

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 7, 2015**

THE GREAT COMMISSION AND US (4)

Colossians 4:2-6

In God's gracious and generous providence, I will be away the next two Sundays, as Mary Sue and I travel to the land of Israel for the first time. Neither of us has ever been there. We will be traveling with a group of 40 people in all, including some longtime friends from our years in Altoona, PA, and even before that, going back to the late 1970s when we were on staff with the Coalition for Christian Outreach (CCO), a campus ministry organization based in Pittsburgh.

We leave next Sunday, June 14, and will return home on Friday, June 26. We are so grateful for the opportunity to visit the land so central to God's covenant with His people and to the history of redemption through the incarnation, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of the one and only Son of God and Savior of sinners, Jesus Christ our Lord. The trip has been given to us as a gift from the CCO, which is generously covering most of the cost of it for us. We feel so blessed. We see the gift of this trip as yet another sign of the benevolent, gracious, and loving heart of our Heavenly Father. All thanks and praise to Him!

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At the end of last Sunday's message, I shared with you a few things I'm sure of regarding the fulfillment of the Great Commission Jesus gave His disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), to be His witnesses, in the power of the Holy Spirit, wherever He has called us to live and work – which, for us, means right here in the shadow of our nation's capital, and reaching out with the gospel in ever-enlarging circles, to the farthest corners of the earth (Acts 1:8). Among the things I'm sure of that I mentioned last week are these:

NO PERFECT METHOD

First: No evangelistic method or program is guaranteed to work or produce the spiritual results we desire to see every time it is used. Whether it is the four spiritual laws, evangelism explosion, community- or city-wide evangelistic events, there is no fail-proof, magic formula in getting the gospel message out to others and getting them to respond. Getting people to respond in repentance and faith, of course, isn't our job. It is the job of the Holy Spirit. Our job is to be faithful witnesses to the Lord Jesus in both words and actions.

DEVOTE YOURSELVES TO PRAYER

Second: Our witnessing, our proclamation of the gospel, and our spiritual conversations with unbelievers must be bathed in prayer. In lots and lots of it. That Paul understood this is evident in today's Scripture reading from Colossians 4. He begins in verse 2 with an overarching call for the Christians in Colosse to live a lifestyle of faithful, steadfast, diligent,

devoted prayerfulness, staying spiritually alert at all times and praying at all times in a spirit of thankfulness – a call meant for us as well.

For any of us who may be intimidated by the thought of praying, I commend the words of Peter Kreeft from his book, *Prayer for Beginners*: “Prayer is easier than we think. We want to think it is too hard or too high and holy for us, because that gives us an excuse for not doing it. This is false humility. We can all do it, even the most sinful, shallow, (and) silly among us. You do not have to master some mystical method. You do not have to master a method at all ... The single most important piece of advice about prayer is one word: Begin! God makes it easy: just do it! God also makes it easy to progress in prayer ... for it gradually becomes more natural and delightful” (Peter Kreeft, *Prayer for Beginners*, 25-26).

What Paul is saying in his call to prayer in verse 2 is that there is never a time when it is not time to pray and that prayer is both a duty and a privilege belonging to all of us who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ and His church.

Then, in verses 3 and 4, the apostle straightforwardly and unapologetically asks for prayer for himself and his fellow missionaries. Pray what? Not for his (their) circumstances to improve. Not for him (them) to be spared the trials and hardships associated with the spread of the gospel in a sometimes hostile world. Not even, specifically, for Paul’s release from imprisonment in Rome. He asks them to pray not for blessings in his own life but for the continued advancement of the gospel. For open doors for the gospel message. For more opportunities to share the message of salvation in Christ, even in jail. And for him to communicate the gospel clearly, so that people will understand it clearly. Which, by extension, is how we ought to pray for missionaries and preachers of the gospel today. And for one another, that God will open doors of opportunity for each of us to tell others about Jesus, and that every time we open our mouths we’ll be able to “make Christ plain as day to them” (Colossians 4:4, *MSG*).

If Paul needed the prayers of God’s people to open doors for the spread of the gospel, and to undergird, strengthen, and sustain his proclamation of the gospel, how much more do we need prayer if we are to do our part to carry out the Great Commission in this generation. Let us “devote (our)selves to prayer.” Let us be diligent, steadfast, and faithful in prayer. And let us bathe all we do and all we seek to do to share and spread the gospel as Christ’s witnesses and ambassadors in lots and lots of prayer.

