

Continue
Colossians 4:2-6
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Randy Lovelace

Good morning, church. It's great to be with you. Great to be with those who are joining us via livestream. And so if today is your first day at CPC, one, don't worry about what I'm about to say, and don't freak out. But today is my last sermon in my congregation, if you're visiting with us for the first time. That's not a bad thing. It's what God is doing. The Lord has led my wife and I to serve a new congregation in Franklin, Tennessee, which is a suburb of Nashville, and we will be leaving in the next couple of weeks as the Lord transitions us.

So a couple of things. If you're joining us for the first time, that doesn't mean you shouldn't come again. I hope you do because we have a great pastor here serving, associate pastor PD Mayfield. And we have Rob Gicking, our director of youth ministries. And we have our session and deaconate, our trustees who are seeking to lead and prepare the church for this transition. And I trust that God is doing just that and will do that.

Not to put too fine of a point on it, but a couple of weeks ago, I couldn't help but think about this Sunday. That what if this literally was the last sermon that I ever preach? Tomorrow is no given. Two weeks ago, a pastor in Nashville after his Sunday service began his sabbatical. He packed the car with his wife and his two daughters. They travelled to the southwest, where they were taking their oldest daughter to her senior year in college. Sadly, however, they did not make it. The father and his oldest daughter passed away in a car accident. His wife and other daughter are alive and recovering. A church, Church of the Redeemer, is in mourning, and the city is because he had great impact on that city around him.

I share that with you because today is all that we have. So what I'm sharing with you is something that is directly from my heart to you as Columbia Presbyterian Church, the ways in which the Lord has used you to form Christ in me, and the ways in which I have learned to walk more dependently on Him as a result of serving you. And so this is from my heart. It is well formed but very personal. You ready?

Let's turn to God's word. Colossians 4:2-6.

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

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

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, I thank you. Thank you for the gift of serving this body. Thank you for the ways in which you have brought me to be keenly aware of my legion of weaknesses. Thank you, Father, for the way in which you've matured me through these saints. Thank you, Father, for the opportunity to declare the word of God, which I have no right to, but it is only a gift. Father, I pray that you would feed your people, richly establish them in prayer and the word and sacrament, that they may be witnesses in the world. Now teach us, Holy Spirit. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Three things. Steadfast in prayer, declare the mystery, and wisdom and witness. Steadfast in

prayer, declare the mystery, and wisdom and witness.

Paul makes it very clear as he's ending this letter. He says to them, "Continue steadfastly." Endure. Continue. Keep going. Keep running. But do what? To do so "in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." First, continue to be steadfast in prayer. And he brings up this idea of being watchful in thanksgiving. But his implied comparison is to be watchful in prayer versus doing and treating prayer as a parenthesis around our doing. If there is anything the Lord has continued to pound into my skull and in my heart, and I believe in my character, is continually over and over again how He reminds me to get out of the way. I keep trying to control life, you see. And He reminds me again and again if I will simply, as Peter says, humble myself under the mighty hand of God, that in that place of being in a humble state praying, "Lord, my life is yours. Your church is yours. What do you want to do?" That in humbling ourselves under the mighty hand of God, when we do so, He promises to lift us up. But being watchful in prayer goes against every fiber of our being, CPC.

Now here I want to speak to the unicorn that is the beauty of CPC. Here's the story that I tell when I tell other people. I've never pastored a church like this, full of so many capable, building, planning, prepared people as this people. When you called me here ten years ago, you were doing three major things at once. You were finishing a building campaign. Big, big item. You were retiring your founding pastor of 33 years. Huge item. And you were calling a new pastor, and you wanted him to do something a little different. The Lord worked through you. This building was finished. The Harrises were blessed and sent. And you received us. You know how to do. You know how to build.

