

Faith that Endures, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: Wise and Gracious Speech

Colossians 4:2-6

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Set the scene, because five verses can look like loose ends and these are not. Paul is finishing a letter written to a congregation he had never personally visited, in a town he probably never saw, and he is writing it from custody. That detail matters more than your class will expect. The man asking them to pray for an open door for the word is chained to a Roman guard. He does not ask for release. Help your class hear that. Everything in this passage comes out of a man whose circumstances had shrunk to almost nothing and who was still thinking about the next conversation. The lesson is not a list of communication tips. It is the working method of someone whose faith had already been tested and had not moved, and who assumed the Colossians would need the same equipment.

The shape of the passage is the lesson, so let the class see the shape before the details. Paul begins inside, with prayer that is steadfast, watchful, and thankful. Then he moves outward, asking for prayer for opportunity. Then he moves further out, to how we walk toward outsiders and how we speak to them. Prayer first, speech last, and the two are joined. Draw that out, because most of us have separated them. We treat evangelism as a skill to acquire or a nerve to work up, and Paul treats it as something that begins on your knees before it ever reaches your mouth. A congregation that will not pray will not speak, and a congregation that speaks without praying will do damage.

Two boundaries need care. First, verse 3 asks that "God may open to us a door for the word." Someone will hear a request for a private revelation or a prompting, a nudge telling Paul where to go. It is nothing of the kind. Paul is asking for opportunity, for circumstances, for a door in a wall. God guides us now through His completed word (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Jude 3), and the confirming gifts of the apostolic age have ceased (1 Corinthians 13:8-10). Never teach your class to wait for an inner voice before speaking. Second, guard verse 6 in both directions at once, because your class contains both failures. "Gracious" is not a warrant for saying nothing, and "salt" is not a warrant for being abrasive. Aim the hour at Christians who are neither timid nor obnoxious, which is rarer than it sounds.

Question 1

Student Question:

In verse 2, Paul urges believers to "continue steadfastly in prayer." What does it mean to be steadfast in prayer, and why is persistence in prayer essential for enduring faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Give the class the word, because English softens it. The Greek is *proskartereo*, and it means to persist stubbornly, to hold fast to, to stick at something. It is the word used of the first Christians who “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42), and of the disciples in the upper room who “with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). It is also used in Mark 3:9 of a boat kept ready and waiting for Jesus. That is the flavor. Not intensity. Attachment. Staying at a post.

Then let the class notice what the command is not. Paul does not say pray fervently, or pray at length, or pray with unusual feeling. He says continue. Steadfastness is a word about time, not temperature. That is quietly good news for your class, because most people in the room have concluded that they are bad at prayer, and what they mean is that prayer does not feel like much. Paul is not asking them to feel more. He is asking them not to stop.

Draw out why this belongs in a series on enduring faith. Prayer is the first casualty of a hard season and the last thing recovered. Nobody announces that they have quit praying, exactly as nobody announces that they are drifting from the assembly. It simply thins out. And notice the direction of the damage: a Christian does not usually stop praying because he stopped believing. He stops believing gradually because he stopped praying. Steadfast is the whole issue, because the alternative is never a decision.

Guard the boundary before someone hears the wrong thing. Persistence in prayer is not a technique for extracting things from God, and it is not the notion that God is worn down by repetition. Jesus explicitly forbade that: “do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Matthew 6:7). Yet the same Lord told a parable “to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1). The persistence is not to change God’s mind. It is what a dependent person does, and dependence is a posture that must be kept up or it collapses.

Bring it home plainly. Ask your class when they last prayed about something for longer than a month. Not a crisis prayer, a sustained one. Then ask the harder question: what did you stop praying for, and what did you conclude when you stopped? Most people quietly decided God was not going to, and then called it acceptance. Paul’s word to a congregation he wanted to see endure was not “pray better.” It was “do not quit.”

