

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. ³ *And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.* ⁴ *Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.* ⁵ *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.* ⁶ *Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.* (Colossians 4:2-6)

Devote Yourselves to Prayer

How much extra time do you have on your hands? Do you find yourself sitting around, wishing that you had something to do? All your TV shows have been watched and re-watched? All your books are read and your house is clean and all your projects at work are up to date? Do you spend half your life just killing time? Boy, I wish, huh? Most of us can only dream of being caught up. We simply don't have enough time and we have too many obligations. Time is a very precious commodity. There are so many important things that need our time. Our kids need our time, not just quality time. Kids need quantity time from mom and dad. Our spouses need a big, healthy dose of our time or our marriages are going to start circling the drain. School and work demand enormous commitments of our time. And so does cleaning and maintaining our house, buying and preparing food, and on and on. How much time does our church need? How much time does our faith need? This year our stewardship focus is on time. Our theme is Love Takes Time. This morning, we want to consider time for prayer. My friends, whatever else you do in your life, **devote yourselves to prayer.**

I.

Now, when we talk about stewardship of time, it's easy for us to think in terms of programs and reports and statistics. But serving God is not about programs. It's not about reports or statistics either. The vast majority of what you and I do to express our faith in Christ will never show up on a report at church. Serving God is about our faith coming out in our lives. Prayer is one example of that. How could we possibly keep track of how often you pray? We can't. But God does. St. Paul says this morning, **devote yourselves to prayer. Pray for the preaching of the gospel.**

St. Paul says, "**Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.**" What does that mean? Commit yourself to prayer. God promises to hear and answer every one of our prayers. He's never too busy to get to you. He never puts you on hold. Pray to the Father who loves you and while you do it, keep watch. What does it mean to keep watch? A long time ago, I was in the army. When you pulled guard duty, you were expected to keep awake and be alert. And that was in Germany where the biggest threat was petty crime. Imagine what it would be like if you were on guard duty in Afghanistan. You would have to be aware of your surroundings at all times. You would have to know what to watch for and what the danger signs were. That's the way it is with us Christians. We are in the middle of a guerrilla war. The big war is over. Christ won when he died and rose. But the devil keeps trying to pick off individual Christians. He plants spiritual IED's and takes pot shots at us when we least expect it. We have to watch and pray lest we fall into temptation. Yet, at the same time, our prayers are full of thanksgiving because Jesus did win the war for us. He does promise to watch over us and bring us home to heaven.

Paul continues, "**And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.**" Paul asked the Colossian Christians to pray for him. What does that mean for us? God has called pastors and teachers to serve here at Peace. God would have his people pray for them, regularly and faithfully. It is part of what you owe the workers that God sends you. What should you pray for? Personal stuff? Certainly. All the personal struggles and crosses that we ministers bear in this life need your prayers. But notice what Paul told the Colossians to pray for: that God would open a door for the message, that Paul would have the opportunity to proclaim that message and that he would do it clearly. That's all the more striking when you consider that Paul was in chains, under house arrest, simply for preaching the gospel. He could've asked these Christians to pray for his release. But Paul asked them to pray for the work God had called him to do.

So pray that God would open a door for our message. Pray that God would bring many people to hear the good news about Jesus here at Peace. Pray that we the members of Peace would hear the word and take it to heart. Pray that God would comfort us with the gospel. Pray that God would change the way we think and feel

so that we want to live as he calls us to. And pray that we called workers would make the gospel clear. That we would understand what God says. That we would proclaim the full counsel of God – all the truths, not just our private hobby horses. Pray that we apply the love and forgiveness of God to the hurting and the guilty in our school and in our church in such a way that they can't help but see the grace and love of God. Then pray that God would work through that gospel to heal those hearts. And pray for the pastors and teachers who serve at HVL. Pray for the pastors and teachers who serve all of us throughout the synod, in our schools and our mission fields. Pray that they would have the opportunity to speak and that they would clearly proclaim the law and the gospel.

That's a lot of praying, isn't it? How much time do you think it would take to do all that? It would take time just to know the personal needs of our pastors and teachers here and at HVL. It would take time to know what's going on in the synod and in our congregation so that you can pray for success in those efforts. It would take time to offer those prayers, to be devoted to prayer. We're not talking about mouthing a quick prayer because we feel guilty today. We're talking about a lifestyle change – including all these needs in regular, watchful, thankful prayer to God. It will take a lot of time to do. But love takes time.

