Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. 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. [Colossians 4:2–4]

Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. [Ephesians 6:19–20]

Welcome back as we are learning more about prayer by “overhearing” the prayers of Paul. He was not only a great church starter, and a powerful theologian, but also a tremendous prayer warrior. Tonight we will be looking at a brief prayer in Colossians that is mirrored in any ways in Ephesians. READ the passage and PRAY!

Never underestimate the power of speech. A judge says a few words, and a man's life is saved or condemned. A doctor speaks a few words, and a patient either rejoices ecstatically or gives up in despair. Whether the communication is oral or written, there is great power in words. I am told that for every word in Adolph Hitler's book Mein Kampf, 125 persons lost their lives in World War II.

The power of speech is a gift from God, and it must be used the way God ordains. In the Book of James, the tongue is compared to a bridle and a rudder, a fire and a poisonous animal, and a fruitful tree and a fountain (James 3). These three pairs of pictures teach us that the tongue has the power to direct, the power to destroy, and the power to delight. The tongue is but a little member in our bodies, but it can accomplish great things for good or for evil.

In this brief section, Paul pointed to four important ministries of speech, the first of which is prayer. That is where we want to spend our time tonight.

Praying (Col. 4:2-3a)

Prayer and worship are perhaps the highest uses of the gift of speech. Paul was not ashamed to ask his friends to pray for him. Even though he was an apostle, he knew he needed prayer support for himself and his ministry.

If a great Christian like Paul felt the need for prayer support, how much more do you and I need this kind of spiritual help! In these few words, Paul described the characteristics of a satisfying and spiritual prayer life.

First, our praying must be faithful. "Continue in prayer" (Col. 4:2). This means, "Be steadfast in your prayer life; be devoted; don't quit." This is the way the early church prayed (Acts 1:14; 2:46). Too many of us pray only occasionally—when we feel like it or when there is a crisis. "Pray without ceasing" is God's command to us (1 Thess. 5:17). This does not mean that we should walk around muttering prayers under our breath. Rather, it means we should be constantly in fellowship with God so that prayer is as normal to us as breathing.

This is not to suggest that God is reluctant to answer prayer and that we must "wear Him out" by our praying. Quite the opposite is true: God enjoys answering our prayers. But He sometimes delays the answer to increase our faith and devotion and to accomplish His purposes at the right time. God's delays are not always God's denials. As we continue in prayer, our own hearts are prepared for the answer God will give. We find ourselves growing in grace even before His answer comes.

Our praying must also be watchful. We must be awake and alert as we pray. The phrase "Watch and pray!" is used often in the Bible. It had its beginning in Bible history when Nehemiah was rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem: "Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch
against them [the enemy] day and night" (Neh. 4:9). Jesus used the phrase (Mark 13:33; 14:38); Paul used it too (Eph. 6:18).

There is no power in dull, listless praying. If there is no fire on the altar, the incense will not rise to God (Ps. 141:2). Real praying demands spiritual energy and alertness, and this can come only from the Holy Spirit of God. Routine, thoughtless prayers are unanswered prayers.

Our praying should also be thankful: "Watch in the same with thanksgiving" (Col. 4:2). Thanksgiving is an important ingredient in successful praying (Phil. 4:6). If all we do is ask, and never thank God for His gifts, we are selfish. Sincere gratitude to God is one of the best ways to put fervor into our praying.

There is always so much to be thankful for! We have already noted the emphasis in Paul's Letter to the Colossians on thanksgiving (Col. 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 17; 4:2). When we recall that Paul was a prisoner when he wrote this letter, it makes this emphasis even more wonderful.

Finally, our praying ought to be purposeful: "Praying also for us" (Col. 4:3). Too often our prayers are vague and general. "Lord, bless the missionaries!" How much better it would be if we would pray for specific needs. By doing so, we would know when God answered and we could praise Him for it. Perhaps it is our lack of faith that causes us to pray generally instead of specifically.

It has well been said that the purpose of prayer is not to get man's will done in heaven, but to get God's will done on earth. Prayer is not telling God what to do or what to give. Prayer is asking God for that which He wants to do and give, according to His will (1 John 5:14-15).

