

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

XXIII.

PRECEPTS FOR THE INNERMOST AND OUTERMOST LIFE.

“Continue stedfastly in prayer, watching therein with thanksgiving; withal praying for us also, that God may open unto us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds; that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak. Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer each one.”—Col. iv. 2-6 (Rev. Vers.).

So ends the ethical portion of the Epistle. A glance over the series of practical exhortations, from the beginning of the preceding chapter onwards, will show that, in general terms we may say they deal successively with a Christian's duties to himself, the Church, and the family. And now, these last advices touch the two extremes of life, the first of them having reference to the hidden life of prayer, and the second and third to the outward, busy life of the market-place and the street. That bringing together of the extremes seems to be the link of connexion here. The Christian life is first regarded as gathered into itself—coiled as it were on its centre, like some strong spring. Then, it is regarded in its operation in the outer world, the wheels and pinions which the uncoiling spring will drive. These two sides of experience and duty are often hard to blend harmoniously. The conflict between busy Martha who serves and quiet Mary who only sits and gazes, goes on in every age and in every heart. Here we may find, in some measure, the principle of reconciliation between their antagonistic claims. Here is, at all events, the protest against allowing either to oust the other. Continual prayer is to blend with unwearied action. We are so to walk the dusty ways of life as to be ever in the secret place of the Most High. “Continue stedfastly in prayer,” and withal let there be no unwholesome withdrawal from the duties

and relationships of the outer world, but let the prayer pass into, first, a wise walk, and second, an ever-gracious speech.

I. So we have here, first, an exhortation to a hidden life of constant prayer.

The word rendered "continue" in the Authorized Version, and more fully in the Revised Version by "continue steadfastly," is frequently found in reference to prayer, as well as in other connexions. A mere enumeration of some of these instances may help to illustrate its full meaning. "We *will give ourselves* to prayer," said the Apostles in proposing the creation of the office of deacon. "*Continuing instant in prayer*" says Paul to the Roman Church. "They *continuing* daily with one accord in the Temple" is the description of the early believers after Pentecost. Simon Magus is said to have "continued with Philip," where there is evidently the idea of close adherence as well as of uninterrupted companionship. These examples seem to show that the word implies both earnestness and continuity, so that this injunction not only covers the ground of Paul's other exhortation, "Pray without ceasing," but includes fervour also.

The Christian life, then, ought to be one of unbroken prayer.

What manner of prayer can that be which is to be continuous through a life that must needs be full of toil on outward things? How can such a precept be obeyed? Surely there is no need for paring down its comprehensiveness, and saying that it merely means—a very frequent recurrence to devout exercises, as often as the pressure of daily duties will permit. That is not the direction in which the harmonising of such a precept with the obvious necessities of our position is to be sought. We must seek it in a more inward and spiritual notion of prayer. We must separate between the form and the substance, the treasure and the earthen vessel which carries it. What is

prayer? Not the utterance of words—they are but the vehicle; but the attitude of the spirit. Communion, aspiration, and submission, these three are the elements of prayer—and these three may be diffused through a life. It is possible, though difficult. There may be unbroken communion, a constant consciousness of God's presence, and of our contact with Him, thrilling through our souls and freshening them, like some breath of spring reaching the toilers in choky factories and busy streets; or even if the communion do not run like an absolutely unbroken line of light through our lives, the points may be so near together as all but to touch. In such communion words are needless. When spirits draw closest together there is no need for speech. Silently the heart may be kept fragrant with God's felt presence, and sunny with the light of His face. There are towns nestling beneath the Alps, every narrow, filthy alley of which looks to the great, solemn snow-peaks, and the inhabitants, amid all the squalor of their surroundings, have that apocalypse of wonder ever before them, if they would only lift their eyes. So we, if we will, may live with the majesties and beauties of the great white throne and of Him that sate on it closing every vista and filling the end of every common-place passage in our lives.