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- *Proskartereo* means to persist stubbornly, to stay at a post (Acts 1:14; 2:42)
- Steadfastness is a word about time, not about intensity or feeling
- Prayer is usually the first casualty of a hard season and thins out without a decision
- A Christian rarely stops praying because he stopped believing; he often stops believing because he stopped praying
- Persistence is not a technique to wear God down; empty repetition is forbidden (Matthew 6:7)
- Jesus taught that we ought always to pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1)

- Dependence is a posture that collapses if it is not kept up

Discussion Prompts

- When did you last pray about something for longer than a month?
- What did you stop praying for, and what did you conclude when you stopped?
- If steadfastness is about time rather than feeling, does that change how you judge your own prayer life?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul adds that prayer should be accompanied by “watchfulness” and “thanksgiving” (v. 2). Why are these two qualities important companions to prayer?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Take watchfulness first, and give the class the picture behind it. The word is the language of staying awake, of a sentry on a wall through the night. Jesus used it in Gethsemane, where the failure was almost comically ordinary: “Could you not watch one hour?” (Mark 14:37). Paul is not asking for anxiety. He is asking for alertness, for a Christian who prays with his eyes open. That is a striking combination, and it is worth pausing on. Most of us pray with our eyes closed in every sense.

Then show the class what watchful prayer actually watches for, because the context answers it. Look at what comes next: an open door for the word (v. 3), and outsiders, and making the best use of the time (v. 5). The watching is for opportunity. Paul is describing a person who prays and then pays attention, who asks God for a door and then notices doors. That is why watchfulness and speech end up in the same short passage. The Christian who never sees an opening is very often the Christian who never asked for one and therefore never looked.

Now take thanksgiving, and let the class feel where Paul is writing from. He is in prison. Thanksgiving is not the natural product of his circumstances; it is the settled habit of his life, and it runs all through this letter (Colossians 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 17). Ask the class why gratitude belongs with prayer, and press past the polite answer. It is not manners. Thanksgiving is what keeps prayer from curdling into a list of complaints with God’s name attached. A man who only ever asks eventually starts resenting.

Draw out how the two work together, because they correct opposite errors and your class has both. Watchfulness without thanksgiving becomes vigilance, and vigilance becomes fear; you scan the horizon and see only threats. Thanksgiving without watchfulness becomes sentimentality, a warm feeling about God that never notices the man across the street. Held together they produce something rare: a Christian who is genuinely alert and genuinely glad. That is the person God can use in a conversation, because he is neither frightened nor asleep.

Land it on the room. Ask each person what they are watching for right now, honestly. Most of us are watching for a threat, or for a change in our circumstances, and almost nobody is watching for a door. Then ask the second: when did you last thank God for something that had not changed? Paul wrote “with thanksgiving” from a cell, and the class should feel how much that costs and how much it protects.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Watchfulness is the language of a sentry staying awake, not of anxiety (Mark 14:37)
- The context shows what is watched for: an open door, outsiders, the best use of the time (Colossians 4:3, 5)
- The Christian who never sees an opening often never asked for one
- Thanksgiving runs through the whole letter and is written from prison (Colossians 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 17)
- Thanksgiving keeps prayer from curdling into a list of complaints
- Watchfulness without thanksgiving becomes fear; thanksgiving without watchfulness becomes sentimentality
- Together they produce a Christian who is alert and glad, and therefore usable

Discussion Prompts

- What are you watching for right now, honestly? A threat, or a door?
- When did you last thank God for something that had not changed?
- Why would gratitude and alertness need each other?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verse 3, Paul asks for prayer “that God may open to us a door for the word.” What does this request reveal about Paul’s understanding of how the gospel advances?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Start with what Paul does not ask for, because it is the loudest thing in the verse. He is in prison. He does not ask for release, for comfort, for vindication, or for his accusers to be dealt with. He asks for a door for the word. Read the rest of the sentence to the class: he wants to “declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison.” The very thing that put him in chains is the thing he wants another chance to do. Ask your class what they would have asked for, and let the honesty of that answer sit for a moment.

