

Colossians 4

The Truth about Spirituality and Service

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Quote

“The most important question is not how much work is being done but how much Jesus is doing through you. Look up; God’s ceiling is unlimited. Learn to look on Jesus, and more and more you will find that Jesus is directing your wandering look toward the Holy Spirit.”

Corrie Ten Boom

In a Nutshell

In chapter 4, Paul tells the Colossian believers: Fellow believers in Colosse, be diligent and alert in your prayers. Please pray that God will give me opportunities to share clearly the message of Christ even while I'm in this prison. In your own dealings with unbelievers, may you be wise with your lives and winsome with your words.

All of the men who assist me and who are such a comfort to me send you their greetings. I am sending a letter to the Laodicean believers, and I want the two churches to exchange and read one another's letter. May God's grace sustain you all.

The Truth about Spirituality and Service

I. Introduction

My Heroes Have Always Been Normal

Janice Munson, 39, and her husband, Dan, were on a shopping trip in Littleton, Colorado, when they came up behind a silver minivan moving along at a very slow pace. The minivan swerved first onto the shoulder, and then into oncoming traffic. Janice glanced into the minivan and was startled to see that the driver appeared to be asleep.

Dan engaged his flashers and began waving his arm and blinking his headlights to warn approaching traffic. Janice knew she had to act. Without a word to her husband, she jumped from the car. Within seconds, she was running alongside the van. She grabbed the door handle, banged on the window and yelled, "You're going the wrong way!" The woman only stared back vacantly.

Janice swung the door open and vaulted inside the moving vehicle. She slammed the gearshift into park, bringing the van to an abrupt stop. Seconds later, a stream of cars coming from the opposite direction whizzed safely past the van and its occupants. Afterwards, police told Janice that the van driver was a diabetic suffering from insulin shock. She was taken to a nearby hospital, treated, and released ("Heroes for Today," *Readers Digest*, October 1994, 23–24).

In *A World without Heroes*, George Roche defines *heroism* as "an extraordinary act of goodness, performed by 'ordinary' persons from whom we do not expect it" (Hillsdale, Michigan: Hillsdale College Press, 1987, 23). True of Janice Munson, just a thirty-nine-year-old wife and mom who risked her life to save lives. Extraordinary action. Ordinary people.

That's true of biblical heroes as well. We tend to make biblical characters into super saints. A careful look reminds us that they were just normal. Sure, some of them accomplished great things: we read of their accomplishments in the biblical record. Their records also include some embarrassing flaws. Remember Abraham's deception, Sarah's doubt, David's adultery, Peter's denials, Mark's desertion? They were just normal folks God used to accomplish his purposes. My heroes have always been normal.

In Colossians 4, we meet some normal people. As the letter closes, Paul introduces us to his partners in ministry. Through these normal heroes God accomplished his work.

The truth about spirituality is that it's obedience in the ordinary, by the ordinary. Genuine spiritual living is not for the favored few, as the false teachers would have us believe. What about service for the Christ who has supremacy? Does such a supreme Savior use only "special" people? Of course not. The truth about spirituality and service is that they're both open to ordinary people like you and me.

II. Commentary

The Truth about Spirituality and Service

Main Idea: *Knowing the truth about spirituality and service calls us to live lives of prayer, wisdom, and faithfulness.*

A. Communication: Sharing Our Most with God (v. 2)

Supporting Idea: *Believers should pray with diligence, awareness, and thanks.*

4:2. Paul has reminded believers that they are identified with an extraordinary Christ who has absolute supremacy. He has called believers (ordinary people) to live their ordinary lives in an extraordinary way. How is the believer to accomplish such a challenging assignment? Is assistance available? Yes. The believer is not alone in a world of temptation and deception. Strength and perspective are always available by looking above in prayer. Paul exhorts believers to pray with (1) diligence, (2) awareness, (3) gratitude.

Prayer should be done with diligence. **Devote** means “be busily engaged in,” persist in, or give constant attention.” Prayer in the believer’s life is not just an option for occasional emergencies. If believers are to withstand the constant pressures of a fallen and unfriendly world, an attitude of persistence and perseverance in prayer is needed.

