



Reflecting On A New Compassion For The Lost

Wednesday, February 13, 2008

Heart To Heart

When I get still and just think about where we are as a church right now, and all of the different layers God is using to answer our prayer to "make all things new" in our lives, I find myself wishing that I could sit down and just talk with you. I'm not talking about in the "big room"—I'm talking about just you and me. And I'm not talking about preaching to you. I'm talking about actually having a real, live conversation with you—maybe like what Isaiah was talking about when he said "come now, let us reason together" (Isa. 1:18).

As we get started today, could we just try to do that? Could you just try to put out of your mind the fact that there are hundreds and hundreds of our brothers and sisters that will be reading this with us today, and could you and I just "reason together" for a few minutes? I know that because of this forum, the conversation will be a little one-sided, but do remember that you can just click on my email address link at the bottom of each day's study and have instant dialogue. I'm not always able to answer, but I do love to hear what God is teaching you and doing in your life. (And, since this forum is such a one-sided conversation, it does help to know that you really are out there, and listening, and studying!)

But, if I could sit with you at your kitchen table today, and just hang out for a few minutes, I know what I'd be wanting to ask you to dream with me about. I'd want you to imagine what it would be like in the last days of the Laodicean church period, to actually be a part of a local church, where every single person really did "SEEK" to live in the realities of the "RISEN LIFE" that God reveals to us in Colossians 3 and 4.

I mean, just think about the impact upon our field, if every single one of us actually were genuinely and passionately praying through Colossians 3 and 4 on a daily basis, genuinely "SEEKING" to allow Christ's life to be lived THROUGH us, and genuinely allowing our relationship with Him (Col. 3:1-17) to touch every other relationship we have in our lives...

Our relationship with our spouse and kids (3:18-21)

Our relationships with the people we work with everyday (3:22-4:1)

Our relationship with the lost people in our circle of influence (4:2-6)

Our relationships with our brothers and sisters in our church (4:7-18)

Oh my! Can you just imagine that? Does that not just resonate in your spirit, that that is really what our lives and our church should be about? And, oh, if we were having this conversation just one on one today, I'd love to hear the thoughts that would flow out of you as you imagine your life and our church genuinely living in these realities!

And as I think about having this conversation with you today, I know exactly what I'd be saying just before I pushed back from your kitchen table and reached for my coat. I'd be saying, "Listen, we can't make everybody else in our church take Colossians 3 and 4 so seriously that it becomes the passionate pursuit and guide for their prayers for the rest of their lives—but we can! So, man, let's join our hearts, and our souls, and our very lives together in passionate pursuit of the "things above" (Col. 3:1-2)!"

Is that where you are today? Say what? Hello! Oh yeah, I almost forgot that we were still in this one-sided form of communication! But, oh, I really do hope that's where you are—but whether you're there right now or not, I really do believe that's where you want to be! So, man, let's do it! Let's do it together! Let's allow this to be the turning point in our Christian lives. Let's allow this to be that time where the decision has been made, as the old song says..."the world behind me, the cross before me —no turning back...no turning back!"

Now, in terms of the application of Sunday's message to the principles God lays out through Paul in Colossians 4:3-6, because of our little heart-to-heart chat today, I'm not going to be able to go into the detail on these that I had intended. There are actually six principles, or what I've been calling "six essential elements of effective evangelism" that God reveals in this passage, and since we covered a big, whopping ONE of them yesterday, that means we need to cover the other FIVE today. (Remember, we begin to direct our hearts tomorrow toward this coming Sunday!) Now, I already know that I won't totally be able to do any of these principles justice, because every one of them could actually be a sermon themselves. But, oh, I do ask you to open your heart, and grab something practical from each one of these. Please don't hurry through them. The souls of people that God could use you to reach in your family, your neighborhood, your place of employment, and literally, around the world are dependent upon us learning and applying these very basic principles!

We looked at the first one yesterday, as God reveals the actual starting place for where evangelism (or, reaching people with the gospel) actually begins...

1. GOD MUST OPEN THE DOOR. (Col. 3:3a)

"Withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance."

Oh, so many things I still want to comment on about the importance of understanding that God is more passionate about reaching people than we could ever be, and the key to Him using us in this work, is making sure that we're actually working in the fields where He is plowing! He reveals where He is working around us through "open doors". The key word here is "PROVIDENTIAL."

2. WE MUST LIVE THE LIFE (Col. 4:5)

"Walk in wisdom toward them that are without..."