And oftentimes, your greatest gift can also be a part of what is your greatest weakness. Do we treat prayer as a parenthesis around our already well-formed plans? Are we asking God to lead us, or are we asking God to get on our agenda? We can have all of our doctrinal furniture in place. We could have the scriptures memorized. You can have the greatest pastors and sermons you've ever heard in your life preached from this pulpit. You can have the greatest confessions of all of church history, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. You can have all of them and completely miss Jesus. All of it. You can have budgets paid for. We can have it all worked out. We can have hundreds and thousands of people visiting our campus every week and still miss Jesus. I say this to you as much as I say it to my own soul.

Consider these words. Saturday, May 22. I don't know what year. But this is what the writer wrote.

"It is now Saturday night, and I must prepare for my holy sabbath. My Bible and my confession of faith are my traveling companions, and precious friends have they been to use. I believe God for that glorious summary of Christian doctrine contained in our noble standards. It has cheered my soul in many a dark hour and sustained me in many a desponding moment. I love to read it and ponder carefully each proof text as I pass along."

That's beautiful. It was also uttered by pastor James Henley Thornwell, a strict Sabbatarian and a strict defender of chattel slavery in the south. You can have the Bible. We can have our doctrines and still be in vast blindness in a major part of how we apply it. I say that not to beat up on Thornwell. He said some good things there. But if he can be blind, what might I be blind to? What might you be blind to?

So in the place of prayer, when Paul tells us to continue steadfast in prayer, watchful and in thanksgiving, is it not very much like what Peter says when he says these words?

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him because he

cares for you. Be sober minded. Be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Resist him firm in your faith, knowing that the same kind of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen."

It is in the place of prayer, steadfast prayer where we're watching and we're waiting, and we're saying, "Jesus, what are you doing today? What do you need to do in me today?" And in prayer, "Holy Spirit, in this time of prayer as I am in the presence of God in whom I live, and move, and have my being, Lord, by your Spirit and in your mercy, show me my blind spots." And only when we're steadfast in prayer do I believe as we're on our knees saying, "Come Lord Jesus, help us," are we in His presence, and I believe He will hear our prayer. Continue steadfast in prayer. Before we start our agendas, before we start our plans, what does Jesus want? And in wisdom and prudence, guiding of the Holy Spirit, governed by the Holy Spirit, governed by the word, surrounded by great doctrine, I believe the Spirit works. And He will guide us. But it begins from a place of prayer.

Secondly, not just steadfast in prayer and being watchful versus doing, but what is saying? He says, "Pray for us." And so I'm going to ask that you pray for me and Kate as we pray for you. And what are we praying for? What would I ask you to pray for? That the Lord would make us continually to be students of His grace. What are you doing this day, Lord? How does the Lord want to use conversations and relationships? The place where He wants us to live, how does He want us to see that place as a place from which we witness of Christ and minister the grace of the gospel. Pray for us. Satan hates you as he hates us. He hates this church, and he hates Christ Community Church. And he wants nothing better than to frustrate us. So pray that the Lord would open up doors for the gospel as I pray for you that the Lord would open up doors for the gospel here in Howard County.

The good thing about living on the east coast, where we have for the last 20 years, is that I didn't have to contend with the ghost of Jesus. Nobody's wondering as they travel along 108 what we're doing here. They largely don't care. That's a great opportunity for telling people about Jesus. People who don't give any regard to religion whatsoever is a right field for telling people about Jesus. Trust me. You should try it. You'll find that even those who have no knowledge of the gospel rarely resist you praying for them, rarely resist you telling them about the person and work of Jesus. But we're going to a place where Jesus is a ghost still. It's changing. But there's still an enculturated sense of Christianity. And I haven't been in that for over 30 years. In fact, it's one of the reasons why I couldn't wait to leave. But I go back as a missionary. I go back as a missionary. Pray that God would open up doors for the gospel.

But more specifically, if I would ask you to pray, I would ask that you pray that we would be able to declare the mystery, which is what Paul says here. He says, "At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison." Now thanks be to God I am not writing this or preaching this from a place of prison. But nonetheless, Paul was preaching from a place of weakness.