DEPEND ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

The third thing I’m sure of is this: Whatever we do in our attempt to fulfill the Great Commission, if we are trusting in the efficacy of our own efforts, or the supposed superiority and sufficiency of a specific strategy, or the proven track-record of a particular program, or the measurable success-rate of our chosen method – if we are trusting in any of these things and not in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us to bring unbelievers to faith in Christ and to grow them up as fully-devoted disciples of Christ, we will be ineffective and will experience frustration, disappointment, and discouragement. There is a role for us to play in fulfilling the Great Commission, a role that only you and I and our

sisters and brothers in Christ around the world can fulfill. We have been given a job to do. And the job is not yet finished. But the results of our labors are not up to us. The results are up to God. And so, our trust and hope must be in Him and not in our strategies or techniques.

LOVE PEOPLE

Fourth: In order to reach people with the gospel, we need to love people – I mean, really love them, right where they are, just as they are – in the same way God loved each of us when we were far from Him, when we were, as the Scripture says, “dead in our transgressions and sins” and walked in the ways of the world (Ephesians 2:1-2). In the same way that we must bathe our witness to Christ, our proclamation of the gospel, and the gospel-work of missionaries throughout the world in prayer, so must we bathe it all in love. Not simply for the world or for people in general, but for real persons with real faces and real souls. Real persons with real personalities, including those with lifestyles, beliefs, and political views with which we disagree. Real persons who want to be justified in what they call “lifestyle choices” but which the Bible calls “sin.” Real persons in all their messiness. We are to love them just as they are, in the midst of their messiness, just as Jesus loved us in all of our messiness and died for us.

If we don’t love the persons we hope to reach with the gospel, if we don’t treat them with love and respect, we may as well just forget about positively impacting their lives with the gospel and making disciples who know and love and serve Christ. Because it won’t happen. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said: “Whom you would change, you must first love.” Which, when applied to the Great Commission and us, means: “Whom you would see changed by the power of the gospel, you must first love.”

In the gospel, God does not say: “Change – clean up your act, pull yourself together, straighten up your life, make something of yourself – and then I’ll love you.” No, no, no. He says: “I love you more than you could ever imagine. Just as you are. Because I love you, I have given My Son to die for you, to forgive all your sins, and to restore you to a right relationship with me as my beloved child. Receive my love. Let me love you. Let me show you how high and long and deep and wide my love for you really is. Let me have your life. Let me change you from the inside out. Because I love you.”

As ambassadors for Christ in the world of today, we must incarnate and communicate and demonstrate God’s love for real people, including the ones who annoy us the most, those who rub us the wrong way and cause our blood pressure to shoot up, and those whom we wish would just shut up. *We. Must. We must.*

All of us have difficult people in our lives, in our networks or relationships – difficult people who are, well, difficult to love. The names or pictures of some of these difficult people probably come immediately to mind. God may or may not want to use *you* to share the gospel with a particular difficult person in your life. He may want to use someone else. Or you *and* someone else. Or you and a lot of other someones. Regardless, this much is sure: Jesus died for difficult people. Jesus loves difficult people. Jesus loves arrogant, abrasive people. It is not their arrogance or abrasiveness, or sin of any kind that He loves, of course, but them. So

we must love, really love, in our words and actions, those who need Jesus and His love. Just as He loved us. Just as we were. And as He loves us, just as we are.

Unfortunately, according to David Kinnaman, President of the Barna Research Group, almost nine out of ten young “outsiders” – 87 percent of young adults outside the church – say the word *judgmental* accurately describes Christianity and Christians today. Did you know that? Ouch! Whether it is fair or not, this is how a lot of people on the outside perceive Christians in our culture today. Jesus did not say that His disciples were to be known by our judgmental attitudes, by our condemnation of sin and sinners, or by our holier-than-thou posturing. He said that the thing that should set us apart from the unbelieving world is our love (John 13:35). Love for one another. But also our love for the world, for sinners who desperately need a Savior – who need Jesus, because only He can rescue and save us from our sins.

WISDOM AND GRACE

Does this mean we should excuse or rationalize or justify sin? Not at all. But look at what Paul says in verses 5 and 6: “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation always be full of grace” In the midst of a secular, unbelieving society like the one in which the 1st century church in Colosse found itself, and in which we increasingly find ourselves today, the apostle calls us to act always with wisdom and to speak always with grace. It takes a whole lot of wisdom and a whole lot of grace to live a life that consistently bears witness to the gospel.

We need to give this further consideration and talk about what it means in practical terms. So, there will be more to come at a later date – after Mary Sue and I are back from Israel. For now, we can do this much:

We can devote ourselves to prayer, in a spirit of watchfulness and thankfulness.

We can ask God to give us the wisdom and grace we need for every situation, in every circumstance, in the challenges we face and the opportunities that come our way every day.

We can pray for one another, asking the Lord to give each one the particular wisdom and grace needed to represent Christ faithfully in all our dealings with outsiders.

And we can encourage one another to keep on keeping on, to keep on pursuing wisdom and grace for the living of these days, to speak up with wisdom and grace, and to let our light shine for Jesus, making the most of every opportunity He gives us to point others to Him.

Love, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.