

Colossians 4:2-6
Make it Clear
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8-31-14

This is now the final message in our summer series in Colossians. And if you're anything like me, when you finish a good book, you immediately go back and revisit the most memorable parts. So this morning as we conclude, I want to give you Paul's Top Five take-aways for the Colossian believers:

- Number 5: That their life would exhibit the knowledge of Faith, Love that works itself out through walking worthily, and Hope that leads to endurance, or hanging in there.
- Number 4: They would look for and seek the center, Jesus Christ.
- Number 3: That they would make Jesus the center, and not fleeting things.
- Number 2: As we are being built up in faith, love, and hope, that we would take Jesus with us where we go. When we look at our lives, that we wouldn't see all that's wrong, but Christ, in whom we are hidden.
- Number 1: They would let the Word of Christ dwell in them richly. The word that says you are Chosen, Holy and Beloved.

Paul was keenly aware that we don't live in isolation. The thing about life is you gotta do it around other people. It was as true then as it is now. The world is a very diverse and highly complex place. In the midst of all of it, Paul is calling them to faith, love, and hope. But how do we do it? Because it's a challenging world at times. Jesus Christ, the carpenter from Nazareth, is that hope that turns challenges into opportunities for God's grace and power to be put on display. And so Paul's final exhortation to the people is, "Whatever you do, keep the hope of Jesus alive among you."

I invite you to grab a copy of Scripture, either the one in the pew rack in front of you or the one you brought with you, and open to Colossians 4 verses 2-6. And I'd like to invite you to stand with me, as you are able, and join me in reading together these closing instructions from the Apostle Paul.

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Let the good news come now, Father, not only in Word, but in power and with full assurance. I pray that these words would be seasoned with your Holy Spirit and would nourish and equip us for every good work you have for us in Wabash. God, I am a man of unclean lips, and so I would ask that you hide me behind the cross, that any word

that is not of you would vanish from memory. That what would remain would be the pure, holy, and life-giving word of God. And Lord, I pray this not in my own power, but I pray in the strong name of Jesus the Savior, amen.

Andy Dufresne was wrongly convicted and sentenced to life in prison. But he was not like most other inmates. Even though he was convicted for the murder of his wife, Andy knew he was innocent. And his hope that justice would prevail and life could go on living was the fuel to keep going. Andy Dufresne is the main character played by Tim Robbins in one of my favorite movies *The Shawshank Redemption*. Even though he was there with all other inmates, Andy believed that life doesn't cease to go on because he's behind bars. There was a deeper hope that compelled him.

While in Shawshank, Andy writes a letter every day to the state making the case for why these inmates need a library. Then one day, a huge shipment of books and records arrives and Andy gets his library. That day while he is working, one of the guards—with whom he has developed a strong rapport—leaves him alone. So Andy locks the door, turns on the record player, then holds the intercom that projects sound to every corner of Shawshank up to the speaker and plays the duet from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* for every inmate to hear. And as those soprano voices ring out over the hard and unforgiving ground, you see ecstasy and rapture overtake every person in that place. It's as if Shawshank ceases to exist and the people on lock down are miraculously transported to another place, a place where they are no longer prisoners but free men.

One of Andy's friends, a man named Red, takes over narrating at this point and he says: "To this day, I have no idea what those ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don't want to know. Some things are better left unsaid. I'd like to think they were singing about something so beautiful that can't be expressed by words and it makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you those voices soared, higher and farther than any person in a gray dreary place dares to dream. It was like a beautiful bird flew into our drab and dreary cage and made these walls melt away. And for the briefest of moments, every last man at Shawshank was free."

The stunt earned Andy two weeks in the hole, solitary confinement. And when he was finally returned to his friends in the mess hall, they're teasing him and say, "You couldn't have played something good, huh? A little Hank Williams?" Another prisoner asked, "Was it worth the two weeks in the hole?" And Andy said, "Easiest time I ever did." "No such thing as easy time in the hole, a week seems like a year." Andy replied, "I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company," pointing to his head and his heart. "In here, they can't take it away from you, no matter how hard they try. Haven't you ever felt that way about music, Red?"

Red replied, "Played a mean harmonica when I was younger but lost my taste for it on the inside, didn't see much use for me in here." Andy replies quickly, "In here is where it makes the most sense. We need it so we don't forget." "Forget?" "That there are things in this world that aren't carved out of gray stone, that there's a small place inside of us that they can never lock away, and that place is called hope. Remember, Red, hope is a good

thing, maybe the best of things.”