I am preaching to you from a place of weakness. Because let me tell you what's about to happen over the next few weeks. And I give you a blank check. I'm all good with it. I know what's going to happen. When I leave, what's going to happen is the following phrases will be said. "Man, we loved Randy, but." You're going to do it. Because I know my weaknesses, and so do you. And that's okay. I gave you a blank check to talk about my weaknesses. I'm all good with that because I know them. I want to talk about them. I don't mind if you talk about them. I get it. That's what happens in every church. It

happened at the church I planted. It happened at the church I'm going to with the guy who left. It's just what we do. It's what you do. I get it. It's all good.

So I preach from a place of weakness. I'm in the borderlands between the place where I've been for ten years and the place I'm about to go. It's a great place to be. But, boy, it feels like a place of weakness. Because guess what? I've already heard some of the things that you're going to be talking about over the next couple of months, and I'm okay with that. But here's what I'm not okay with. Do not allow others to allow talk about my weakness to drift into gossip about things which are not true.

So hear it from me, the horse's mouth. What would I ask you to pray for? I would ask you to pray that God would enable me to declare the mystery, but in three ways. You ready? Here's a pen. I'm going to give you a prayer because these are the three sermons that I have preached ever since I have been a pastor, but they've just been in different forms. Okay? Different passages. Three things.

Number one, union with Jesus. This is the number one thing on which I want to spend my time and the rest of my career shouting from the rooftops. It is nothing outside of our union from Jesus that enables us to get up in the morning and to have any semblance of hope. Union with Jesus. This was important to Paul when he says in chapter 3,

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is seated, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on earthly things, for you have died, and your life is hidden in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Our union with Jesus from His birth to His resurrection, we're united to all of it. He is the second Adam. He did everything Adam wouldn't do and couldn't do. And He did it with glorious divine human clarity and beauty. I need His active obedience. I need His passive obedience. I need Jesus when He was obedient as a teenager, and I need His obedience on the cross, both. And our union with that keeps me out of and keeps you and I out of a transactional understanding of our relationship with Jesus.

See, if we found ourselves on union with Christ, then we don't have to get on our knees and try to clean ourselves up and give excuses to God. Because we're united to Christ, He receives us already. We've been cleansed. Therefore, we have freedom, freedom, in the presence of God, a Father who loves us and who cares for us. And there is freedom and peace in that. Union with Jesus is number one.

Number two. Pray that God would open up a door for me to declare the mystery of discipleship and spiritual formation in Jesus. Discipleship and spiritual formation in Jesus. I only stand here because somebody else listened to the call of God through the work of the Spirit and put their hand on my shoulder and would not let me go. Taught me how to read the Bible, taught me how to pray, taught me how to be a husband, taught me how to be a father, taught me how to be a pastor, taught me how to be a neighbor. I was discipled. And through that, I've learned how to pray, and I've learned to confess my prayerlessness.

There is no greater sin than pride in my book. It's at the root of all of it. And perhaps the greatest rebellion of my entire life, the besetting sin is self-dependence. And it's self-dependence that keeps us in prayerlessness. "I'll believe you for the big things, but I've got this." "I've got you on Sunday. Now I've got my to-do list on Monday." Spiritual formation and discipleship begin to bring the light of the gospel on the areas where we need to grow.

Paul would say in Colossians 1, "And you who were once alienated and hostile in mind doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless,

above reproach before him." The whole point of our union with Jesus is that we would mature in the faith. Discipleship that we would mature in our understanding of who we are before God. Spiritual formation. Our work life, our family life, our worship, all of it, all of life. Because this is what he says about Jesus. "For in him, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things as far as the curse is found." All things, all of life falls under His discipleship and spiritual formation of the spirit. Pray that I might declare the mystery of discipleship and spiritual formation in Jesus alone.