In like manner, there may be a continual, unspoken and unbroken presence of the second element of prayer, which is aspiration, or desire after God. All circumstances, whether of duty, of sorrow or of joy, should and may be used to stamp more deeply on my consciousness the sense of my weakness and need; and every moment, with its experience of God's swift and punctual grace, and all my communion with Him which unveils to me His beauty—should combine to move in my heart longings for Him, for more of Him. The very deepest cry of the heart which understands its own yearnings, is for the living God; and perpetual as the hunger of the spirit for the food which

will stay its profound desires, will be the prayer, though it may often be voiceless, of the soul which knows where alone that food is.

Continual too may be our submission to His will, which is an essential of all prayer. Many people's notion is that to pray is to urge our wishes on God, and that to answer our prayers is to give us what we desire. But true prayer is the meeting in harmony of God's will and man's, and its deepest expression is not, *Do this, because I desire it, O Lord*; but, *I do this because Thou desirest it, O Lord*. That submission may be the very spring of all life, and whatsoever work is done in such spirit, however "secular" and however small it be, were it making buttons, is truly prayer.

So there should run all through our lives the music of that continual prayer, heard beneath all our varying occupations like some prolonged deep bass note, that bears up and gives dignity to the lighter melody that rises and falls and changes above it, like the spray on the crest of a great wave. Our lives will then be noble and grave, and woven into a harmonious unity, when they are based upon continual communion with, continual desire after, and continual submission to, God. If they are not, they will be worth nothing and will come to nothing.

But such continuity of prayer is not to be attained without effort; therefore Paul goes on to say, "*Watching therein.*" We are apt to do drowsily whatever we do constantly. Men fall asleep at any continuous work—and then, besides that, there is the constant influence of externals, drawing our thoughts away from their true home in God, so that if we are to keep up continuous devotion, we shall have to rouse ourselves often when in the very act of dropping off to sleep. "*Awake up, my glory!*" we shall often have to say to our souls. Do we not all know that subtly approaching languor? and have we not often caught our-

selves in the very act of falling asleep at our prayers? We must make distinct and resolute efforts to rouse ourselves—we must concentrate our attention and apply the needed stimulants, and bring the interest and activity of our whole nature to bear on this work of continual prayer, else it will become drowsy mumbling as of a man but half awake. The world has strong opiates for the soul, and we must stedfastly resist their influence, if we are to “continue in prayer.”

One way of so watching is to have and to observe definite times of spoken prayer. We hear much now-a-days about the small value of times and forms of prayer, and how, as I have been saying, true prayer is independent of these, and needs no words. All that, of course, is true; but when the practical conclusion is drawn that therefore we can do without the outward form, a grave mistake, full of mischief, is committed. I do not, for my part, believe in a devotion diffused through a life and never concentrated and coming to the surface in visible outward acts or audible words; and, as far as I have seen, the men whose religion is spread all through their lives most really are the men who keep the central reservoir full, if I may so say, by regular and frequent hours and words of prayer. The Christ, whose whole life was devotion and communion with the Father, had His nights on the mountains, and rising up a great while before day, He watched unto prayer. We must do the like.

One more word has still to be said. This continual prayer is to be “with thanksgiving”—again the injunction so frequent in this letter, in such various connexions. Every prayer should be blended with gratitude, without the perfume of which, the incense of devotion lacks one element of fragrance. The sense of need, or the consciousness of sin, may evoke “strong crying and tears,” but the completest prayer rises confident from a grateful

heart, which weaves memory into hope, and asks much because it has received much. A true recognition of the loving-kindness of the past has much to do with making our communion sweet, our desires believing, our submission cheerful. Thankfulness is the feather that wings the arrow of prayer—the height from which our souls rise most easily to the sky.

And now the Apostle's tone softens from exhortation to entreaty, and with very sweet and touching humility he begs a supplemental corner in their prayers. "Withal praying also for us." And the "withal" and "also" have a tone of lowliness in them, while the "us," including as it does Timothy, who is associated with him in the superscription of the letter, and possibly others also, increases the impression of modesty. The subject of their prayers is to be that "God may open unto us a door for the word," a phrase which apparently means an unhindered opportunity of preaching the gospel, for the consequence of the door's being opened is added, "to speak (so that I may speak) the mystery of Christ." And the special reason for this prayer is, "for which I am also (in addition to my other sufferings) in bonds."