Paul reminds us here of the importance of our "WALK" in terms of reaching people with the gospel. And the key word here is "BELIEVABLE". You see, sometimes we're ineffective in our evangelism because "how we live speaks so loudly, the world can't hear what we're saying." And Paul tells us in verse 5, that if we're going to be effective in our witness, it is going to have to be "BELIEVABLE". In other words, our "WALK" is going to have to match our "TALK." I don't think lost people expect perfection, but I do think that they are searching desperately for somebody who really is something they're not... somebody in whom it is evident that the power of the gospel was powerful enough to affect every area of their lives. The platform of a changed life is the platform God intended for us to proclaim His message.

The Bible talks a lot about our "WALK" (i.e. our "lifestyle"). Search your heart as you consider what God says about the "walk" of those who have been "RISEN WITH CHRIST" (Col. 3:1)...

Walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:4)
Walk in the Spirit. (Rom. 8:1)
Walk by faith. (2Cor. 5:7)
Walk in good works. (Eph. 2:10)
Walk worthy of our calling (Eph. 4:1)
Walk in love. (Eph. 5:2)
Walk as children of light. (Eph. 5:8)
Walk circumspectly. (Eph. 5:15)
Walk worthy of the Lord. (Col. 1:10)
Walk in such a way as to please God. (1Thess. 4:1)
Walk in the light. (1John 1:7)
Walk as Jesus walked. (1John 2:6)
Walk after His commandments. (2John 1:6)
Walk in truth (3John 1:4)

And I think that all of these things are what God has in mind when He talks in Colossians 3:5 about "walking in wisdom toward them that are without." In other words, let the wisdom of God that He placed in you when He saved you, get out of you, and into your life! Live out who you are in Christ!

And then, Paul reveals to us a third essential element of effective evangelism...

3. WE MUST OPEN OUR MOUTH. (Col. 4:3b,c, 4b, 6)

Yeah, that second point we just talked about (i.e. "lifestyle" evangelism) is so very, very important. We MUST (!!!) live the life in front of a watching world. It is our LIFE that builds the platform from which we SPEAK... but somewhere along the way, we MUST do just that! We MUST SPEAK!!! Notice in verse 3 that it is a "door of UTTERANCE" ... "to SPEAK the mystery of Christ." The end of verse 4 says, "... as I ought to SPEAK"! Verse 6 says, "Let your SPEECH be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to ANSWER every man"! I mean, did you catch that? Five times in these four verses He makes reference to opening our mouth to "SPEAK" or PROCLAIM the gospel!

And the key word here is "BOLDNESS". In the parallel passage in the "twin epistle," listen to how Paul made this same request for prayer to the Ephesians in chapter 4, verse 19...

"[Pray] for me, that utterance may be given unto me, THAT I MAY OPEN MY MOUTH BOLDLY, to make known the mystery of the gospel."

As we talked about the other day, here's a guy in prison for "opening his mouth" to SPEAK the gospel, and when he writes to the churches requesting prayer for his life, his request isn't for his release, or for strength to hold up under his adverse circumstances! He says, "Hey, would you guys please pray that God will use these circumstances that He's allowed in my life, that they might become a 'door' for me to use to win these people to Christ? And as you're praying for that 'door' for me, please pray that when God opens it, that I'll be BOLD enough to walk through it, by OPENING MY MOUTH!"

Oh, may God, likewise, give us the BOLDNESS to "OPEN OUR MOUTHS" to actually give people the gospel. Which most definitely leads to the fourth thing...

4. WE MUST KNOW THE MESSAGE. (Col. 4:3c, 4, 6)

And the key word here is "EQUIPPED". Somewhere along the way, we've got to come to the place spiritually that we actually 'KNOW' the message we've been called to proclaim, so that we 'KNOW' how to weave it into the conversations God allows us to have with people when He is "opening doors for us to speak"!

Watch the terminology Paul uses in these verses...He says "Pray that God would open unto us a door of utterance, TO SPEAK THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST." And the point is, we can't "SPEAK" it, if we don't know what it is (see Col. 2:2-3; 1:25-27; Eph. 6:19; 1Cor. 15:3-4; 1 Tim. 3:16)!

Paul adds in verse 4, "THAT I MAY MAKE IT MANIFEST, as I ought to speak." And again, we can't clearly make it manifest if it isn't clear to us! And to be effective, the message we communicate must be presented CLEARLY!