Finally, the third thing is pray that I might declare the mystery and to be a faithful witness to grace alone. I read a writer this summer who said,

"I am at my most rebellious oftentimes when I am on my knees praying because there in prayer, I'm still trying to clean myself up, to make excuses for my weaknesses, to be defensive about the ways in which I know that I sin, and I try to make myself better before a father who loves me. And again and again and again by the Holy Spirit and the light and the power of grace alone, which has no transaction in it at all, I don't have to clean myself up, and nor do you."

"Grace, grace, God's grace. Grace that is greater than all my sin."

It is a powerful truth when Paul declares, "And you who were once alienated and hostile in mind doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled to you in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless in his sight." Those are passive verbs. It's not what you do, and it's not what I do. It is by grace alone.

So pray for me. Pray for us that I might be able to faithfully continue to declare the mystery of Christ, union with Him, discipleship in Him, but also grace alone through Him. This is the only thing I really care about. And if you hear anyone tell you otherwise, stop them. It's simply not true. This is what I care about and nothing else. And by God's grace, you have been faithful, supportive, and patient, allowing me to preach the word to you in season and out of season. We together have experienced loss, real loss, loss that left a residue and has left a residue on me. I needed therapy in the middle of my time with you because of the exhaustion, not from you but just the difficulties of life. Right? I know I'm not alone. Right? Yeah. It's hard. Life is hard. And death really, really is horrible. Walking with you in loss and grief, God has been faithful. And we are trophies of His grace. And His grace has been enough.

He also says here not just steadfast in prayer and declare the mystery. It is also wisdom and witness when he says here to them, "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." First, he's saying as you go about your life if you are a follower of Christ, you will and are and ought to be in regular engagement with those who are outside the house of faith. Not the literal house, but those who don't know Jesus. So he's saying in essence to be shrewd, be wise, and pray for wisdom. Remember steadfast in prayer? Pray that the Holy Spirit would guide you in how you ought to conduct yourself towards those who are outside the house of faith. And he says that when you give an answer, it ought to be the words of life.

So as this church continues on into the future, and as you seek to walk by faith and not by sight, as you seek to make Christ known, you'll be doing so in the presence of those who do not believe. How are you answering those who do not believe? Do you know those who do not believe? And I will tell you that the opportunity over these last ten years to have a whole network of those who don't know Jesus from their blue jeans has been a great opportunity to be humbled at how much I have learned from them but

also how the Lord has opened up a door to make Christ known in word and deed. I hope and pray for you that this place would be a place that would open wide its doors to those who do not believe, and that we would be wise in how we answer them in regard to the gospel.

Now you heard me say a few weeks ago that it's important we remember that oftentimes before anyone ever believes, they need to know, do we belong? Now we hear the word "belong" before "belief" as a theological thing. That's not what I mean. I belonged to a community of believers, and I didn't believe anything they believed. But there was a place where I could be their friend. There was a place where they opened up the door of their lives in breaking bread, going on skateboard trips, riding our bikes together, where they were willing to rub shoulders with me. And they were not put off. They were not stained. But I was changed in the process.

Allowing them to belong doesn't mean they're members of the church if they haven't professed Christ. That's not what I mean. How are we befriending those who don't know Him? And what are the words that we share with them? Are they words of life? Make sure as we speak the truth and live it out as witnesses to His grace, we do so making sure, Lord help us, that we do not put any obstacles in their way between them and Jesus. They don't need to have all of their belief systems all nice and tidy. They don't need to have their political systems all nice and tidy. They don't have to have their lives nice and tidy. I wasn't, nor are you, and nor do they. The Lord will work through the faithful witness, through the words of life to those who do not believe if we are willing to be used of Him to be witnesses to the name.