He was a prisoner. He cared little about that or about the fetters on his wrists, so far as his own comfort was concerned; but his spirit chafed at the restraint laid upon him in spreading the good news of Christ, though he had been able to do much in his prison, both among the Prætorian guard, and throughout the whole population of Rome. Therefore he would engage his friends to ask God to open the prison doors, as He had done for Peter, not that Paul might come out, but that the gospel might. The personal was swallowed up; all that he cared for was to do his work.

But he wants their prayers for more than that—"that I may make it manifest as I ought to speak"—this is probably explained most naturally as meaning his endow-

ment with power to set forth the message in a manner adequate to its greatness. When he thought of what it was that he, unworthy, had to preach, its majesty and wonderfulness brought a kind of awe over his spirit; and, endowed, as he was, with Apostolic functions and Apostolic grace; conscious, as he was, of being anointed and inspired by God, he yet felt that the richness of the treasure made the earthen vessel seem terribly unworthy to bear it. His utterances seemed to himself poor and unmelodious beside the majestic harmonies of the gospel. He could not soften his voice to breathe tenderly enough a message of such love, nor give it strength enough to peal forth a message of such tremendous import and world-wide destination.

If Paul felt his conception of the greatness of the gospel dwarfing into nothing *his* words when he tried to preach it, what must every other true minister of Christ feel? and if he, in the fulness of his inspiration, besought a place in his brethren's prayers, how much more must they need it, who try with stammering tongues to preach the truth that made his fiery words seem ice? Every such man must turn to those who love him and listen to his poor presentment of the riches of Christ, with Paul's entreaty. His friends cannot do a kinder thing to him than to bear him on their hearts in their prayers to God.

II. We have here next, a couple of precepts, which spring at a bound from the inmost secret of the Christian life to its circumference, and refer to the outward life in regard to the non-Christian world, enjoining in view of it, a wise walk and gracious speech.

"Walk in wisdom towards them that are without." Those that are within are those who have "fled for refuge" to Christ, and are within the fold, the fortress, the ark. Men who sit safe within while the storm howls, may simply think of the poor wretches exposed to its fierceness with selfish complacency. The phrase may express

spiritual pride and even contempt. All close corporations tend to generate dislike and scorn of outsiders, and the Church has had its own share of such feeling; but there is no trace of anything of the sort here. Rather is there pathos and pity in the word, and a recognition that their sad condition gives them a claim on Christian men, who are bound to go out to their help and bring them in. Precisely because they are "without" do those within owe them a wise walk, that "if any will not hear the word, they may without the word be won." The thought is in some measure parallel to our Lord's words, of which perhaps it is a reminiscence. "Behold I send you forth"—a strange thing for a careful shepherd to do—"as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents." Think of that picture—the handful of cowering frightened creatures huddled against each other, and ringed round by that yelping, white-toothed crowd, ready to tear them to pieces! So are Christ's followers in the world. Of course, things have changed in many respects since those days. Partly that persecution has gone out of fashion, and partly that "the world" has been largely influenced by Christian morality, and partly that the Church has been largely secularized. The temperature of the two has become nearly equalized over a large tract of professing Christendom. So a tolerably good understanding, and a brisk trade has sprung up between the sheep and the wolves. But for all that, there is fundamental discord, however changed may be its exhibition, and if we are true to our Master and insist on shaping our lives by His rules, we shall find out that there is.

We need, therefore, to "walk in wisdom" towards the non-Christian world; that is, to let practical prudence shape all our conduct. If we are Christians, we have to live under the eyes of vigilant and not altogether friendly observers, who derive satisfaction and harm from any incon-

sistency of ours. A plainly Christian life that needs no commentary to exhibit its harmony with Christ's commandments is the first duty we owe to them.

And the wisdom which is to mould our lives in view of these outsiders will "discern both time and judgment," will try to take the measure of men and act accordingly. Common sense and practical sagacity are important accompaniments of Christian zeal. What a singularly complex character, in this respect, was Paul's—enthusiastic and yet capable of such diplomatic adaptation; and withal never dropping to cunning, nor sacrificing truth! Enthusiasts who despise worldly wisdom, and therefore often dash themselves against stone walls, are not rare; cool calculators who abhor all generous glow of feeling and have ever a pailful of cold water for any project which shows it, are only too common—but fire and ice together, like a volcano with glaciers streaming down its cone, are rare. Fervour married to tact, common sense which keeps close to earth and enthusiasm which flames heaven high, are a rare combination. It is not often that the same voice can say, "I count not my life dear to myself," and "I became all things to all men."

