

SOUL CARE 4: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS
COLOSSIANS 4
MARCH 25, 2018

For those of you on social media or just the internet, I am wondering if you have noticed something amazing and terrifying about the age we live in. Let's say you search Google for your hopes of an upcoming vacation, flights, houses, activities in Hawaii. After this, is anyone surprised anymore when you have targeted ads in your social media or ads in your webpages that now include "cheap flights to Maui," "great deals on Hawaiian hotels" and "discounts for whale watching tours?" Like I said, amazing and terrifying.

My wife and I are convinced these apps are also using the microphones in our phones to listen to our conversations. We were talking with a friend the other day and we started making a joke about "hot pockets." You know the mildly gross sandwich wrapped in a bun that can live for eternity in your freezer and then come to life in the microwave two minutes later into a hot gooey mess of cheese and meat? Yeah, those hot pockets. We were searching them on Google. We were talking about them. Moments later, my wife sends me a screen shot from her social media advertising guess what? Hot pockets!

All of these targeted ads have made people more callous than ever. It isn't an overstatement to think everyone everywhere is selling something to us. You have hundreds of friends selling beauty products and oils online. You have companies seeking out your business and sniffing through your life. To make the conspiracy really real, we now have proof that a company, Cambridge Analytica, obtained the data of 50 million Facebook users and used that data to help shape and mold elections for American elections and the Brexit vote.

All of that is enough to make all of us a bit paranoid. Everyone is trying to sell us something. Everyone wants something from us. It used to be, in the old days, you just had to ignore the door-to-door salesman or walk past the perfume shilling woman in the mall, but now, they are

in our lives, our phones and our news. With all of this in mind, I want to come to one of the biggest topics when it comes to the Christian faith, evangelism. Evangelism, at its core, is sharing the good news. Euangleion, gospel in Greek, literally means good news. Evangelism is a related word about sharing the good news that God sent his son to earth to save us from our sinful inclinations, to show us the way of the kingdom and he ratified or verified that he was God's chosen son by dying and rising again three days later. That's the gospel, a profound message of grace and forgiveness and new life that was verified by that person dying and miraculously coming back to life.

That is a powerful message worth sharing. For those who have experienced this message, it has changed and shaped their life, but most people in our culture feel the same way about Christianity as they do about Facebook ads. They don't like the approach. They have seen every technique in the books, the bait and switch wherein you invite someone to your house or event and then the hard press is put on. For many, this feels no different from a timeshare pitch. There's the fear and panic model wherein you try to shout someone down or tell them they will fry like a sausage if they don't listen to you. For others, they have received a pamphlet on the street in the same you would for a comedy show or a 20% off coupon to the local department store. The bottom line is that it feels like Christians are selling and no one is buying. Not only that, they don't even want to hear about the product.

How do you share the most important story in all of human history? How do you share the euangleion without being a charlatan, a salesman or an arm twister?

We are in the last week of our series, *Soul Care*. We are asking how you take care of your eternal soul in the here and now. How do you nourish it and grow it? Each week we have been teaching and giving examples of different ways people grow their souls and their intimacy with God. What does evangelism have to do with soul care? Well for some, it feels like a drag on your soul because you are uncomfortable sharing your faith and after what we shared about

people's paranoia about always being sold to, I get it. But evangelism done well and done authentically is actually quite good for your soul.

Psychological science did a simple study about a shared experience using two people and chocolate. The people were not allowed to talk in the room. Only to be silent and eat chocolate together. Sounds good so far right? Sign me up. But they added a layer of nuance with two subgroups. In one set, both people were given only the chocolate to eat together. In the other set, both people were given the chocolate, but one of the people was asked to complete a task while eating the chocolate.

They then asked each group about how the chocolate tasted. The people who were alone together and only eating the chocolate rated the chocolate tasting much better than the group wherein one person was eating chocolate and the other person was eating chocolate while completing another task. The bottom line, shared experience amplified the flavor. It made it sweeter. When we experience our Christianity, and don't get to share it with the people we love most, life isn't as sweet. Our souls thrive when we get to share this satisfying message with those we love.

