Christ*) is used throughout Paul's writings as a reference to the limits of language and understanding when it comes to expressing and comprehending the Kingdom of God.

Nevertheless, Paul's mission is to proclaim *the mystery of Christ to the world*. And he asks the Colossian believers to join him in this endeavor by interceding on his behalf. In 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks of the *mystery of Christ* as being beyond anything any human can conceive in their heart that God will give to those who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9).

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul speaks of the *mystery of Christ* as being that God's grace will extend to the Gentiles, and they will be fellow heirs and partakers of God's promises (Ephesians 3:1-6). That would fit with Paul's desire to proclaim the gospel of Jesus to the entire *world*, which was (and is) primarily made up of Gentiles. Also in Ephesians, Paul speaks of marriage as reflecting the great mystery that the church is His bride and the body of Christ (Ephesians 5:30-32).

In reference to the mystery of Christ, Paul adds, *for which I have also been imprisoned* (vs 3). This is most likely a reference to the time Paul has spent in jail for his faith. It seems that Paul is currently in jail while writing this letter to the Colossians, based on other references to imprisonment in this letter (Colossians 4:10,18).

The word translated *imprisoned* here is the Greek word "deo," which literally means "bound," "tie," or "fasten." Paul could be using this as a double-meaning; not only is he imprisoned by human authorities, but the deeper truth is that he is tied to *the mystery of Christ* as a servant of God. He is bound to an obligation to proclaim God's *mystery* because of the call on his life to do so (1 Corinthians 9:1).

Paul's hope is *that I may make it (the mystery of Christ) clear in the way I ought to speak* (vs 4). This is still part of what Paul is asking the Colossians to pray for—that he might *speak* with clarity, so those who hear would understand the good news of Jesus. The word for *clear* (Greek “phaneroo”) means to manifest or reveal that which is hidden. So Paul is hoping to make *the mystery of Christ* less of an enigma for people, enough for them to be able to put their faith in God.

Paul can help unveil the mystery by *the way I ought to speak*, meaning that he can help by saying things in an effective manner. This shows that Paul was seeking to refine his ability to speak, seeking to be as persuasive as possible. It also shows that Paul believed that his disciples in Colossae could help him achieve effectiveness through their prayers on behalf of his mission.

For the last two verses in this section, Paul toggles back to giving the Colossian believers instruction on how to steward their own journey. With the above reference to Paul and his mission as an example, he continues by exhorting them to *conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders* (vs 5). The word for *conduct* (Greek “peripateo”) means “walk.” So, the phrase “walk in *wisdom*” *toward outsiders* means to be taking every step wisely—to always be exercising one's character as a witness of the Kingdom to which one belongs.

By *outsiders*, Paul likely means those who are not yet believers in the Kingdom of God. This matches what Paul described a verse earlier as his calling, his mission. This phrase imploring the Colossians to *conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders* is an invitation for them to join Paul in his mission of reaching the world for the gospel of Christ.

The implication here is that people are watching what we say and do. What we choose to do and the way we behave has influence over those around us. Paul tells the Colossians that *conducting* themselves well is *making the most of the opportunity* (vs 5). The Greek word translated *making the most* here is “exagorazo.” It literally means “redeem.” The word translated *opportunity* is “kairos,” often translated as “time.” So, this phrase literally means “redeeming the time.” The opposite of redeeming the time is to waste time. So, make the *opportunity* count. Spend it on doing something that will produce a return.

It is interesting to note here that Paul's emphasis on the witness of the Colossians to non-believers primarily focuses upon their behavior. Paul asks for prayers for wisdom about how best to explain the gospel to Gentiles. But when advising his disciples how to witness themselves, his emphasis is upon their behavior.

Further describing how to *make the most* of this *opportunity* to be a good witness with their lives, Paul instructs the Colossians to *let your speech always be with grace as though seasoned with salt* (vs 6). The value of salt is that it accentuates the flavors of the meat or bread it seasons; it brings what is true into further emphasis. Salt makes things taste even more like themselves. So, it is not just about speaking the truth. When we speak the truth *with grace*, it accentuates the truth, making it clearer and more recognizable. This is Paul's reminder that it is not just what we say but how we say it that matters. It is not just the reality of facts that matter in our speech, but the tone, the kindness, the intent within our words. People pick up on these invisible things; it can add to or detract from the flavor. It can help increase our impact if we do it well.

The Greek word translated *grace* is “charis” and means “favor.” So the exhortation is to speak in ways that are favorable. This could include speaking in a manner that is helpful, observant, and responsive. The truth sets people free, but the truth should be wrapped in language that is winsome.

The irony is that trying to communicate truth in this accentuated way not only affects the listener, but the speaker too. There is mutual benefit here. When we speak the truth in *grace*, utilizing *wisdom*, we are participating more fully in the truth. There is no greater way to learn than to teach. When we operate in these ways, we become more intimate with the truth, more able to see it, and more adept at communicating it. Paul explains the benefit in this way: *so that you will know how you should respond to each person* (vs 6). Exercising wisdom and grace makes you better able to discern. Practice makes perfect. By adopting these perspectives and following this practical wisdom, the Colossian believer grows in both character and impact.

Biblical Text

Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.² Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving;³ praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned;⁴ that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.⁵ Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.⁶ Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.