Watchful literally means “stay awake” and refers to an attitude of being spiritually alert. Using the same term, Peter encouraged his readers to “be self-controlled and *alert*. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8, emphasis added). Believers need to be alert because Satan wants to devour them. Colossians tells believers to be alert because false teachers want to deceive them. Believers need to be aware of the evil forces which seek to tantalize and capture them. If believers wish to be wide awake in their prayer life, the insight of C. S. Lewis can be helpful:

No one in his senses, if he has any power of ordering his own day, would reserve his chief prayers for bedtime—obviously the worst possible hour for any action which needs concentration.... My own plan, when hard pressed, is to seize any time, and place, however unsuitable, in preference to the last waking moment.... The body ought to pray as well as the head” (*The Joyful Christian*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1977, 88–89).

Finally, Paul calls believers to **thankful** prayer. Believers who pray with gratitude for God’s blessing will be less likely to be led astray by the lures and lies of the enemy.

B. Conversation: Sharing Our Message with Unbelievers (vv. 3–6)

Supporting Idea: *Believers should share the gospel with clarity, wisdom, and grace.*

4:3–4. The believer is to share his most with God through diligent, watchful, grateful prayer, but the believer’s prayers are not to be centered only on self. Paul asked the Colossian believers to **pray for us** (his partners in ministry), **too**. This request, however, is broader than Paul and his associates. Paul’s request is that the Colossians pray for him so he can share the message of **the mystery of Christ** with those who have not yet joined the family of faith. Paul could have prayed for many things. He reminds us that he is **in chains**, a clear reference to his imprisonment. He could have prayed for release or relief. He didn’t though. He prayed that God would **open a door [of opportunity] for [his] message**. Paul knew God can open doors of opportunity even for those behind prison doors.

Proclaim means “to make clear and plain.” Paul desired not only opportunity; he also requested clarity. Paul’s desire was that even in his less than ideal circumstances he might bring others to faith in Christ. Paul’s prayers were answered. Philippians, like Colossians, was written while Paul was imprisoned. In that letter Paul writes, “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ” (Phil. 1:12–13). As Paul closed Philippians (4:22), he sent a special greeting: “All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household,” no doubt a reference to the palace guards and others with whom Paul had contact during his imprisonment. The answer to his request in Colossians continued later in his life as well. Acts 28:30–31 tells us, “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Even as Paul brings his letter to a close and as he prays for opportunities to evangelize, **Christ** remains central. He is the exalted Creator and Redeemer in chapter 1. He is the fullness of deity, and he conquers by his cross in chapter 2. He is seated in majesty and authority in chapter 3. In chapter 4, it is Christ who is proclaimed.

4:5. Paul shifts his evangelistic interest from himself to the believers at Colosse. If believers are to be effective in sharing the message, they must **be wise in the way [they] act toward outsiders**. Wisdom enables us to combine boldness with tact. Wisdom enables us to employ the proper approach in specific situations and with particular individuals. If believers are to be effective in sharing the message, they must also **make the most of every opportunity**. The literal translation of this phrase is redeem [buy back] the time. It refers to “snapping up every opportunity that comes.” Believers can look to the example of the man who penned the words for encouragement. Paul, the prisoner, exploited every opportunity to share the message.

4:6. For the sharing of the message of Christ to be effective, the wise walk must be accompanied with flavorful talk. The believer’s talk is to be gracious, rather than gruff, and charming, rather than coarse. The believer’s talk is to be **seasoned with salt**. Salt was used for two purposes in Paul’s time. It was used as a preservative to keep food from spoiling. This would mean the believer’s speech is to be free from corruption, wholesome. Salt was also used as an additive to give flavor to food. If this meaning lies behind the figure, then the believer’s speech is to be interesting, witty, tactful, and appealing. Perhaps the best understanding of the reference to **salt** is that the believer’s speech is to be both wholesome and appealing. Paul wants believers to **know how to answer everyone**. He tells them to answer with speech which is gracious, wholesome, and appealing.

C. Community: Sharing Our Ministry with Believers (vv. 7–18)

Supporting Idea: *Believers find comfort, help, and brotherhood with other believers.*

4:7–9. How was Paul able to maintain his perspective while in prison? With so many churches so close to his heart, how was he able to keep up with helping each one face their own unique challenge? Was he a superman? No. He had help.

In the concluding verses of the letter to the Colossians, Paul does more than send along personal greetings. He gives us a glimpse into his fellowship of encouragement. Verses 7–18 are more than a mere list of names. They are real, ordinary people, who helped Paul carry out an extraordinary ministry for the sake of an extraordinary Savior. We, too, will need others if we are to maintain the vitality in ministry which Paul exemplifies.

