

## **“HOLY AND FAITHFUL”**

### **8. The Daily Distinctives**

*Colossians 3:18 – 4:6*

We’re getting towards the end of this letter from Paul to the new Christian community in Colossae. They are a bunch of people who have come to believe in Jesus Christ through the teaching of Paul’s friend Epaphras, but Paul, who is writing from prison (probably in Ephesus) is very concerned that there are teachers in Colossae who are peddling a false gospel – some insisting that these fledgling disciples keep to a whole set of unnecessary rules, others encouraging them to seek some kind of secret knowledge in order to approach God, and yet others mixing up belief in Jesus with a whole lot of other idea about the old pagan gods and goddesses. In teaching these things, they are downplaying the centrality of Jesus and the grace which is at the heart of the true Gospel. The theme which runs through this letter is that Jesus, “*the image of the invisible God*”, is supreme above all and needs to be the main focus of their faith.

And last time we saw that this Jesus-centred faith needs to be expressed in attitudes and behaviour. It is not simply some interesting topic for discussion or an academic idea unrelated to ordinary life. Believing in Jesus – committing oneself to him and taking seriously his teaching – needs to make a distinctive difference to the way we live our lives day by day. And for us, just like the Colossian Christians, that means we adopt values and attitudes which are very much at odds with the culture in which we find ourselves, a culture which, by and large, does not have room for God and Jesus, and pays little attention to the values of love, justice and righteousness which characterise Christianity. Some of the things which Paul mentioned in the earlier part of chapter 3 were very much counter to the culture of the Empire and so made the followers of Jesus stand out.

And, in the passage we’re looking at today, Paul mentions three areas in which the new way of life under the influence of Jesus Christ would also be very distinctive. He writes about the mutual responsibilities in the home – marriage and parenting – and the workplace, presenting ideas that were quite revolutionary in many ways, not least because they expressed a mutuality that wasn’t generally found in wider society at that time – husbands needed to take care of their wives, fathers were to encourage and build up their children, and masters were to take seriously the welfare of their slaves. These were all important ideas, particularly as this new Christian community was an inclusive one where men and women of all ages were worshipping and learning together – and where, astonishingly, slaves and their masters would be part of the same group. Remember what Paul wrote in 3:11 – “*Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*”

Now, Paul includes a very similar section in his *Letter to the Ephesians* and it’s not long ago that we looked at that together, so I won’t go over all that ground again today. If you want to look at that, you can go to the church website, click on *Resources*, then on *Sermons* and look back to March and April 2019 where

you'll find three sermons dealing with this subject. The point I would emphasise today, though, is that, if you truly want to follow Jesus, then that is going to make a difference to every area of your life and, in a culture that is moving further and further away from the way of life taught by Jesus, Christians will be increasingly distinctive in their lifestyle. So we need to hear what Paul has to say in the next few verses as we move into this final chapter of the letter.

Again, this is something that you'll find in all Paul's letters and is key to the teaching that Jesus gives his followers. Our beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviour need to be undergirded by prayer. Paul says here that we should "*Devote [ourselves] to prayer*", by which he means that our prayers should be both persistent and passionate. You really cannot follow Jesus without engaging in prayer.

Paul encourages us to be "**watchful**", meaning that we should keep alert in prayer at all times – alert to the needs that there are and alert to the answers we receive, all the time linking what we are praying for and about to what is going on around us. This is prayer that engages with the situation we're in – it's not just repetitive prayer disconnected from the reality of the world around, but prayer that is fully aware of the needs and opportunities of our context.

And, once again, Paul says we should be "**thankful**". Whenever we pray, we should be expressing our gratitude for what God has already done, for what he is already doing. It's that thankfulness that boosts our confidence to bring further prayers to God, that reminds us that he does respond to our requests.

And Paul here asks for prayer for his own situation. Remember, he is in prison – probably actually under house arrest – but his prayer is not for release or for an easing of his situation. It is for his witness, for an opening to talk about Jesus – to his guards, to his visitors, to anyone whom he sees. He doesn't want to miss any opportunity to "*proclaim the mystery of Christ*" – to share the good news of the gospel – and he wants to "*proclaim it clearly, as I should*". We still need to keep praying for the proclamation of the gospel, to bring before God those people who are called to reach out with the amazing story of God's grace.

But it's not only Paul who has that responsibility. Yes, he has that particular gift of the evangelist. He knows that he has been called by God to preach and teach – that's how he introduced himself to these Colossians at the beginning of the letter: "*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*" – but he suggests that they all have a part to play in sharing what this is all about. There are those who are gifted as evangelists, who have that particular mixture of personality and passion and God-given ability that means they can communicate the Gospel in ways that many of us cannot. We need to encourage them and pray for them. But if we take seriously what Jesus teaches and we allow that to affect our words and deeds, our attitudes and behaviour, then, in a culture that is not necessarily in tune with that, we will stand out, and

that will allow opportunities to talk about it all. As Geoffrey Wilson writes, *“Christians are not only to commend the Gospel by their lives, but also by their lips”*.

