

7 Steps of winsome witness

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[0 : 0 0] Last Sunday evening, I declared myself just a little demob happy at the prospect of preaching the final sermon in the series on Acts, number 68, I believe it was. That's thanks to the Bonacarb website. I noticed that little statistic. But little did I know that we would this evening be returning to Paul in Rome, awaiting his day in court before Caesar. You'll remember that that's where we left him, there in chapter 28 of the book of Acts, under house arrest in Rome, awaiting his day in court. But we are going to return to Paul there on that occasion, but not in the book of Acts, but rather as we consider these verses in Paul's letter to the Colossians. And it's generally considered, though it's difficult to establish with complete certainty these things, but it's generally considered that this is a letter that was written by Paul during that particular captivity in Rome. So we left him, as we remember the final verse, preaching concerning the kingdom of God and Jesus Christ without hindrance.

Acts. And in between, attending to his guests that are mentioned there in Acts, he had opportunity to write letters to the churches. And this is one of the letters that he wrote.

Now, the reason why my attention has been drawn to this letter and the verses that we've read really has nothing to do with the fact that it ties in a little with having concluded Acts last week, and there is that connection. That was not in any way planned, but rather fortuitous. The reason I was drawn to these verses is that I was thinking of a passage, or thinking it would be helpful to consider a passage that provides us with instruction and encouragement in the matter of bearing witness to the faith. And I do so in the context of, though the lessons are of general application, but I do so in the context of us beginning a new course of Christianity explored, where, as we've already mentioned, the success of that depends in great measure on us inviting folks to take part. Now, I should say, for the avoidance of doubt, if indeed there were any doubt, that bearing witness to the faith involves more than inviting somebody to church, or, in this case, inviting somebody to a course. And that,

I hope, is something that will become clear, though I'm sure it is already, for all of you, very clear, but something that will become increasingly clear as we consider our passage this evening. But that is the context, and that gives a little bit of the background as to what drew me to these verses.

Well, we've read the verses there in Colossians chapter 4, and I think we'll read them again. They are just four or five verses, and reading them again will refresh our memory as to the content, and then as we begin to consider what we have there, it will be that little bit more familiar. So, Colossians chapter 4, and we'll read from verse 2. Paul, as is evident, is coming to the end of the letter. These are final instructions, and indeed a request, as we notice, that he makes to the Christians in Colossae. 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. Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders.

[4 : 1 3] Make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

As Paul comes to the end of the letter, he has a specific request of the Colossian Christians, and the request is that they would pray for him, and he wants them to pray for an open door, but not the open door that we might have imagined. Paul is in captivity. It would have seemed reasonable if he's going to be asking folk to pray for an open door that it would be an open door that would grant him liberty from his captivity. It wouldn't have been remiss of him to have done so, but that is not the open door that he asked the Colossians to pray for. Rather, he asked that they would pray that there would be provided to him an open door for the gospel message. And in the making of the request, it would seem that Paul's train of thought moves in the direction of how we are to relate to and share with outsiders, to use his own language, the gospel. And for the great benefit of the church through the ages, including ourselves, Paul identifies a number of elements or conditions that are necessary if we are to be effective in witnessing to others concerning Jesus. So, what seems to have happened is that, that Paul is concerned about something very specific in his own circumstances. He has this great desire that there would be increasing and further opportunities, open doors for the gospel.

He wants the Colossians to help him by praying that those opportunities would be provided. But even as he thinks about the matter, it leads him to give us further instruction on this general theme in these few and brief verses, but really full of very helpful and practical instruction in this matter. Now, as I said before, one way or the name that I'm giving or the title that I'm giving to this message is the Seven Secrets of Winsome Witness. You can do with that title as you wish, but what we want to do is just identify seven things that Paul either explicitly mentions or we can identify in a more implicit way. And I'll say what they are, what these seven secrets are, and then we can think of each of them and see how we find them or how we can notice what he says about them in these verses. So, the seven things that I want to just mention this evening are these, to love deeply, this is seven secrets of Winsome Witness, to love deeply, to pray steadfastly, to listen carefully, to act dutifully, to walk wisely, to speak graciously, and to live expectantly. So, these are the seven things, and we're just going to consider each of them briefly in turn.