A dangerous principle that last, a very slippery piece of ground to get upon!—say people, and quite truly. It is dangerous, and one thing only will keep a man's feet when trying it, and that is, that his wise adaptation shall be perfectly unselfish, and that he shall ever keep clear before him the great object to be gained, which is nothing personal, but "that I might by all means save some." If that is held in view, we shall be saved from the temptation of hiding or maiming the very truth which we desire should be received, and our wise adaptation of ourselves and of our message to the needs and weaknesses and peculiarities of those "who are without," will not degenerate into handling the word of God deceitfully. Paul advised

“walking in wisdom,” he abhorred “walking in craftiness.”

We owe them that are without such a walk as may tend to bring them in. Our life is to a large extent their Bible. They know a great deal more about Christianity, as they see it in us, than as it is revealed in Christ, or recorded in Scripture—and if, as seen in us, it does not strike them as very attractive, small wonder if they still prefer to remain where they are. Let us take care lest instead of being doorkeepers to the house of the Lord, to beckon passers-by and draw them in, we block the doorway, and keep them from seeing the wonders within.

The Apostle adds a special way in which this wisdom shows itself—namely, “redeeming the time.” The last word here does not denote time in general, but a definite season, or *opportunity*. The lesson, then, is not that of making the best use of all the moments as they fly, precious as that lesson is, but that of discerning and eagerly using appropriate opportunities for Christian service. The figure is simple enough; to “buy up” means to make one’s own. “Make much of time, let not advantage slip,” is an advice in exactly the same spirit. Two things are included in it; the watchful study of characters, so as to know the right times to bring influences to bear on them, and an earnest diligence in utilizing these for the highest purposes. We have not acted wisely towards those who are without unless we have used every opportunity to draw them in.

But besides a wise walk, there is to be “*gracious speech*.” “Let your speech be always with grace.” A similar juxtaposition of “wisdom” and “grace” occurred in chapter iii. 16. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom . . . singing with grace in your hearts”; and there as here, “grace” may be taken either in its lower æsthetic sense, or in its higher spiritual. It may mean either favour, agreeableness, or the Divine gift, be-

stowed by the indwelling Spirit. The former is supposed by many good expositors to be the meaning here. But is it a Christian's duty to make his speech always agreeable? Sometimes it is his plain duty to make it very disagreeable indeed. If our speech is to be true, and wholesome, it must sometimes rasp and go against the grain. Its pleasantness depends on the inclinations of the hearers rather than on the will of the honest speaker. If he is to "redeem the time" and "walk wisely to them that are without," his speech cannot be always with such grace. The advice to make our words always pleasing may be a very good maxim for worldly success, but it smacks of Chesterfield's Letters rather than of Paul's Epistles.

We must go much deeper for the true import of this exhortation. It is substantially this—whether you can speak smooth things or no, and whether your talk is always directly religious or no,—and it need not and cannot always be that—let there ever be in it the manifest influence of God's Spirit, who dwells in the Christian heart, and will mould and sanctify your speech. Of you, as of your Master, let it be true "Grace is poured into thy lips." He in whose spirit the Divine Spirit abides will be truly "Golden-mouthed"; his speech shall distil as the dew, and whether his grave and lofty words please frivolous and prurient ears or no, they will be beautiful in the truest sense, and show the Divine life pulsing through them, as some transparent skin shows the throbbing of the blue veins. Men who feed their souls on great authors catch their style, as some of our great living orators, who are eager students of English poetry. So if we converse much with God, listening to His voice in our hearts, our speech will have in it a tone that will echo that deep music. Our accent will betray our country. And then our speech will be with grace in the lower sense of pleasing. The truest gracefulness, both of words and conduct comes from

grace. The beauty caught from God, the fountain of all things lovely, is the highest.