Finally, I close with this. He says to conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders "making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." We profess that Jesus is the redeemer. We have it written in our confessional documents. We preach from it. We say that we believe it. But if our identity is in Christ and not just a belief system, if we've come into union with Jesus, that means remember our identity isn't something we construct. It is something that we receive. Because if God is the creator of all things, if He's created us, and He saw our unformed substance before one of our days came to be, says the psalmist, that means that God is the one who gives me my identity. I don't construct it on my own. I am who I am because of who He's made me.

If that is the case then, every jot and tittle of my life falls under His lordship and my identity with Him. It impacts how I speak to others and how I don't speak to others, especially those who do not believe. And it is so tempting, isn't it? It's so tempting to respond.

Can I tell you a funny story as I close? All right. Here's a funny story. A true story. I'm right in the middle of a hot summer highway under construction that is my life, full of potholes, orange cones, and one-way construction signs. It's not a pretty picture. But I am learning, though the hard way. This morning I got up and remembered that I was watching a cyclist, and he has this, you know, vlog that he does. And it's really fun. He's a retired ex-pro. And it's just one of my little private joys. It's great. It's fun. So he goes around the world, and he rides his bike. And he does incredible feats of climbing things that I wish I could go do, but I can't.

So he oftentimes features interviews with other cyclists who have broken records. And this past week, he did an interview with this young Welsh woman. She's in her 20's. She just finished her degree at Stanford. She's back in Wales. And she just got a world record for women around the world in doing what they call Everestine challenge. That is, she climbed 29,000 and some odd feet in eight and a half hours. She beat the world record by 30 minutes. Amazing. Incredible.

So he does this really cool interview with her, and I was blown away by how humble she was. I mean, it was so inspiring. And she could crush all of us, right? You know. And I wrote in the comments,

"Man, thank you for doing this interview. Her humility is inspiring. Man, I hope she continues. She could kill all of us. Just keep pounding away." I left the comments. Great. Moved on. People liked it. Fine. Whatever. I rarely comment on YouTube stuff, but I did here. Then four or five people decided that what I was doing was that I was just sucking up. Right? Haters gonna hate, as we say. Right? So social media being a dumpster fire, at the last one, somebody made some ridiculous comment. And I was like, yeah, I'm going to reply to that. So I put, "Haters gonna hate. Can't fix stupid." I did it. That's what I said. That's exactly what I said. And that was the nicest thing I could think of. All right.

So that started getting likes, and then it became a highlighted comment. I got up this morning, as I am to do, hearing the wise spiritual words of the Holy Spirit working through my wife knowing that I was going to be preaching to you about our wise words to those who are outside the house of faith. And I got on my knees this morning, and I said, "Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay." And I went on there, and I deleted the comment.

And I'm saying this to you as a fellow struggler. Don't you just want to rip off a really cool reply? I mean, social media is a dumpster fire, but there is also a part of us that likes being in the dumpster. Sometimes you taste the comment, and it tastes like sugar. It tastes so good. Right? And so I'm saying this to you as someone who's a fellow struggler. But I also know how pathetic I can be, how futile, how worthless. And I was reminded of my identity. Remember your identity. It's in absolutely nothing else. Nothing else. Not our zip code, not our education, not our politics, not our theology, not our family, not our networks. It begins and ends in Christ alone, and it governs everything we do.

So as one beggar looking for bread at the table of Christ, I pray for you as fellow beggars for bread. Continue. Pray. Declare the mystery. And be witnesses with wisdom to those who do not know Him, that we might declare the glories of His grace. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. Thank you, brothers and sisters. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for this people. I thank you for these ten years, for bringing the word. Thank you, Father, for the way in which you have taught me through them. Thank you, Father, for the ways in which you have continued to confront me in my weakness and brokenness and show me again and again my deep and profound need for grace. Father, I pray for them, that you would lift them up, that you would encourage them, that you would fill them with your grace and love. And I pray, Father, that you would declare to them by your Spirit the mysteries of the glories of Christ and that they would find rest and peace for their souls in Christ alone, that we would leave this place as faithful witnesses. Lord, do this, we ask. In Jesus's name. Amen.