Now, as we do think of these elements or secrets or whatever you want to call them, I hope it provides for us an opportunity to examine ourselves, but not to examine ourselves with the purpose that we would leave church this evening with a major guilt trip about how far short we fall. It may be that for many of us that will be the conclusion, that we fall short in many ways, and it's good to recognize that if we are indeed falling short, but I wouldn't want it to generate a burden of guilt that, far from helping us, actually paralyzes us. Guilt, of course, does have a place in the Christian life. It can be a very useful means for bringing us to recognize where we're falling short, to seek forgiveness, and to change. So, it does have a healthy place, but it can be sometimes something that, far from helping us, does simply make us feel very depressed and can paralyze us.

And I certainly don't want what I say this evening to have that intention, but rather that as we consider these matters, they would serve to help us become, each of us, a winsome witness for the gospel. If we have not been that in the past or in the measure that we ought to have been or could have been, well, the past is the past. Today is a new day, and we're beginning a new week, and there is a new opportunity for us to consider these things, and with God's help, to change and to improve.

[9 : 24] So, let's think of these elements that I've already identified. First of all, the importance of loving deeply. And the love in question is in two directions, a love for Jesus and a love for others, and very particularly in this regard, for those whom Paul describes as outsiders. He uses that language in verse 5, be wise in the way you act towards outsiders. Of course, it's important to love insiders as well, but the concern of Paul on this occasion is with regard to outsiders, to those who are not part of the Christian community, to those who as yet are not believers. And a fundamental element in winsome witness is a love for such, a love firstly for Jesus, but also a love for others or for outsiders. Now, of course, I don't think anybody would quibble with that being true, but you might ask the question quite legitimately, well, okay, that's true, but where is that stated in the verses that we've read? Paul makes no explicit reference in these verses to his love for the Lord.

But he doesn't need to. As we often say, and it's true, actions speak louder than words. If we just cast our mind back to Paul's conversion and commissioning, what mission was he given by the Lord very specifically? And we can just remind ourselves as we would return again to Acts and chapter 9. Just very briefly read a couple of verses there that speak of Paul's conversion and commissioning by the Lord. Acts chapter 9 verses 15 and 16. But the Lord said to Ananias, who in turn would then pass the message on to Saul or to Paul, I have heard, sorry, verse 15, but the Lord said to Ananias, go, this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. So, this is the mission that Paul was given when he became a Christian. And before just thinking in what measure he is fulfilling it, let's just also remind ourselves of what Jesus said in John chapter 14 and verse 15 regarding how we as believers can demonstrate that we do love him beyond simply a verbal affirmation that that is the case. In John chapter 14 and verse 15. So, we've thought about what Paul was commissioned to do. We now just want to notice what Jesus says concerning how we demonstrate that we love him. John chapter 14 and verse 15, we read, if you love me, you will obey what I command. A familiar verse. But as we bring these things together, what Paul was commissioned to do, to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, to kings, to suffer for the name of

Jesus, and then we bring alongside that this truth concerning the manner in which we demonstrate our love, by obeying the Lord, well, we can see how it is clear by Paul's actions how deeply he loves the Lord. Because what is Paul doing, even as he is in chains there in Rome? Well, he is doing exactly what he was commanded to do some 30 years before. Paul loves the Lord deeply, and the depth of his love is evidenced by his consistent and persistent obedience to his calling. So, we can say, even though Paul makes no explicit reference to it, that he loves deeply, and this is foundational for his witnessing for the Lord. He loves his Lord deeply. I wonder, what about us? And again, the intention is not to make us feel inadequate or guilty, but to give ourselves the opportunity to ask that important question as

Christians, how deep is our love? Now, I don't want you to be distracted by a vision of the Bee Gees singing, how deep is your love? When I was putting this together, for some reason, that tune just came into my mind. For those of you who are under 40, that reference maybe has absolutely no significance.