And Paul has some advice for us in that. Again, this is pretty straightforward stuff, but Paul feels he needs to restate it for his readers – for us – so that we can get involved effectively in sharing our faith. He says that we should *“Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders”*. *“Outsiders”* here is those who do not share our faith as yet. We need to ensure that we do not compromise the Gospel by our behaviour or our words. Think before you speak and ensure that what you say is appropriate. But, on the other hand, don’t be so cautious that you end up saying nothing – *“make the most of every opportunity”*, writes Paul: or, as *The Message* has it, *“Don’t miss a trick”*. Pick up on what others are saying and take the opportunity to say something about Jesus or your faith. It doesn’t need to be a sermon, but sometimes a simple remark can lead to a longer and more effective conversation.

But, as Paul goes on to say, *“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt”*. Your job is not to hammer them with hellfire and judgement. My Dad began his working career as a joiner at a large building firm and one of the older men there was a Christian who would stand up every lunchtime and preach to his workmates. Dad said that that made life very difficult for any other Christians there because everyone assumed they were just like the preacher man, in whose conversation there was no grace, and more sulphur than salt. Be aware of the people you are speaking to and make sure that your words are appropriate to them and *“seasoned with salt”*. In other words, don’t just serve up a pre-prepared spiel, a memorised testimony or a lot of religious jargon – a bit like some of the Jehovah’s Witnesses who come to the door and have their little speech off pat.

Paul says that we should be alert to the situation, *“so that you may know how to answer everyone”*. Everyone is different, so make sure what you have to say is going to be right for them. Geoffrey Wilson again: *“No effective witness is given to Christ by rattling off a stereotyped testimony because this completely ignores the fact that each person has their own special needs.”* Or as Tom Wright puts it, *“Paul knows that tedious monologue is worse than useless in evangelism. Christians are to work at making their witness interesting, lively and colourful: and, at the same time, to ensure that they have thoroughly mastered the rudiments of their faith.”*

Think about your faith – that’s what the first part of this letter is all about: know what you believe and why you believe it (there are some good examples of that in the testimonies on our church Instagram account) – and be ready when the opportunity arises, to share it simply and honestly. Yes, you know the heart of the Gospel and the basic truths about Jesus and what he has done, but why does it work for you: what difference has it made to your life. We’ve said this many times before, but the people you’re talking to will have no

hesitation in telling you about their interests and passions – be it sport or fashion or books they’ve read or beauty products they use or their grandchildren or their holidays or whatever – so don’t feel you have to hold back telling them about what is important in your life.

You see, if you follow Jesus and try to put his teachings into practice in your life, then it will affect your behaviour and your conversation. And that will mean that you are distinctively Christian and may well invite questions – “Why do you do that?” “Why *don’t* you do that?” “What’s that all about, then?” – so you need to be ready to answer them. Know what you believe and why you believe it – that’s the point of reading the Bible and of reflecting on what you read, through listening to sermons, reading books, joining a housegroup or whatever. Then let that make a difference to the way you live your life day by day and how you relate to the people around you. And be ready to tell your story when people ask you about it.

Now, if you’re still not quite sure what you believe – nor even if you believe – then why not find out a bit more by joining our online Alpha course? That will give you an opportunity to think about it all, to ask the questions you have, to express your reservations, to discover what others think. There will be some contact details on the screen at the end of the service, so get in touch if you’d like to find out more.

It’s been a bit of a ramble this morning, so let’s just re-cap on the main points. Following Jesus will mean a change in your behaviour and lead to a distinctive lifestyle, which should be apparent in every situation, even in your family and your workplace. You’ll need to keep praying for God’s help for yourself and for those who are specifically called to proclaim the Gospel. Even if you are not someone with that particular gift, you can still take the opportunities of everyday conversation to say something about Jesus and the difference he has made to you, but do it sensitively and thoughtfully. Above all, keep Jesus at the very heart of all that you are, all that you say, all that you do.

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Paul goes on to say, "*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt*". Be aware of the people you are speaking to and make sure that your words are appropriate to them and "*seasoned with salt*". Be alert to the situation, "*so that you may know how to answer everyone*". Everyone is different, so make sure what you have to say is going to be right for them.

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**For reflection and discussion**

- 1) What do you think Paul means by "**devote yourself to prayer**"? How "devoted" are you to prayer?
- 2) Has anyone ever asked you about what you believe? How did you respond?
- 3) How can our conversations be "*full of grace*"? What does it mean for them to be "*seasoned with salt*"?
- 4) Why are so many people hesitant to talk about their faith? What can we do about it?
- 5) What are you going to do in response to this?

