

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This is now the third week we are focusing on the theme: Christ's Love, Our Calling. It all starts with Christ's love. He loved us who are unlovable. In spite of who we are by nature, and the sins we have committed, God loved us enough to send his Son to die on the cross for us. With the full assurance that we are loved and accepted by God, we now respond to his love by honoring him and glorifying God with our thoughts, words and actions.

God has given us only a set number of minutes on this planet. Odds are you won't have more than 42,000,000 of those minutes total. That might sound like a lot of minutes, but God only gives them one at a time... about a 1,000 of them a day if you take out the time you sleep. You can't borrow minutes when you need them the most and repay them later. You always get them at the same rate. God calls us to use the time he's given us wisely.

So far we've heard that one important use of our time is to grow our relationship with the Lord by meditating on his Word, prayer and time in church. Time spent building up the relationship that will be important to you for all eternity is time well spent.

We also heard last week how important it is for us to spend time with fellow believers. They are our spiritual brothers and sisters. We need each other. We need encouragement and support along the way in this sinful world filled with heartache and tragedies. We need to be with those who are sharing the same eternal future or we will be heavily influenced by those who are consumed by the material and the now.

Today we learn of yet another way God would have us invest the 1,000 minutes a day that he gives us as a gift. Use that time to love your neighbor. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind." Then he added: "And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." You give glory to God when you love your neighbor as yourself. Now... what does it mean to love our neighbor? It can mean many things, can't it? Shoveling their driveway for them. Keeping an eye on their house when they're on vacation. Doing favors for them. Thinking about their needs and doing what you can to fill those needs. I think this is a sampling of the sort of things that typically come to mind.

But consider this: the greatest way you can show them love is to do something for them that will impact them for all eternity. It's certainly nice if we shovel snow for our neighbor, or help a co-worker with a project that's behind schedule. But perhaps we should give thought to this: What can I do for my neighbor that will help them when they stand in judgment before God almighty, Maker of heaven and earth? It is especially this question we will consider today. Christ's Love; Our Calling. Responding to Christ's love, I want my neighbor to enjoy that same love and forgiveness of Christ that I have, right? What could be more important.

This is the encouragement the apostle Paul gave to the church in Colossae. Let's look at those verses we heard in the second lesson. The reading starts like this:
"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this part, because we've had a couple sermons in the last few months on the importance of prayer. On the other hand, apparently this is something God wants us to be reminded of

frequently since it does appear again and again in his holy Word. Prayer is important. Your God wants to hear from you. Your prayers reflect the level of trust you have in your God.

Devote yourselves to prayer being watchful and thankful. What does it mean to be watchful in prayer? It means just that... be alert, not sleepy. Think of the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane how they fell asleep instead of praying with Jesus. We too become sleepy and inattentive. Christ is coming. Our life is winding down. Our minutes on earth are limited. Be alert! Devote yourselves to prayer.

Be thankful in prayer. Do you want a good measure to indicate when your prayers are getting selfish or coming from a prideful heart? Just ask yourself how much thanking you're doing in your prayers. How much gratitude is being expressed when you pray to God. If it's lacking, it's time to evaluate your heart. Prayer with thankfulness reflect a heart that is humble and a heart that is focused on God instead of self. Be thankful in prayer!

Now let's get to the heart of what we want to talk about today devote yourself to prayer... praying for what? Look at our reading and you'll see that Paul clearly wants the Colossians... and us... to pray for our neighbor. When you love your neighbor, you'll pray for your neighbor. And when you love and pray for your neighbor, there will be one concern most prominent in your mind: the salvation of your neighbor's soul.

So listen to this, there are three main things to pray for when it comes to prayers of love for the salvation of your neighbor's soul.

1) Pray for opportunities to share the Word. Pray that God will give you opportunities (open doors), that you'll *see* them, and that you'll *take* them. Here's what Paul said: **“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.... make the most of every opportunity.”**

Someone might say, “I rarely share my faith because I don't have many opportunities.” Well, tell me, have you prayed for more opportunities? Or have you breathed a sigh of relief if you've had few opportunities? I firmly believe that all of us have opportunities that God presents us. But I fear many times we don't see the opportunities that are there because we don't look for them! Someone shares with you a problem they're having in their life, and you nod you're head in sympathy... but say nothing about your God who is the ultimate solution to every problem. The opportunity was there, but maybe you didn't even see it because you weren't looking for it.