[14:19] But nonetheless, despite that danger, I do ask you, how deep is your love? How deep is my love for the Lord? Because this is foundational if we are to be a winsome witness for him. But I mentioned that in this matter of loving deeply, it's not only a love for the Lord, but also a love for others, or to use Paul's language for outsiders. Now again, the evidence of this is not to be found in touchy-feely expressions of love, though no doubt they have their place, but in loving service to others, very particularly in sharing the gospel message with those who have not yet heard or believed. One helpful definition of love for another is to seek the other's greatest good. The measure that we love somebody is the measure in which we seek the other's greatest good. That strips from the definition of love, the sentimental aspect that I'm not suggesting isn't valid or important, but in Christian love, we ought not to be overly concerned with the sentimental aspect, but the very practical aspect.

How do we demonstrate our love in the manner in which we serve others and seek their greatest good? And what greater good can we do for another than tell them the good news concerning Jesus and His forgiving love and His invitation that we might become part of the family of God?

God. To give outsiders the opportunity to come in from the coldness of unbelief to the warmth of the gospel.

So, winsome witness is grounded, in the first instance, in this matter of loving deeply. We are to love deeply. But we are also to pray steadfastly. As we've already mentioned at the very beginning, the subject, the theme of witnessing to outsiders emerges in the context of Paul requesting prayer that he be given the opportunity to speak to others, that doors would be open for him. And it's very clear that Paul sees prayer as being central to this task. Why is it that prayer is so central to the task of being a winsome witness? Well, it's central because we depend on God in so many different and related ways. We depend on God for the message that we have. We depend on God for the motivation. We depend on God for the ability to proclaim it clearly, to again pick up on language from the verses that we've read. And crucially, we depend on God that we would be given the opportunity and indeed that those to whom we have the opportunity to speak would hear and would respond. In all of these things, we stand dependent upon God.

And given that that is so, it ought not to surprise us that prayer would be central to this matter. We pray in recognition of our dependence upon God. Paul, the great apostle, was conscious of his dependence upon God to such an extent that he asks the Colossians to pray for him, that he would be able to speak clearly and that doors of opportunity would be opened for him.

[18:07] Notice that in this matter of prayer, we are told to devote ourselves to prayer. Then in verse 2, devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. Now, verse 2, I think, is a more general exhortation concerning prayer. And prayer in all its amplitude, I suppose, not specifically prayer in this regard. What seems to be happening in Paul's train of thought is he mentions prayer in encouraging the Colossians to devote themselves to prayer, and that, in a sense, triggers in his own mind this desire to ask their help to pray for him. So, he's speaking generally about prayer, and then he moves on to this specific request for himself. But nonetheless, the exhortation to devote ourselves to prayer, or to pray steadfastly, does, of course, also apply to this matter of seeking to be, and with God's help being, a winsome witness to others, that we would devote ourselves to a prayer, praying for both the opportunity, and also when we are granted the opportunity with Paul, praying that we would have clarity in the manner in which we speak. Finally, notice just a little detail in regard to prayer that Paul asks the Colossians to pray for us. Notice there at the beginning of verse 3, and pray for us, where the us implies that he's not asking only on his behalf, but on behalf of others who accompany him. It's thought perhaps particularly Timothy. Without wishing to draw a great deal from that, I think it does remind us of the importance of recognizing that witnessing to others, seeking to be a witness for Jesus, should not be a solitary mission. We need the help of one another, as we would pray for one another. We need the encouragement of one another. We need to be able to ask for the help of one another, and indeed to share our encouragements, and indeed our disappointments with one another. Paul is not on some solitary mission. The very fact that he asked for help from the Colossians is evidence of that, but even in the help that he asks, he asks not only for himself, but for others who accompany him in this task. So, we are to pray steadfastly. We are to love deeply.

We are also to pray steadfastly. But a third thing we can say in this regard is that we are to listen carefully. Now, what do I mean by saying that we are to listen carefully? Well, really all I'm saying is that it's not enough to pray for an opportunity. We need to listen or discern as God answers that prayer.

We believe that God answers prayer. And so, if we ourselves are asking God to give us an opportunity, if we're asking others to help us, as Paul was, that opportunities would be given, then it's reasonable that we should expect that God will answer. It's unreasonable to imagine that God would be indifferent to such a request. God was very pleased when his people asked for this kind of opportunity. So, it seems to me entirely reasonable that God will grant opportunities to us, but we need to be listening to God, discerning the way in which He is providing us with those open doors or opportunities.

