

Fully Devoted to God

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Colossians 4:2-6

Sermon Series:
Journey of Transformation

Do we throw up prayer, as we would a last second desperation shot?

If this sermon isn't up to par, don't blame it on me. Blame it on March Madness. Every year about this time, I come down with the same malady. For those uninitiated ones, March Madness is a tournament held each year to decide the NCAA college basketball championship. Sixty-five teams compete in a single elimination tournament for the right to be crowned national champions.

Since I watch plenty of games, I listen to play-by-play announcers refer to prayer on a continual basis. They talk about players who "throw up a prayer." In basketball parlance, this equates to a player who takes a desperation shot. When the shot goes in, his prayer is answered.

The Ohio State Buckeyes won the right to play in the tournament with a last second shot to determine the Big Ten championship. Guard Evan Turner shot the ball with .2 seconds on the clock and swished a 37-foot buzzer beater—my condolences to you Michigan fans. I was intrigued by the headlines the next day: "Evan Almighty: Ohio State's Turner puts up a prayer and beats Michigan in a Big Ten basketball tournament."

Evan puts up a prayer. Really? Is that how we pray? Do we throw up prayer, as we would a last second desperation shot? To some

people, prayer works this way. I'm trying to imagine Paul writing about throwing up a prayer.

As we turn one last time to the book of Colossians, let's put our Scripture lesson into a larger framework of sermons. In 2008, we preached a year of sermons called God's Big Story. We centered on three words to help us remember the story—creation, fall and redemption. We have been created to live in relationship with God and each other. We fall out of these relationships through something called sin. But God offers redemption through Jesus Christ.

God's Big Story doesn't end with Jesus. It continues in the life of the early church. We devoted 2009 to learning how God's Big Story plays itself out in the life of the early church in the book of Acts.

In 2010, we have narrowed our field of vision even further to a single church. How can God's Big Story transform a church? Ultimately, our goal is focused on each person. We want you to discover how your story can become part of God's Big Story.

Paul issues three directives as he closes his letter. First, be devoted to prayer (4:2). The word "devoted" means to attend to something diligently and continually. When Peter preached his Pentecost sermon, 3000 people became believers and "devoted themselves to the apostle's

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teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer” (2:42). They didn’t merely throw up prayer, they were absolutely devoted to it.

Paul mentions Epaphras in verse 12 as one devoted to prayer. He writes that Epaphras “is always wrestling in prayer for you.” The Greek word for wrestle, *agonizomai*, is where we derive our word agony. Agony expresses devotion. Epaphras didn’t launch a Hail Mary prayer, he was strenuously devoted to it.

Our tendency is to give up when we don’t receive immediate answers to prayer. Jesus counseled his followers to pray and never give up (Luke 18:1).

Monica represents a model of perseverance in prayer. She prayed and wept for her wayward son for years. When he was studying in Carthage, he took a mistress, with whom he fathered a son. He once boasted to his mother there would be no problems between them if she would only give up her faith. Monica sought the counsel of a priest, who advised her to be patient. He said it would be impossible that her son, over whom she had shed so many tears, would perish. One day, he predicted, her son would embrace the Christian faith. Her son became a professor of rhetoric at a school in Milan, where he was introduced to a bishop named Ambrose.

Ambrose’s sermons captivated Monica’s son. Still, he held out. His famous prayer from that period in his life says it all, “O Lord, give me chastity, but not yet.” Monica’s son began to read the Bible. A

passage from Romans awakened him to faith. He was converted to Christ and was baptized by Bishop Ambrose. Monica’s son became St. Augustine, one of the giants of the Christian church.

Monica epitomizes people who never give up on prayer. Maybe you are praying for a wayward son or daughter. Maybe you are praying for a spouse or family member. Perhaps there is a friend in your life who has been the subject of your repeated prayers. When you become discouraged in prayer, think of Monica, who prayed every day for 32 years before her son saw the light.

“Pray for us,” Paul writes in verse 3, “that God will open to us a door for the Word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison.” This is the first time we learn Paul is writing this letter from prison. The door he asks God to open is not his prison cell but a door into people’s hearts. He concludes, “Pray that I may reveal it [the mystery of Christ] clearly, as I should” (4:4).

Duncan Campbell was a well-known preacher in the Church of Scotland in the last century. As he finished preaching one day in a Presbyterian church, he sensed an inner voice say to him, “Berneray.” He asked God for confirmation, and again the name Berneray came to him. Berneray is a small island off the coast of Scotland, with a population of 130. A third time the name came to him.