That brings us back to square one. If we don't want to eat our chocolate alone, how do you share this message to a world that is sick of being sold something to a world that is wary of the Christian message because of bait and switch, fear-based and pamphlet heavy messaging?

Colossians 4:2-4

Paul is concluding his letter to the Colossian church, and he starts out with a profound theological foundation for any form of evangelism. Something so simple and yet so profound. Prayer. He says pray and pray for me as I share this message. Paul notes the uphill battle of what is in front of him. Pray for me to share this mystery clearly. We talked about this two weeks ago, but the Christian faith is not a math equation to be solved. No matter how much we

like to share the ABCs of faith or distill it down to praying a prayer of salvation (which is not in the Bible by the way), Christianity is a mysterious faith to be shared and not a set of tenets to be memorized. Paul recognizes this and asks, pray for me so that I can share the mystery clearly.

Paul is making it clear that evangelism is integral to sharing your faith. Praying for another person on a regular basis has to happen. This illuminates a key idea that I want you to understand today. That is divine sovereignty and human responsibility. This concept is woven into many concepts of the faith and is especially pertinent when it comes to evangelism. Divine sovereignty means that God is in control of this world. He is all powerful and all knowing, nothing takes him by surprise and nothing happens outside of his will. When you hear that, you say, "Well what's the point?" If it's God's plan and God's will, then what difference does it make? The Bible regularly shows divine sovereignty mixed with human responsibility, that he calls us into his story and gives us opportunities to respond.

Again, you might ask why does God need us? If he loves people more than we do, which he does, and if we can't change people's minds or force them to believe, which we can't, then why this mountainous task of evangelism. And for that, I will take you back to the chocolate. It makes life sweeter when you share the experience. Think about going on vacation and finding a hike that includes a waterfall. Think about how excited you are to share that with someone when your paths line up and you find out they are going to the same place. You aren't shilling for that state park to make them money, you don't get anything about it...you just want them to see what you have seen. Like a new restaurant, like a wonderful movie, those things profit you nothing, yet, you share. Why? For the sweetness of the concept of the shared experience. That they might see and experience what was so impactful for you.

That brings us back to the passage. Paul says be steadfast in prayer and be watchful. That is the essence of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Pray and then watch for opportunities. Pray for those who are hurting. Pray for those who are far from God. Pray for those who need

help and be watchful. This is a potent concept. Awhile back, Pastor Arvin preached on a different concept, but he introduced an idea that I love. Only pray for people if you are willing to potentially be an answer to that prayer.

Don't pray for poor people to be blessed unless you are willing for God to show you ways that you might be an answer to that prayer. Don't pray for orphans to be well fed and cared for unless you are willing for God to call you to support them through World Vision or something more. Don't pray for people to come to faith if you aren't willing to be watchful and share the good news when the opportunity arises.

I've had a couple experiences recently that reminded me of the fear and the joy of this entire concept of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, of prayer and watchfulness. In the last few months, I have been in a low place. I felt distant from God and unsure of many things in my life, and then one night I had a dream. A very ambiguous but specific dream about a friend I hadn't seen or heard from in years. By my understanding, the dream had no particular meaning that I could decipher. At the risk of looking foolish, I texted my friend the dream. He then proceeded to write me back about how exactly this seemingly ambiguous dream fit into what was going on his life and this led to a conversation about troubles in his marriage and the opportunity for growth. Not more than a week later, I had the same experience with an ambiguous dream about a friend I haven't seen or connected with in quite some time. Same thing, I tell him about the dream and it all makes sense. In the course of both of these exchanges, I was also prayed for as I shared some of my recent struggles and doubts.

Now then, I could have not reached out because I didn't want to look foolish or presumptuous, but I would have missed out on the chocolate. I would have missed that sweet gift of God using me to encourage them and for both us to feel invigorated that God still speaks and does care about us and does speak to us in bold new ways. Pray and be watchful.