When Paul goes on to, beyond his own particular request, as he develops the theme, as he encourages or instructs the Colossians from verse 5, he actually uses, or he touches on this matter when he says in verse 5, be wise in the way you act towards outsiders, and then particularly this, make the most of every opportunity. Make the most of every opportunity, which of course involves, in the first instance, spotting the opportunity. I think it's true for many of us that our difficulty, is maybe not the lack of opportunity or open doors, but our inability, perhaps sometimes, our unwillingness to see the door that has been or is being opened, maybe just slightly ajar, but nonetheless ajar for us. And this matter of listening and of discerning and of identifying opportunities for witness is a conscious matter that involves living, if you forgive a cliché or a bit of jargon, involves living with what some people have described as gospel intentionality. So, we're actually consciously thinking about the way in which there will be opportunities for us in our daily lives to speak a way to speak a word in season, to use a kind of old-fashioned but biblical term.

And of course, as Paul says and encourages the Colossians, having identified an opportunity, we must make the most of them. And the language speaks of doing so swiftly and urgently.

[23 : 34] The picture seems to be that opportunities can be fleeting. The opportunity may be there today, but by tomorrow it may no longer be there, and that's the nature of things. That's not always the case, but there are occasions when an opportunity can come, but it can also go. The language that Paul uses here where it's translated for us, make the most of every opportunity, that term, make the most is intending or attempting to capture the original language that literally speaks of buying up, buying up every opportunity. The language in the King James that we'll be familiar with is of redeeming the time.

Again, the language of redeeming has to do with this idea of buying up. And it's almost the idea of, for those of you who are interested in shopping, those of you of both genders who are interested in shopping, so there's no suggestion of any kind of misogyny here. But any of you who are interested in shopping, the idea here is of a bargain that you want to grasp, because maybe tomorrow it won't be there anymore.

You know, it's a one-day-only bargain, and you want to buy it up before you miss out. Now, I'm not encouraging you to do that in Union Square tomorrow, by the way, or I'll be in trouble with some of you.

But that's the picture. And the picture is of spotting an opportunity and grasping it before it's lost. This is what Paul is saying to the Colossians. So, we are to listen carefully, that we would hear and discern the way in which God is providing us with opportunities, and as we identify them, so we would grasp them.

We have to move on swiftly. The next element is that we are to act dutifully. We can mention this very quickly. Act dutifully. We began with the importance of loving deeply, and I think that was the right place, or is the right place to begin. Love is at the very heart of winsome witness.

[25 : 36] But love does not remove from the picture the place of duty. Notice what Paul says in verse 4, Pray that I may proclaim it, that is the message, the mystery of Christ, pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should. Particularly the words there, as I should. It's not altogether clear if Paul here is referring to the act of proclaiming as something that he should do, or the manner, that is, that he should do so clearly. It's possible he's referring to this idea that he should or he ought to proclaim it clearly. But regardless, what is true is that he recognizes that duty does have a worthy place in this matter of gospel proclamation. Love is a more powerful motivation, but duty is also a legitimate element in the picture. This is something that we ought to do, and something that we ought to do well.

So, act dutifully. Moving on to the next element, which is to walk wisely. Notice in verse 5 what Paul says, Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders. Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders.

Here it's as if Paul is taking a step back in establishing, you might say, a basic ground rule for winsome witness. And what he's saying is, it's not just about the moment, it's about the life of which the moment is a part. It's not just about the message, but about the messenger. It's not just about the talk, but it's about the walk. If we are to be taken seriously, if we are to provoke interest in others, if our words are to carry weight, we must walk wisely. Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders. This is about our day-to-day living in and with outsiders. Notice that Paul takes it as a given that we must live amongst and interact with outsiders. And how we walk, how we work, how we help, how we react in difficult situations, how we behave, these are matters that will be fundamental in allowing us and establishing the opportunity to be heard and indeed to be questioned by others.