Do we love the Lord enough to interrupt our busy lives and pray for his work? Do we love the fellowship of believers here enough to pray for God's blessings on our congregation and her schools? Do we love the workers God has given us enough to pray for them and their ministries? Do we love the word enough to pray that it would be clearly and boldly proclaimed among us? It's easy to let other things be more important to us. It's easy to let other concerns drive our lives. But that sin is unworthy of us as people of God. That sin deserves God's punishment in hell.

But God loves us even when we fail to love him. Jesus lived the life of perfect love that we can never live. Jesus was constant in prayer, not just to be an example for us, but in our place. He prayed because he knew that we sinners would always fall short of God's standard of prayer. Jesus did all that so that God could count us as perfect in love and prayer. Then Jesus died and he paid for all our selfishness, for all our failure to pray, for all our guilt and sin. He wiped all that guilt away with his blood. Jesus rose and God has declared us to be perfect in prayer, perfect in love, perfect in faith. Every time we hear that message, God works in us to create an ever greater desire to pray for all things, and especially for the work of the gospel. Then in love, God hears and answers every prayer we offer. In thankfulness to God for all that love, be devoted to prayer.

II.

But is prayer enough? Several years ago, I was talking to one of our members about our efforts to improve our finances. He said that all he heard was, "Pray about it!" He wanted to hear a more concrete call to do something. He wasn't saying that prayer is unimportant. Rather, he understood that God works through us. All the glory, all the success, are his. But he chooses to do his work through us. So when we pray, we aren't done. We still need to take part in the work God gives us to do. My friends, **devote yourselves to prayer. Put your prayers into action.**

Right after he told the Colossians to pray for his preaching, St. Paul said, "**Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.**" Pray that I speak clearly. And you be wise and make the most of every opportunity. Every opportunity for what? To spread the gospel! That's not just my work or the work of the teachers in our schools. It's all of our work. We pray for it and then we do it!

Paul goes on to explain what wisdom is in this work: let your conversation be full of grace and seasoned with salt. Let your conversation be full of grace means reflect the undeserved love of God in the way you deal with people out there. You never know when a casual encounter will lead to talking about Jesus. You never know how many people are paying attention to your faith. It's not your job to know. It's your job to love all people, whether they deserve it or not. When your ordinary conversation is full of God's grace, people will listen to you when you talk about spiritual matters.

And your conversation needs to be seasoned with salt. What does that mean? Salt was used to preserve food in Paul's day. The gospel preserves us. Your conversation needs to be seasoned with the good news of Christ. Paul says that if your conversation is seasoned with the gospel, you will know how to answer everyone. The Holy Spirit works through the good news about Jesus and he equips you. He makes you able to speak. But if you're not hearing the gospel, you're not going to be prepared. So once again, we come back to time. Pray and then share the gospel. Take the time to learn it.

Do we come and hear the word of God? Do we study the word at home and take advantage of opportunities to grow through Bible classes offered at church? We pray for our children's faith, but do we husbands and fathers lead our families in prayer and do we teach the word to them? Do you wives encourage that work and help to teach prayer and devotion to your children? Do you children hear and learn that word gladly? Do we take the time to serve the Lord in our conversations with people who are out there? Or are we too frightened – too unprepared to give an answer? Are we faithful in serving our congregation? We pray for God to bless our efforts, but what time can you dedicate to serving the Lord here?

Those kinds of question make us uncomfortable. They should, because they force us to examine our lives and our hearts. And we can do one of two things. We can run away from those questions, or we can take the time to ask ourselves about our own willingness to put our prayers into action by hearing and sharing and working together. Which will you do?

The sinful flesh wants to run away because it's never fun to hear that we've sinned. But sometimes we have to hear it. Then our only recourse is to fall into the arms of our Saviour who loves us and has forgiven us and washed all our failure and sin away. Our only recourse is to cling to his forgiveness and soak it up and let it heal our hearts and ease our consciences. But then, that gospel that soaks into our hearts has to come out. If we are faithful to God's forgiveness, then we will want to be faithful to the work he has given us to do. We will strive to do that work. We will pray and ask our God to bless our work. Then we will give a generous portion of our precious time to do that work he has given us.

Love takes time. We all have so many demands on our time. The hours and days of our lives are a precious gift of God. Give a generous portion of that gift back to him. The church is not the only place you do that. You are giving your time to the Lord when you pray and study the word together as a family. You are giving your time to the Lord when you pray for his work here. You are giving your time to the Lord when you help those who are in need and when you talk about Jesus. Do those things faithfully. And don't neglect the fellowship of believers here. This is our portion of the body of Christ. Be generous with your time here. Do all that because God has been generous with you. He loves you. He calls you to be a part of expressing his love to the world. Amen.