What Andy Dufrense knew was this: Hope teaches you and me that there is a gift that can never be taken away, there is a joy that can never be imprisoned, there is music that can never be silenced, there’s a glory that shines brighter than the brightest stars, and if you follow this hope from wherever you are, no matter how down and out, or how high and mighty you are, this hope will always lead you to the person, the Savior Jesus Christ, the hope of the world.

Paul’s desire for us and for the Colossian believers was that they be a winsome and compelling body. To do that, the very first thing that they needed to possess was hope. New Testament Scholar NT Wright puts it this way when he says: The facts of a **future** hope are a powerful motivation for **constant faith and costly love** in the present.

How does Paul suggest they cultivate that deep and abiding hope? With prayer and thanksgiving. Lives of thanksgiving, or doxology rather than ideology or even theology, are characterized by unyielding prayer. In fact, CS Lewis once said that the most tragic thing about being an atheist is beholding that breathtaking vista and not having anyone to thank. The old hymn lyric goes like this, *my life flows on in endless praise, above earth’s lamentation. I hear the clear, though far off hymn that hails a new creation. No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I’m clinging. Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing. Prayer pours forth from thanksgiving.*

In my office, I have a sign that hangs on the window above my desk, and when you get home, I would encourage you to make a copy to put on your refrigerator with these two words: Pray First.

Prayer is our ace in the hole; it is the discipline we have that can keep us from being consumed by our vast surroundings. Jesus regularly removed himself from the crowds to do what? Give thanks and pray. So prayer is the bond that tethers us to our center, and the conduit for a life of faith, love, and hope.

We’ve spent these last 6 weeks looking at community: community gathered, community formed in Christ, and community sent. We are God’s gathered and sent community. In our Call to Worship and the Old Testament reading, we heard from Proverbs and Jeremiah about a group of people who were living as a community in exile. They were the foreigners surrounded by a very different kind of culture. And God had a very particular plan for their life there, just as He has for our life here. Just as Paul was planted in Rome and Andy Dufrense in Shawshank, we can see ourselves as planted on the corner of Miami and Hill, to be gospel witness and shapers of culture in Wabash.

This is why Paul’s last bit of exhortation in Colossians is this: **Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt.** This little community of believers in Colossae had what it took to bring the flavor of the gospel to the world around them.

Jesus used this image of his followers being salt in the world around them. Have you ever noticed that when it comes to applying salt, the right proportion is key? Too little salt present, the food remains bland and indistinct. Too much salt and the salty flavor becomes oppressive. Our calling as followers of Jesus is to be winsome without being heavy handed, compelling without being overpowering. The gospel is a beautiful message, Jesus can—and does—invite you and me into his kingdom recipe.

Paul says season your surroundings. Our presence as God's redeemed people in our community should bring out the best in what is around us. The gospel ought to make us better citizens of Wabash, better members of our neighborhood community, better caretakers of our God's creation, and more astute appreciators of art and culture. Author and Pastor Tim Keller says that more than anyone else, Christians should be people who appreciate and enjoy things like music, art, movies, literature, nature, commerce, because we believe above all that God created these, and can use them for His glory and redemptive purposes. Sometimes all it takes is just a pinch of salt.

Brad was a friend of mine from my previous congregation. One day, he told me a story about how he had been driving around the area doing service calls for his family's oil company. At one of their gas stations, there was a local farmer selling peaches out of the bed of his truck. Brad, who was a very quiet and not terribly gregarious person, walked over to the truck and began talking to the farmer. In the course of their conversation, he learned that if the peaches didn't sell today that he was going to get rid of them before they went bad. So right there, Brad offered to buy the entire bed full of peaches. He then took them back to his neighborhood, delivering them to all of his neighbors, and introducing himself to those he did not know. With the sweetness of those peaches, Brad was adding a little kingdom salt to his neighborhood.

One person adding a little saltiness to this world can flavor a whole batch of people. And as Paul said in chapter 3, from last week's text, in whatever you do, in word or in deed, do it in doxology, giving thanks to God.

This next week, ask the Lord in prayer for ways that you can show the hope of Christ's love to those around you. Who knows if your one act might release someone from the cold grey lifeless bondage that has held them, and lead them into the broad place where the horizons of God's grace and mercy are as wide as the east is from the west, and whose mercies are new to you each morning. Amen.