We are to walk wisely. And this walk will be seen the closer the relationship is. That's obvious. If we have a very fleeting relationship with somebody, then however wisely we walk, they won't even notice. But the closer our relationship, our friendship, then the more evident it will be to others the manner of our walk. And a wise walk grants credibility and authority to the words that we speak. Indeed, Paul implies that a wise walk will generate interest and questions.

Then in verse 6, let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. Paul is saying it's not just that you'll have to be desperately finding opportunities, but rather there will be questions will be asked of you.

[29 : 00] But those questions will be asked of you in the measure that you walk wisely. The next element, we're nearly there, is to speak graciously. We're not to choose between walking and talking. They go together. But what and how are we to speak? What is it that we speak? Well, the language that Paul uses is of the mystery of Christ. 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. Now, what's this about, the mystery of Christ? We may think it's difficult enough making known a simple message. The last thing we need is to have to make known mysteries. But we don't need to panic in this regard.

In the New Testament, as no doubt many will be aware, the word mystery refers to that which was hidden, but that has now been revealed. So, in a sense, is no longer a mystery. Well, what is this mystery that has been revealed? Well, Paul himself gives a clear answer in this very selfsame letter. In chapter 2 and verse 2, notice what Paul says. He says, my purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and so on and so forth. What is the mystery of God? What is the mystery of Christ?

It is Christ himself. Christ himself is the message. We speak concerning Jesus, who he is, and what he has done, and how he graciously invites sinners to himself. This is what we are to speak, but how are we to speak? Well, Paul asked for prayer that he would speak clearly. To speak clearly is something that maybe many of us find difficult, and it does imply a measure of knowledge. It implies often practice that would help us to speak clearly, and some may speak more clearly than others, but nonetheless, it is important. Paul recognizes it's important. Indeed, he seeks help in prayer that he would speak clearly, but not just clearly. Think especially of what Paul says in verse 6, let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt. First of all, full of grace.

What's the reference there? Well, possibly it's combining the idea that the content of our message should be full of God's grace, for the message is indeed one of God's grace, but also, and perhaps more particularly, the concern is with the graciousness in the manner of our delivery.

So, a message or a conversation that is full of grace is a conversation that is gracious in the manner in which we conduct it. We could say more on that, but we won't. What else? One final thing that it says here about how we are to speak graciously. It speaks of our conversation being seasoned with salt. Here, the idea is of speaking in a manner that is compelling, interesting, lively, colorful. And maybe some of you are thinking, well, that's beyond me. I might just be able to say something, but if you're asking me to be interesting, lively, and colorful, well, that's beyond my capacity. Well, I don't want you to get you off the hook, but I would just mention that Christianity explored is interesting, lively, and colorful. So, while, as I say, not wanting to get you off the hook, if you feel incapable of interesting, lively, and colorful, then maybe one option for you would be to encourage folk to participate. And maybe in that way, you don't need to be interesting, lively, and colorful, but they'll get their fill of interesting, lively, and colorful by other means. Speak graciously. That is another element. And the final thing, the final thing that I want to say as we consider these seven secrets for winsome witness is to live expectantly. I have made brief reference to this already, but I'll just briefly mention it again. While Paul recognizes he and the

[33 : 24] Colossian believers are dependent on God providing opportunities, hence his request for prayer, he also takes as a given that opportunities will abound. He expects them. He asks for them, yes, but he expects them. This is the implication of what we noticed a moment ago at the very end of the section where he takes as a given that questions will be asked of the believers. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that, so that as a result, you may know how to answer everyone. He's saying people will speak to you. People will ask you. People will inquire of you as they see the life that you live, as they listen to the manner that you talk. They will ask you questions. You will get opportunities. Live expectantly. Don't be surprised. Don't think that this, oh, this will never happen to me. No, this is something that we can expect. So, live expectantly. So, there are a few elements that I hope are helpful for us as we just think about our own Christian lives and the manner in which we are fulfilling this privilege and duty. Seven, if you wish, secrets of winsome witness, to love deeply, to pray steadfastly, to listen carefully, to act dutifully, to walk wisely, to speak graciously, and to live expectantly. Let's pray.