Then draw out what the request assumes. Paul was the most capable evangelist who ever lived, and he asked other people to pray that God would give him an opportunity. He did not assume his gifts would manufacture one. He knew that a door is something God opens and a man walks through, and that the walking is no substitute for the opening. Luke shows both sides of this:

God opened “a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27), and Paul says of Troas, “a door was opened for me in the Lord” (2 Corinthians 2:12). The advance of the gospel is God’s work and our labor, and Paul never confused the two or dropped either.

Now guard the boundary plainly, because this is the point at which the verse is most often mishandled. Paul is not asking for a private revelation, a prompting, an inner nudge, or a feeling that tells him where to go. He is asking for circumstances. A door is an opportunity, a gap in a wall, a person who will listen, a guard who asks a question. God does not speak to us today through impressions or new revelation; the confirming gifts belonged to the apostolic age and have ceased now that the faith has been once for all delivered (1 Corinthians 13:8-10; Hebrews 2:3-4; Jude 3). He speaks through the completed Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Never tell a Christian to wait for a prompting before he opens his mouth. He will wait forever, and he will call his silence obedience.

Then let the class feel what this does to the excuse most of them are carrying. If a door is opportunity rather than a supernatural signal, then the reason we do not speak is almost never that God has not provided one. Doors are everywhere. Ask the class how many conversations they had last week with someone who is not a Christian, and then ask what happened. Paul, chained to a soldier with one audience of one, kept asking for a door. Most of us have twenty and are praying for none.

Bring it home by putting the request back in their mouths. Ask when they last prayed for an opportunity to say something about Christ to a specific person. Not for the church, not for the preacher, not in general. For themselves, this week, that man. It is the plainest thing in the verse, and it may be the thing nobody in your class has done.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul, in prison, asks for a door for the word rather than for release (Colossians 4:3)
- The gospel advances by God opening doors and men walking through them (Acts 14:27; 2 Corinthians 2:12)
- Even Paul asked others to pray for opportunity rather than trusting his ability to make one
- An open door is opportunity and circumstance, not a private revelation or prompting
- Direct revelation and confirming gifts belonged to the apostolic age and have ceased (1 Corinthians 13:8-10; Hebrews 2:3-4)
- God guides today through the completed Scriptures, once for all delivered (Jude 3; 2 Timothy 3:16-17)
- Waiting for an inner voice turns silence into false obedience

Discussion Prompts

- In prison, Paul asked for a door rather than a key. What would you have asked for?
- When did you last pray for an opportunity to speak to one specific person about Christ?

- If God gives opportunity rather than promptings, what happens to the reason you stayed quiet last time?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul says he wants to “declare” the mystery of Christ “as I ought to speak” (vv. 3–4). What does this suggest about the responsibility and seriousness of sharing the gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Take “mystery” first, because the class will hear the English word wrongly. In Scripture a mystery is not a puzzle to be solved or a secret kept from us. It is something once hidden and now revealed. Paul defined it earlier in this very letter: “the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints,” which is “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:26-27). So the thing Paul wants a door for is not an obscure doctrine. It is the open secret of God, and the only reason anyone knows it is that God said it out loud.

Then let the class weigh “as I ought to speak.” The word is a word of obligation, of what is owed, of debt. Paul uses that language of himself constantly: “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians” (Romans 1:14), and “woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:16). He does not describe evangelism as an opportunity he graciously takes. He describes it as a bill he owes. Ask your class what changes if the gospel is something we owe people rather than something we offer them when we feel up to it.

Notice what verse 4 asks for, because it is humbling and specific: “that I may make it clear.” Not that he may be eloquent, or persuasive, or well received. Clear. Paul, who wrote Romans, asked for prayer that he would be understandable. That should do two things in your class. It should embarrass our excuses, since our concern is usually how we will come across rather than whether the man will understand. And it should relieve the person in the room who is convinced he is not clever enough. Clarity is the assignment, and clarity is available to anyone who knows the message.