Colossians 4:5-6

The first part is pretty heavy on divine sovereignty and the second part is heavier on human responsibility. Walk with wisdom toward outsiders and live a life that is gracious and seasoned with salty language. Salty language doesn't mean to cuss like a sailor, but it does mean to have your language seasoned with Christ in ways that make people thirsty. Be gracious and make people thirsty for Jesus. May your life look like something other people want. May joy and peace exude from your pores in such a way that people want what you have.

This is probably the most overlooked part of Christian evangelism. Jesus was and is the most engaging person in human history. He showed compassion to the least of these, he taught in ways that were counterintuitive and powerful, he served everyone, he loved his enemies and on and on the list goes. That's why people followed him, not because he gave them proof. In fact, every time someone said, prove it to me, show us a sign, he rebuffed them. I am not against apologetics or thoughtful deep faith, but Jesus seemed to show that living in a divine way was the best way for people to contemplate the divine.

I'll put it like this, for those of you who are interested in joining a gym, imagine two gyms side by side. One gym has out front a severely out of shape person who is selling gym memberships. He has pamphlets and studies about the importance of cardio and weightlifting that he knows by heart and can quote to you chapter and verse. The other gym has a quiet person who is in extraordinary shape. They aren't loud and bombastic, but it is clear that they regularly use their own gym. While the out of shape chapter and verse quotes might get some more quick sells based on verbosity and volume, I am guessing most of you would be more compelled by the person who looks like the gym has actually changed their life.

We live in the highest de-churched area in the nation. That means many people have heard the story, but they soon realized that the gym members rarely worked out and it wasn't really a

gym, more of a club. Many of them know the story. They don't need a sales pitch, they need to see someone whose life has been changed by Jesus. Someone who gives generously, who models inclusivity and cares for the lowly, someone who serves sacrificially. That is far more compelling.

I want to finish up today by showing you something fascinating in Paul's farewell portion of his letter.

Colossians 4:7-14

Now this seems like a laundry list of names until you look closer. There is something in these final verses that should give you great comfort and hope when it comes to the monumental task of evangelism.

Onesimus, does that name sound familiar? He is the runaway indentured slave of Philemon at the center of Paul's letter to him. At some point, he becomes a Christian and runs away from his master which was a severe offense in this setting. Paul ends up writing a letter on behalf of this man to Philemon who was probably quite angry about these events and questioned the faith of the servant who would run away.

Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, is the same Mark from years earlier in Acts 15 who deserted Paul in his Christian work. Barnabas wanted to give him a second chance and bring him along anyway, and their disagreement was so sharp that they parted ways because of Mark's betrayal.

Finally, in verse 14 is Demas. Here Paul is mentioning him in his letter as one of his brothers, but later in 2 Timothy 4, we find out that Demas has deserted Paul in a similar fashion to Mark in Acts 15.

Why do I bring these up? Because our stories are often messy. Some loved ones grew up in the faith but are now far from it. Some ran away from the faith and are now returning to it. The point? Their story with God isn't over till it's over. Don't give up hope. Remain patient and gracious. When people like Mark and Demas walk away, it would be easier to stay mad or lose hope, which usually turns us towards oppositional language towards this person. Instead of being gracious and patient, we turn fearful and antagonistic. Our spiritual journeys are not linear. Sometimes people zig, sometimes people zag. Remain hopeful that God loves these people more than you do, so continue to pray and be watchful.

For those of you today who aren't quite sure about this Jesus thing, I want to end by making sure you hear the good news. I don't want to scare you or twist your arm. I am guessing you, like all of us, feel something is askew in this world. I am guessing that as you look at the rat race, you have asked more than a few times, is there something more? The answer to all of these questions is wrapped up in Jesus of Nazareth. We believe that what he taught and how he lived was verified by the miracle of his death and resurrection. Richard Rohr notes that Jesus' death on the cross wasn't Jesus changing God's mind about us, but Jesus changing our minds about God. That he loves us so much that he would come down to love us, serve us and even be killed by us so the true nature of God's grace and forgiveness could be revealed. That is the sweet message today. God isn't mad at you, and he doesn't hate you. He sent his son to save you, forgive you and show you the path to abundant and eternal life. If that isn't good news, then I don't know what is.