He turned to the leader of the gathering and whispered, “You’ll need to excuse me. God has just told me to go to Berneray.” “Why,” the

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leader objected, “you can’t do that. You’re speaking here tomorrow morning.” “But what do you do if God calls you to Berneray?” Campbell asked. “You go to Berneray,” the leader replied.

Since there was no air travel to Berneray, Campbell caught the first flight to the nearest island. When he arrived, he asked the way to Berneray. A fisherman told him there was no commercial way to get there, but he would take him for a small fee. It was nearly the exact amount Campbell had in his pocket.

When they arrived, the fisherman dropped Campbell at the shoreline. He climbed a bluff and found a young man plowing a field. He asked the farmer, “Do you have a church on this island?”

“Yes,” said the young man.

“Please tell the pastor that Duncan Campbell has arrived.”

“We don’t have a minister now,” the farmer answered.

“Do you have elders?” Campbell asked.

“Yes.”

“All right, go to the nearest elder and tell him, Duncan Campbell has arrived.”

The farmer thought he was crazy but left anyway as Campbell rested on his suitcases. The farmer returned to say, “The elder has been expecting you. He has a place ready for you. He has already announced church services tonight.”

While Campbell was preaching in the Presbyterian Church three days earlier, this elder had devoted the day to praying in his barn for

God to send revival to the island. This elder heard how God used Campbell to bring revival to Scotland, so he prayed for God to bring him there. He was so certain God was going to send Campbell that he made all the necessary arrangements to use the local church and had already announced the services. The elder’s wife had overheard him praying in the barn, “Lord, I don’t know where he is, but you know and with you all things are possible. Send Duncan Campbell to the island.”

What would happen here if we were this devoted to prayer—if we prayed for revival this fervently—if we prayed for open doors to declare the Word clearly? Pray that locks would come off people’s hearts. Pray that scales would fall from people’s eyes. If you don’t know how to pray this way, our sermon series on Christian practices after Easter could help you in this regard.

Paul’s second directive calls us to be wise in conduct toward outsiders (4:5). Paul writes in verse 5, “Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders.” The Greek word for conduct, *peripateo*, is popular in Paul’s letters. It’s commonly translated “walk,” so verse 5 literally reads, “in wisdom walk among those outside.”

Walking is an appropriate metaphor to describe our Christian conduct. Walking implies direction and progress toward something. That’s why we entitled this Colossians sermon series “Journey of Transformation.” As disciples, we are on a journey toward transformation. As we walk in the way of the Lord,

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we invite Jesus Christ to transform us into his committed disciples.

This walking has particular connection to “outsiders.” Outsider is not a pejorative word, as though we are insiders and everybody else out there is an outsider. Insider and outsider are not value-laden words. Paul had earlier warned his readers about false teachers infiltrating the church. Paul’s warning might persuade those inside the church to isolate and withdraw from outsiders. Paul’s counsel is just the opposite. Don’t separate from so-called outsiders. Live among them and win the right to be heard.

Paul’s admonition at the end of verse 5, “make the most of the time,” means literally to buy up all the time that is available to us. The King James Version translates this verse as “redeem the time.” In the words of N. T. Wright, “Every opportunity is to be snatched up as if it were a bargain.”

Paul’s third directive calls us to be gracious in speech (4:6). “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.” Paul has already cautioned us about the damage done with loose lips. He implores us to get rid of “malice, slander, abusive language and lying to one another” (3:8-9).

Paul calls us to gracious speech. The Greek word for gracious (charis) is where we derive the word charity, one of the old-fashioned words for love. Those who are saved by grace are

under obligation to live grace-filled lives.

Our speech must be “seasoned with salt.” These words are reminiscent of Jesus’ teaching, “You are the salt of the earth...and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-14). Salt seasons the flavor of a meal. Our witness to Christ must not be bland and stale but lively and interesting. Dull, lifeless speech detracts from Christ. Winsome, attractive speech draws people to Christ.

Wise conduct (4:5) and winsome speech (4:6) turn out to be an ideal way to conclude this sermon series. The qualities of wise conduct and winsome speech are not achieved by sheer human effort but by a life devoted to Christ through prayer, watchfulness and thanksgiving (4:2). In the words Paul used to end his letter, “grace be with you” (4:18). It all comes down to grace. Those who are saved by grace are called to live grace-filled lives.