Guard the boundary, kindly. This seriousness must not become the idea that the outcome rests on our performance, or that a soul is lost because we phrased it badly. God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6-7), and the power is in the gospel itself, not in the skill of the man carrying it (Romans 1:16). Nor does the weight of the obligation license a heavy hand; Paul is about to say “gracious, seasoned with salt” two verses later. Take the responsibility seriously without taking God’s part of it onto yourself.

Land it where your class lives. Ask them to imagine that a friend asked, right now, why they are a Christian, and to answer in under a minute, out loud. Most people cannot, and the reason is not that they do not believe. It is that they have never once said it. Then ask the question Paul’s

phrase presses: if this is owed, who are you behind on? That is an uncomfortable sentence, and it is exactly what “as I ought to speak” means.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A biblical mystery is not a puzzle but something once hidden and now revealed (Colossians 1:26-27)
- “Ought” is the language of obligation and debt, not of optional opportunity (Romans 1:14; 1 Corinthians 9:16)
- Paul asked for prayer that he would be clear, not eloquent or persuasive (Colossians 4:4)
- Clarity is the assignment, and it is available to anyone who knows the message
- The power is in the gospel itself, not in the skill of the man carrying it (Romans 1:16)
- God gives the growth; we do not carry His part of the work (1 Corinthians 3:6-7)
- Seriousness about the obligation never licenses a heavy hand (Colossians 4:6)

Discussion Prompts

- Could you say why you are a Christian, out loud, in under a minute? Try it.
- What changes if the gospel is something you owe people rather than something you offer when you feel ready?
- Paul asked to be clear rather than impressive. Which of those do you actually want to be?

Question 5

Student Question:

In verse 5, Paul tells believers to “walk in wisdom toward outsiders.” What does wise conduct toward unbelievers look like, and why does it matter for the church’s witness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice that Paul says walk before he says speak, and the order is deliberate. Verse 5 is conduct; verse 6 is words. He knows that a man’s life either earns him a hearing or costs him one, and that no amount of gracious speech repairs a life that contradicts it. Help your class see the sequence. We tend to think of evangelism as beginning when we open our mouths. Paul starts it several steps earlier, with how we behave toward people who want nothing to do with us.

Then dwell on “outsiders,” because the word is doing something. Paul uses it plainly: those outside the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 5:12-13). The class should feel the tension in it. The word draws a real line, and Scripture does draw that line, since a person is either in Christ or he is not. But notice what Paul does with the line. He does not use it to dismiss the people on the other side. He uses it to tell us how carefully to walk toward them. The category exists to govern our behavior, not to license our contempt.

Get concrete about what wisdom looks like, because the question asks for it and abstractions will not help your class on Monday. Wise conduct toward outsiders looks like paying your debts and doing your work well, since Paul told this congregation that whatever they do is done for the Lord (Colossians 3:23). It looks like not being strange about things that do not matter, and not bending on things that do. It looks like knowing when a man is asking a real question and when he is picking a fight. It looks like being someone a neighbor would call in an emergency. Peter said it this way: keep your conduct honorable, so that when they speak against you they may see your good deeds and glorify God (1 Peter 2:12).

Now guard both edges, because your class will fall off one of them. On one side, wisdom is not worldliness, and it is not the calculation that we will win people by being indistinguishable from them. There is nothing attractive about a Christian with nothing different to offer. On the other side, wisdom is not withdrawal. Some of us have mistaken having no non-Christian friends for holiness. Jesus was called a friend of sinners by people who meant it as an insult (Luke 7:34), and He did not correct them. A church that cannot be reached by outsiders has not protected its witness; it has ended it.