We might call **Tychicus** the trusted assistant. He is an example of faithfulness in little things which led to greater things. He was sent to inform the Colossians of Paul’s **circumstances and encourage [their] hearts**. He was probably the carrier of the letter to the Colossians as well as the letter to the Ephesians

(Eph. 6:21). In later years **Tychicus** was a relief minister for Titus (Titus 3:12). As Paul approached death, he sent **Tychicus** to care for the church at Ephesus (2 Tim. 4:12).

Accompanying the trusted assistant is Onesimus, the runaway slave from Colosse. We read his story in the Book of Philemon, a companion volume to Colossians. Everyone knew what the local boy had done. The story of Onesimus is a story of grace and hope. The slave becomes a **dear brother**. Only the gospel (1:3–8) can cause such a radical and absolute change.

4:10–11. Aristarchus, the devoted companion, was always there when Paul needed him. He was with Paul in prison. In Acts 19:29, **Aristarchus** was with Paul during the Ephesian riot; in Acts 27:2, he was with Paul in shipwreck. Adversity did not lessen his affection.

Mark, the recovered friend, made a mistake and a recovery. Mark abandoned Paul on his first missionary journey; as a result, Paul refused to take him along on the next trip (Acts 15:37–39). The career of John **Mark** appeared to be over, but Barnabas, his cousin, nurtured and encouraged him and salvaged him. He was with Paul as Colossians was written. At the end of Paul's life, he said Mark was useful to him (2 Tim. 4:11). Mark had been recovered, and Paul wanted the Colossians to **welcome him**.

Jesus Justus, the unsung hero, also brought **comfort** to Paul. Little else is known about Jesus (Jewish name) Justus (Roman name) except that he was a source of consolation to Paul.

4:12–13. Every church and ministry needs an Epaphras, the prayer warrior, also from Colosse. He was mentioned earlier (1:7) as the man responsible for bringing the gospel to the Colossians. For Epaphras prayer was not a game, it was a battle. He prayed continually, fervently, and with purpose. Aware of what the Colossians were facing, he knew their need was to grow to maturity in Christ in order to continue to resist the alluring lies of the false teachers.

4:14. One of Paul's most enduring companions was his **dear friend Luke**, the talented specialist. A man who gave his many considerable gifts to God, Luke was a doctor, historian, author, and friend. When Paul wrote Colossians, **Demas** was still at Paul's side. Unfortunately, Demas became a worldly defector. At the end of Paul's life, Demas fell in love with the world and forsook Paul (2 Tim. 4:10).

4:15–16. Paul sends a **letter** and **greetings** not only to Colosse, but also to **Laodicea**. The church in each city was to read its letter and then share it with the church in its sister city. Just what the letter to the Laodiceans was remains a mystery, but we know it must have had some significance for all believers in the Lychus valley. Later, a Latin letter to the Laodiceans circulated in some churches and is included in publications of the New Testament Apocrypha, but it was certainly not written by Paul.

4:17. Archippus may have been the son of Philemon and Apphia and the pastor of the church that met in their home (Phlm. 2). He is challenged to **complete the work [he] received in the Lord**. Perhaps he needed this word of encouragement so as not to give up in the face of the fierce battle with the false teachers.

4:18. Paul closed his epistle with an assurance of his personal interest in the Colossians and a request that they **remember** him and his circumstance of being in **chains**.

Main Idea Review: *Knowing the truth about spirituality and service calls us to live lives of prayer, wisdom, and faithfulness.*

III. Conclusion

Putting Things in Their Proper Place

Dr. A. C. Dixon once wrote, "When we rely on organization, we get what organization can do; when we rely on education, we get what education can do; when we rely on eloquence, we get what eloquence can do; and so on. I am not disposed to undervalue any of these things in their proper place—BUT when we rely on prayer, we get what God can do."

Colossians is all about proper place. False teachers were attempting to remove Jesus Christ from his proper place of absolute supremacy. Paul tells believers that the proper place for their ambitions is heaven above and not earth below. Prayer certainly has a prominent place in Colossians. The letter begins with two prayers (1:3–8 and 1:9–14) and closes with two references to prayer (4:2 and 4:12). Sandwiched in between are our responsibilities: know the truth and avoid error; live out our new life by developing character and deepening relationships. If ordinary people, like you and me, are to have any hope of fulfilling those compelling responsibilities, then prayer must have its proper place in our lives.