The speech is to be "*seasoned with salt.*" That does not mean the "Attic salt" of wit. There is nothing more wearisome than the talk of men who are always trying to be piquant and brilliant. Such speech is like a "pillar of salt"—it sparkles, but is cold, and has points that wound, and it tastes bitter. That is not what Paul recommends. Salt was used in sacrifice—let the sacrificial salt be applied to all our words; that is, let all we say be offered up to God, "a sacrifice of praise to God continually." Salt preserves. Put into your speech what will keep it from rotting, or, as the parallel passage in Ephesians has it, "let no *corrupt* communication proceed out of your mouth." Frivolous talk, dreary gossip, ill-natured talk, idle talk, to say nothing of foul and wicked words, will be silenced when your speech is seasoned with salt.

The following words make it probable that salt here is used also with some allusion to its power of giving savour to food. Do not deal in insipid generalities, but suit your words to your hearers, "that ye may know how ye ought to answer each one." Speech that fits close to the characteristics and wants of the people to whom it is spoken is sure to be interesting, and that which does not will for them be insipid. Commonplaces that hit full against the hearer will be no commonplaces to him, and the most brilliant words that do not meet his mind or needs will to him be tasteless "as the white of an egg."

Individual peculiarities, then, must determine the wise way of approach to each man, and there will be wide variety in the methods. Paul's language to the wild hill tribes of Lycaonia was not the same as to the cultivated, curious crowd on Mars' Hill, and his sermons in the synagogues have a different tone from his reasonings of judgment to come before Felix.

All that is too plain to need illustration. But one word may be added. The Apostle here regards it as the task of every Christian man to speak for Christ. Further, he recommends dealing with individuals rather than with masses, as being within the scope of each Christian, and as being much more efficacious. Salt has to be rubbed in, if it is to do any good. It is better for most of us to fish with the rod than with the net, to angle for single souls, rather than to try and enclose a multitude at once. Preaching to a congregation has its own place and value; but private and personal talk, honestly and wisely done, will effect more than the most eloquent preaching. Better to drill in the seeds, dropping them one by one into the little pit made for their reception, than to sow them broadcast.

And what shall we say of Christian men and women, who can talk animatedly and interestingly of anything but of their Saviour and His kingdom? Timidity, misplaced reverence, a dread of seeming to be self-righteous, a regard for conventional proprieties, and the national reserve account for much of the lamentable fact that there are so many such. But all these barriers would be floated away like straws, if a great stream of Christian feeling were pouring from the heart. What fills the heart will overflow by the floodgates of speech. So that the real reason for the unbroken silence in which many Christian people conceal their faith is mainly the small quantity of it which there is to conceal.

A solemn ideal is set before us in these parting injunctions—a higher righteousness than was thundered from Sinai. When we think of our hurried, formal devotion, our prayers forced from us sometimes by the pressure of calamity, and so often suspended when the weight is lifted; of the occasional glimpses that we get of God—as sailors may catch sight of a guiding star for a

moment through driving fog, and of the long tracts of life which would be precisely the same, as far as our thoughts are concerned, if there were no God at all, or He had nothing to do with us—what an awful command that seems, “Continue stedfastly in prayer”!

When we think of our selfish disregard of the woes and dangers of the poor wanderers without, exposed to the storm, while we think ourselves safe in the fold, and of how little we have meditated on and still less discharged our obligations to them, and of how we have let precious opportunities slip through our slack hands, we may well bow rebuked before the exhortation, “Walk in wisdom toward them that are without.”

When we think of the stream of words ever flowing from our lips, and how few grains of gold that stream has brought down amid all its sand, and how seldom Christ’s name has been spoken by us to hearts that heed Him and know Him not, the exhortation, “Let your speech be always with grace,” becomes an indictment as truly as a command.

There is but one place for us, the foot of the cross, that there we may obtain forgiveness for all the faulty past, and thence may draw consecration and strength for the future, to keep that lofty law of Christian morality, which is high and hard if we think only of its precepts, but becomes light and easy when we open our hearts to receive the power for obedience, “which,” as this great Epistle manifoldly teaches, “is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

ALEXANDER MACLAREN.