Land it personally, and be specific. Ask each person to name one person outside Christ whom they actually know, by name, well enough that the person would take their call. Not a coworker they nod at. If nobody comes to mind, that is the lesson, and it is worth a silence. Then ask what your walk has already told that person about Christ, before you ever said a word. They have been watching longer than you think.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul commands the walk before the speech; conduct earns or costs a hearing (Colossians 4:5-6)
- “Outsiders” names those outside the body of Christ; the line is real (1 Corinthians 5:12-13)
- The category governs our behavior toward them, and never licenses contempt
- Wise conduct is concrete: honest work, paid debts, no strangeness about trifles, no bending on essentials (Colossians 3:23)
- Honorable conduct is what causes outsiders to glorify God (1 Peter 2:12)
- Wisdom is not worldliness; a Christian indistinguishable from the world offers nothing
- Wisdom is not withdrawal; Jesus was called a friend of sinners and did not deny it (Luke 7:34)

Discussion Prompts

- Name one person outside Christ who knows you well enough to take your call.
- What has your walk already told that person about Christ, before you said anything?
- Which is your temptation: blending in, or pulling away?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul says to make “the best use of the time” (v. 5). How does this instruction relate to the urgency of the gospel and the brevity of opportunities?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Give the class the literal sense, because it is more vivid than the translation. The phrase means buying up the time, redeeming it, purchasing the opportunity like a merchant who sees something at a price that will not last. Paul says the same thing to the Ephesians, “making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16). The image is of a man in a market who knows the stall is closing. Time in this verse is not a resource we possess. It is a chance we can miss.

Then notice where the phrase sits, because context defines it. It is attached to walking in wisdom toward outsiders. This is not a general exhortation about productivity or time management, and your class will hear it that way unless you stop them. Paul is talking about a window with a person’s name on it. The opportunity being bought is a conversation, and the reason it must be bought now is that it will not necessarily be there later.

Draw out the urgency honestly, without theatrics. People move away. People get sick. People get harder. The neighbor who was asking questions after his father died is not asking six months later, because the door quietly closed while we were deciding whether to say something. Every person in your class has a story like that, and most of them have never told it to anyone. Ask, and be prepared to wait. This is not manipulation. It is the actual shape of human life, and Paul is simply refusing to pretend otherwise.

Guard the boundary, because urgency curdles easily. Making the best use of the time does not mean forcing a conversation that is not ready, or treating a person as a project to be closed. Paul has just said walk in wisdom, and he is about to say gracious and seasoned with salt. Urgency without wisdom produces the kind of Christian who ambushes people, and that man closes more doors than he opens. And do not let this drift into date-setting or alarm about the end. Jesus said no one knows the day or the hour (Matthew 24:36). The urgency here is about the brevity of a man’s opportunity, not a calculation about the calendar.

Bring it home in one question. Ask the class who they have been meaning to talk to. Everyone has a name. It has usually been the same name for years, and the reason it is still pending is never that the moment was wrong; it is that no moment ever felt right. Then ask what it would cost to buy that opportunity this month. That is what the verb means, and it means it about a person, not a schedule.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The phrase means buying up or redeeming the opportunity, like a merchant at a closing stall (Ephesians 5:16)

- The context is outsiders, so the time being bought is a conversation, not a calendar
- Opportunities genuinely close; a door open today may not be open later
- Urgency without wisdom produces ambushes and closes more doors than it opens (Colossians 4:5-6)
- People are not projects to be closed
- This is not about date-setting or alarm; no one knows the day or the hour (Matthew 24:36)
- The brevity in view is the brevity of a man's opportunity

Discussion Prompts

- Who have you been meaning to talk to? How long has it been the same name?
- Has a door ever closed while you were deciding whether to speak?
- What would it cost you to buy that opportunity this month?

Question 7

Student Question:

Verse 6 instructs that speech should “always be gracious, seasoned with salt.” What does “seasoned with salt” mean, and how does it differ from speech that is merely polite?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Read the verse whole, because the two halves are usually separated and they were written together. “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” Gracious first. The word is *charis*, the word for grace itself, and it carries the sense of speech that is winsome, that gives something to the hearer, that is a gift rather than a transaction. Paul had already told this congregation to put away obscene talk and slander (Colossians 3:8). Now he says what goes in its place, and it is not merely inoffensive speech. It is speech that hands the hearer something.