As we read the Word and fellowship with our Father, we discover His will and then boldly ask Him to do what He has planned. Richard Trench (1807-1886), archbishop of Dublin, said it perfectly: "Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance; it is laying hold of His willingness."

Of course, it is possible to pray in our hearts and never use the gift of speech (1 Sam. 1:13); but we are using words even if we don't say them audibly. True prayer must first come from the heart, whether the words are spoken or not.

Study Paul's prison prayers (Phil. 1:9-11; Eph. 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Col. 1:9-12) for examples of prayer at its best.

Proclaiming the Word (Col. 4:3b-4)

Paul did not ask for the prison doors to be opened, but that doors of ministry might be opened (1 Cor. 16:9; Acts 14:27). It was more important to Paul that he be a faithful minister than a free man. It is worth noting that in all of Paul's prison prayers, his concern was not for personal safety or material help, but for spiritual character and blessing.

Paul was in prison because of the "mystery of Christ" which related to the Gentiles (see Eph. 3:1-13). The mystery involved God's purpose for the Gentiles in relation to Israel; for in the church, Jews and Gentiles are one (Eph. 2:11-22). Read the account of Paul's arrest in the Jewish temple (Acts 21:18-22:30). Note that the Jews listened to Paul till he spoke the word Gentiles (Acts 22:21-22). It was Paul's concern for the Gentiles and his ministry to them that put him into prison.

Even among some believing Jews, there was a kind of bigotry that wanted to force the Gentiles into a lower position (Acts 15:1ff). This extreme legalistic party wanted the Gentiles to become Jews ceremonially before they could become Christians! Paul and Barnabas met this threat to the Gospel of grace head-on and the council decided in their favor. But the legalistic party continued to oppose Paul and his ministry. They did not want the Good News of the mystery of Christ to get to the Gentiles. They wanted to maintain their air of Jewish superiority.

How strange that Paul would want God to help him do the very thing that had caused his arrest! He had no intention of giving up his ministry or of changing his message.

When John Bunyan was arrested for preaching illegally and put into prison, he was told that he would be released if he promised to stop preaching. "If I am out of prison today," he replied, "I will preach the Gospel again tomorrow, by the help of God."
How could Paul share the mystery of Christ when he was a prisoner? Paul's case was discussed by many people; Paul was also able to witness to the guards to whom he was chained (Phil. 1:12-18).

Imagine being chained to the Apostle Paul! Through this witness, the Gospel was carried into parts of Rome that would have been inaccessible to Paul had he been a free man. There were even *"saints in Caesar's household"!* (Phil. 4:22)

The proclamation of the Gospel is empowered by prayer. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God as we come to the throne of grace and ask God for His blessing. We must never separate the Word of God from prayer because God has joined them together (Acts 6:4).

A visitor at Spurgeon's Tabernacle in London was being shown around the building by the pastor, Charles Spurgeon. "Would you like to see the powerhouse of this ministry?" Spurgeon asked, as he showed the man into a lower auditorium. "It is here that we get our power, for while I am preaching upstairs, hundreds of my people are in this room praying." Is it any wonder that God blessed Spurgeon's preaching of the Word?

You, as a church member, can assist your pastor in the preaching of the Word by praying for him. Never say to your pastor, "Well, the least I can do is to pray for you." The most you can do is to pray!

Pray for your pastor as he prepares the Word, studies, and meditates. Pray that the Holy Spirit will give deeper insights into the truths of the Word. Pray too that your pastor will practice the Word that he preaches so that it will be real in his own life. As he preaches the message, pray that the Spirit will give him freedom of utterance, and that the Word will reach into hearts and minds in a powerful way. (It wouldn't hurt to pray for other church leaders too.)

The proclaiming of the Word of God is a great privilege and a tremendous responsibility. You do not have to be an ordained preacher or a missionary to share God's Word. Even in your daily conversation you can drop the seed of the Word into hearts, and then pray that God will water that seed and bring forth fruit.