The truth about spirituality and service is that spirituality is keeping Christ central, and service is for ordinary people who love their Savior.

Principles

- Prayer should be more than an occasional emergency; it deserves our constant attention.
- Believer's prayers should be conducted with a keen sense of spiritual alertness.
- Evangelism begins with praying for opportunities.
- Opportunities for evangelism are everywhere.
- Opportunities for evangelism must be seized.
- Faithful evangelism is a matter of combining a wise walk with flavorful talk.
- God uses ordinary people to accomplish his work.
- Vital ministry is accomplished through a team of people.

Applications

- Evaluate the effectiveness of your prayer life. Are you diligent or haphazard? Do you give God the best moments of your day or the moments that fade into sleep? Determine to be a prayer warrior like Epaphras.
- Pray that God will give you opportunities to share your faith.
- Seize the opportunities God gives you to share your faith.
- Learn a gospel presentation so that you share with clarity.
- Make yourself and your gifts available to the Savior. God is in the business of doing extraordinary things with ordinary people who faithfully serve his extraordinary Son.

IV. Life Application

Celebrating Faithfulness

We live in a celebrity crazed society. *Time* film critic Richard Schickel says celebrities have become "the chief agents of moral change in America." Why? Because they're so moral? No. Simply because they're celebrities, and we listen to celebrities.

Scripture tells us that God has chosen to use the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, the weak to shame the strong—yet we fall into the celebrity trap, too. We have a tendency to make super saints of biblical characters and believe that God's work is accomplished only through "big names" with highly visible gifts. God's work is accomplished through "no names" as well as "big names."

Chuck Colson reminds us of that encouraging truth. He tells of a Prison Fellowship visit to Washington, D.C., saturated with media coverage. The governor of Maryland was present along with camera crews and reporters. The program included an internationally known gospel singer and Colson as the featured speaker. At the closing exercises, several inmates gave their testimonies. One man said, "I really appreciated Chuck Colson's message, and I was stirred by Wintley Phipp's singing. Herman's testimony reached me right where I was at. But frankly, those things really didn't impress me so much as did the ladies among the volunteers who, after the crowd and TV cameras left, went into the dining hall, with all the noise and confusion, and sat at the table to have a meal with us. That's what really got to me" (Charles Colson, "Ordinary People," *Moody Monthly*, May 1987, 12).

Our world may be obsessed with celebrities, but God most often builds his kingdom through the faithful obedience of ordinary people. Have you fallen into the celebrity trap? Convinced God can't use you? The truth is, he can. All it takes is availability, reliance on his enabling power, and faithfulness in the ordinary grind of life. So get involved. Dig in. Get your hands dirty. Keep it up. Most of us will never be "big names," but the only "big name" that really matters is Jesus.

V. Prayer

God, may we enter your presence often, thanking you for your work in our lives, asking for opportunities to share your grace, and joyful as we find the fellowship and encouragement that comes from Christian community.

VI. Deeper Discoveries

A. Salt (v. 6)

Salt was plentiful in Palestine, both from the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea. Salt was both a preservative and a seasoning. The Old Testament emphasizes the preservative nature of salt. Salt is added to the meal offering to signify the lasting nature of the covenant (Lev. 2:13; Num. 18:19; 2 Chr. 13:5). New Testament passages seem to emphasize the seasoning function (Matt. 5:13; Mark 9:49–50; Luke 14:34; Col. 4:6). In each of these instances, salt is seen as a valuable commodity. Due to the addition of impurities and to chemical changes which took place during humid weather which causes the sodium chloride to leech out, the outer layer of salt could be lacking in flavor in many instances. It was then discarded as worthless (see Matt. 5:13). Here in Colossians 4:6, Paul speaks of salt as an additive to give flavor, that meaning being emphasized by the use of the word seasoned (*artuo*). This type of speech is engaging and clever but is not the **fine-sounding arguments** used by the false teachers in Colosse (2:4). The believer's speech is to be witty and compelling because it is connected to truth not because it lacks truth.