In verse 6, Paul continues on down this same path, saying...

"Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may KNOW HOW YE OUGHT TO ANSWER EVERY MAN."

And the point here, is that to be effective, we can't just have our little canned package of the gospel that we open on people. He's talking here about coming to the place that with every individual person He allows us to come in contact with, we see them in light of their relationship with Him, and we're conversing with them with that in mind. We're listening carefully for where they are in terms of their relationship with Christ. We're looking and praying for God to open the door—so that we're carefully and prayerfully listening to them, while in our spirits we're praying, "Okay, Lord, what are You up to in this person's life? Why have You brought them into my path today? What are You wanting to do right now? What do You want me to say? What do You want me to ask? And oh, God, help me to know how to "season" this conversation with just the right amount of "salt," so that it is "flavorful" enough for them to want it to continue. May it be just enough salt to create in them a thirst that can become an open door for the gospel."

But, do recognize this...as "gracious" as we may be in our conversation (4:6), and as "wise" as we may be in how we conduct ourselves (4:5), there is a fifth principle of which we must be fully aware...

5. WE MUST EXPECT PERSECUTION (Col. 4:3d)

You see, folks, we must keep in mind that we have a very real enemy who desires more than anything else, to keep people separated from the message of the gospel (2Cor. 4:3-4; 2Tim. 2:25-26). We've been called to make the message "manifest" (Col. 4:4a), but Satan desperately wants to keep it hidden (2Cor. 4:3-4).

But, the truth is, as long as we're not being used to make the message "manifest," we're no real threat to Satan. In fact, he doesn't really need to "get up in our stuff." But buddy, when we get serious about living the life (Col. 3:1-4:2), and we get serious about sharing the power behind our lives (Col. 4:3-6), do recognize that Satan is going to try to "shut us DOWN," so he can "shut us UP."

Notice that in the last part of Colossians 4:3, Paul says...

"For which I am also in bonds."

Listen, as Paul was writing these very words, he was in a Roman prison in "bonds", chained to a Roman guard for walking through the "doors of utterance" that God had given to him. I think God wants us to recognize, that the price of powerful and effective ministry in terms of the gospel, is that we will encounter and suffer persecution (2Tim. 3:12). I love the way Paul says it in 1Corinthians 16:9...

"For a great door and effectual is opened unto us, AND (!!!) there are many adversaries."

Do you see that? Not, "BUT" there are many adversaries..."AND" there are many adversaries. The point is, "open doors" and "persecution" go hand in hand. Persecution just comes with it. Satan will see to that.

And the key word here is "SURRENDER." Because you see, to be effective in reaching people with the gospel, we must be willing to pay the price of "bonds."

And then, one final principle...

6. WE MUST MAKE THE MOST OF EVERY OPPORTUNITY. (Col. 4:5)

And the key word here is "URGENCY". Paul says at the end of verse 5...

"Redeeming the time."

It very simply means that we must "BUY UP" every opportunity! We must take full advantage of every opportunity the Lord gives to us!

We talked at the beginning about the fact that "doors" are God's business. He's the One who must open the doors of opportunity. But, we must live our lives with the constant recognition that the door will not always be open!!! And we have history to look back on that proves that. Oh, there is an "URGENCY" about this! We must "redeem the time"!

So, God shows us six unbelievably practical essential elements to effective evangelism. God help us to apply them.

1. GOD MUST OPEN THE DOOR. (Key Word: PROVIDENTIAL)
2. WE MUST LIVE THE LIFE. (Key Word: BELIEVABLE)
3. WE MUST OPEN OUR MOUTH. (Key Word: BOLDNESS)
4. WE MUST KNOW THE MESSAGE. (Key Word: EQUIPPED)
5. WE MUST EXPECT PERSECUTION. (Key Word: SURRENDER)
6. WE MUST MAKE THE MOST OF EVERY OPPORTUNITY. (Key Word: URGENCY)

Please don't view what God gives us in this passage as our little "daily devotional." Oh my, no! This is God's game plan for using our lives to fulfill His purpose in leaving us on this planet! Like we talked about at the beginning of today's study, let's let this part of Colossians 3 and 4 make it into the very fabric of WHO WE ARE and WHAT WE DO everyday that He allows us to remain on this planet!

And, hey—thanks for hanging out with me today.

What's that you say?

I couldn't hear you...maybe you just ought to email me.