Or maybe you *do* see the opportunity, but you hesitate. You're afraid. You're not sure what to say. And the opportunity passes. Friends, we're talking about eternal life or eternal death for your neighbor! Would you take a moment now to *confess to God* your failure to pray for, see and take opportunities to share his word of hope and comfort? Because our failures in this area ultimately show a lack of love for our neighbor. We have sinned against almighty God.

Now, I want you to think of Jesus. Did Jesus seek opportunities to share the Word? Did he see them when they arose? Did he take advantage of them? Yes to all these questions! He proclaimed the Word in places of worship (that one's a given). But not only there! He proclaimed it on hillsides... in packed houses... in public places... along the road as he traveled from place to place. He proclaimed it to a Samaritan woman at a well when resting and getting a drink of water. He proclaimed it while fishing. In all this, Jesus was being your substitute. He was fulfilling God's perfect will for you. And when he went to the cross, he took with him our failures to seek and take advantage of every opportunity that God has placed in our path. In Christ you are forgiven!

With this forgiveness freely granted, will you now with a new heart pray? Pray for open doors for the gospel in your life. Open doors for our church in our city. And open doors for missionaries around the world.

Be diligent in prayer for opportunities to share the word.

2) Pray for the clear proclamation of Christ's message. Paul said, **“Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. ... Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone”**

There are any number of things that can hinder the clear proclamation of Christ's message... not because the message itself is unclear. It's perfectly clear and understandable to all people. However, the communication of that message to others sometimes gets muddled. This can happen when the speaker is not trusted by the listener. When the speaker fails to take into account what the listener understands and hears. When the speaker doesn't fully grasp the message himself, he certainly won't relate it clearly. If the speaker doesn't understand the culture or world view of his listener. These are just a few examples of how proclaiming Christ's message can sometimes happen in a less than clear way.

Devote yourselves to prayer... prayers which reflect a love for your neighbor... prayers which ask God to help all who proclaim Christ's message to do so in a way that is clear and understandable. Pray this for your pastor... for missionaries who have a language and cultural communication barrier to overcome. But pray this prayer for yourself as well. That when God gives you opportunities, and you speak, that you may speak clearly and understandably the Gospel truth of Jesus.

3) Pray for a proper life-witness. By life witness I mean, everything that you say and do witnesses to your faith, to the greatness of your God and to the power of his love. When his love changes your life and moves you to love your neighbor, your love-words and love-actions are a testimony of Christ's love. Paul said it this way: **“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; 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.”**

What does it mean to act wisely toward outsiders? It means we should be careful that our actions do not in any way run God's name through the mud, but instead give glory to his name. What does it mean to have conversations always full of grace? It means God's unconditional love for us should overflow into every conversation we have. “Seasoned with salt” means our contributions to conversations add a “God flavor” to whatever we're talking about. His preserving love and grace are there.

I'm guessing an honest look at our lives will reflect that we were sometimes foolish in how we acted toward outsiders... giving them a reason to criticize Christianity and therefore Christ's message. I bet we can think of conversations where grace was lacking, and in which no taste of God could be found. The witness we give by our lives hindering the kingdom instead of helping... and ultimately showing a great lack of love for neighbor.

Again, take these sins to the foot of the cross. Openly confess with great sorrow the damage these sins have done. Then look with relief at the life-witness of Jesus. His words. His actions. His preaching. His miracles. His love. Perfect in every way. Perfect on your behalf. Your failures removed from you and atoned for by the blood of Jesus. His forgiveness is complete!

It's at the cross of Christ and at his empty tomb that we find our motivation and energy for change. There we find the power to be true life-witnesses for Jesus. Our words and actions are changed completely as our whole lives conform more and more to the likeness of Christ.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, you've got 200 (850; 750) minutes left today... then another 1,000 tomorrow... and the day after. Every single minute a gift from God. Will you use a fair chunk of those minutes to show love for your neighbor? Would you actively think about how, when and why you will show that love? And will you especially give serious prayer and thought to the greatest way you can show love for your neighbor... by sharing Christ's message with them... a message which changes people's eternal futures! Pray for opportunities and open doors! Pray for a clear proclamation of the message! Pray for a strong life-witness of the power and message of Christ crucified. May God strengthen us and refocus us that we may use our time to his glory as we love our neighbors! Amen.