B. Hierapolis (v. 13)

Hierapolis was the third primary city in the Lychnus River Valley, about six miles across the Valley from Laodicea and fourteen miles from Colosse. The city was famous for hot springs thought to have medicinal value. Many pagan cults grew up around the beautiful springs. Hierapolis had hot water; Colosse had cold water; and Laodicea had tepid water. Hierapolis is not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament, but it seems to be a place where Epaphras had started a church alongside the churches in Colosse and Laodicea.

C. Nympha (v. 15)

Nympha is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. A church met in the house of this friend of Paul. Beyond that we do not know much. Even the gender of Nympha is debated. The form of the name in the Greek, an unaccented accusative, allows for the reference to be to a man or a woman. This explains the textual variations in gender with reference to the church in either "her house" (nasb, niv), "his house" (kjv), or even "their house" (rsv). The manuscript evidence can be used to argue for any of the options. In the end the identity of Nympha remains a mystery.

D. The church in her house (v. 15)

House churches were common in the New Testament. In addition to the church which met in Nympha's house, we know that a church also met in the house of Philemon (Phlm. 2). In Acts we find that believers met in the house of Lydia at Philippi for encouragement (Acts 16:15, 40). Priscilla and Aquilla seem to have had a church meet in their house in the different cities in which they lived: Rome (Rom. 16:5) and Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19). In Corinth, Paul used the house of the converted synagogue leader Titius Justus as a church for some period of time (Acts 18:7).

History tell us that churches did not own property for the purpose of meeting to worship until after a.d. 200. Before that time the church met outdoors (Acts 16:13) or in the synagogue for short periods of time (Acts 17:2, 10).

E. In my own hand (v. 18)

This reference to Paul's writing in his own hand may mean he wrote the entire letter; more likely he used a secretary or amanuensis (scribe who listened to dictation and wrote the letter) who would have copied down Paul's words, and then Paul simply wrote the final greeting in his own handwriting to authenticate the letter. Paul mentions his own signature in a number of his letters (1 Cor. 16:21; 2 Cor. 10:1; Gal. 6:11; 2 Thess. 3:17; Phlm. 19). This personal signature guarded against forged letters which would claim to have come from Paul (2 Thess. 2:2) and gave emphasis to what Paul was saying (Gal. 6:11).

VII. Teaching Outline

A. Introduction

1. Lead story: My Heroes Have Always Been Normal
2. Context: In the fourth chapter of Colossians, Paul brings the letter to a close with an exhortation to be diligent in prayer and prudent in dealing with unbelievers. If believers are to be successful in the spiritual battle of avoiding error, they must rely on the power of prayer. Believers are not to forget that the gospel, which changed their lives, must be shared wisely, graciously, and clearly if it is to have impact on unbelievers. Paul concluded with greetings from the team of coworkers who faithfully helped him in ministry.
3. Transition: As we look at this chapter, we see that vitality in personal lives and public ministry is a matter of prayer and community. No one lives the Christian life alone. God is available through prayer. Other believers are available for encouragement. Prayer and community allows ordinary believers to serve their Savior, and their world with extraordinary results.

B. Commentary

1. Communication: Sharing Our Most with God (v. 2)
 - a. Praying with diligence.
 - b. Praying with awareness.
 - c. Praying with gratitude.
2. Conversation: Sharing Our Message with Unbelievers (vv. 3–6)
 - a. Evangelism calls for perspective and clear proclamation (vv. 3–4)
 - b. Evangelism calls for wisdom and an opportunistic walk (vv. 5)
 - c. Evangelism calls for grace and flavorful talk (v. 6)
3. Community: Sharing Our Ministry with Believers (vv. 7–18)
 - a. Faithful servants are a source of encouragement (vv. 7–11)
 - b. Fervent servants are a source of support (vv. 12–13)

- c. Friendly servants are a source of community (vv. 14–18)

C. Conclusion: Celebrating Faithfulness

VIII. Issues for Discussion

1. For whom are you praying? What do you expect to happen as a result of your prayers of intercession for other people?
2. Do you have answers for the questions people raise about your faith? In what situations do you talk with unbelievers about your faith? How can you find more opportunities to do so?
3. What description would other members of your church use to characterize your Christian life?
4. Do you have incomplete work for God? What is your plan for completing it?

Holman New Testament Commentary Anders, M. (1999). [*Galatians-Colossians*](#) (Vol. 8, pp. 348–353). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.