Then take the salt, because that is where the question presses. Salt in the ancient world did two things: it preserved, and it gave flavor. Jesus used it of His disciples and warned about the salt that loses its taste and is good for nothing (Matthew 5:13), and He said, “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” (Mark 9:50). Salted speech is speech with content, with bite, with something in it worth tasting. It is not bland. Ask your class to name the last conversation they had about anything that mattered, and whether the Christians in it said anything with salt in it.

Now draw the contrast the question asks for, and be honest, because this is the sentence the class needs. Politeness is the absence of offense. Salt is the presence of something. Politeness is what you offer a stranger so that the encounter costs you nothing. Salted speech risks something, because it says a real thing. A great deal of what passes for Christian graciousness is actually just not wanting to be disliked, and Paul is not describing that at all. The saltless Christian is not gentle. He is simply absent from the conversation.

Guard the other edge just as hard, because your class has that man too. Notice that Paul says gracious and salted, and he says it in one breath. Salt without grace is not boldness; it is just abrasion, and the man who prides himself on telling it like it is has taken half a verse. Notice also that salt seasons food. It is not the meal, and nobody eats a spoonful of it. The truth is the meal, and salt is what makes it possible to swallow. Paul told the Ephesians to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), and Peter said to make a defense with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15-16). Both halves, always.

Land it on the room with the plainest test you can give. After a conversation with you about Christ, does the other person want to keep talking, and did you actually say anything? Most of us fail one of those two, and we usually fail the same one every time. Ask the class which one is theirs, and then ask what a salted, gracious sentence would have sounded like in the last conversation they let go by.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- “Gracious” is the word for grace; speech that gives something to the hearer (Colossians 4:6; 3:8)
- Salt both preserves and flavors; salted speech has content and bite (Matthew 5:13; Mark 9:50)
- Politeness is the absence of offense; salt is the presence of something worth tasting
- Much that passes for graciousness is simply not wanting to be disliked
- Salt without grace is abrasion, not boldness; Paul commands both in one breath
- Salt seasons the meal but is not the meal; truth is spoken in love (Ephesians 4:15)
- A defense is to be made with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15-16)

Discussion Prompts

- After a conversation with you about Christ, does the person want to keep talking? Did you say anything?
- Which is your failure: no salt, or no grace?
- What would a gracious, salted sentence have sounded like in the last conversation you let go by?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul adds that believers should “know how you ought to answer each person” (v. 6). Why is personal and thoughtful engagement more effective than a one-size-fits-all approach to sharing the gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Fasten the class on two words: “each person.” Not people. Not the lost. Each person. Paul could have written a formula, and he had every qualification to do it, and instead he tells them to know how to answer the man in front of them. That single phrase quietly dismantles the way most of us have been taught to think about evangelism, which is as a script to deliver rather than a person to know. Ask your class why God would refuse to give us a formula when a formula would obviously be easier.

Then let the class watch Paul do it, because he is the best example in Scripture. In the synagogue at Antioch he reasons from the Law and the Prophets to people who already had them (Acts 13:16-41). At Lystra, among pagan farmers, he starts with rain and crops and gladness (Acts 14:15-17). At Athens, among philosophers, he starts with an altar they had built themselves and quotes their own poets (Acts 17:22-31). Same gospel, three completely different doors. He said it plainly: “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22). The message never moved. The approach always did.

Draw out why this requires knowing a person. You cannot know how to answer a man you have not listened to. One person needs an argument, and another has heard every argument and needs someone to sit with him. One is angry at the church for a reason, and one is angry at his father and has never separated the two. One has a question, and one has a wound wearing a question’s clothes. A script cannot tell those apart, and it will confidently answer the wrong one. This is why verse 6 comes after verse 5, and why walking in wisdom toward outsiders had to come first.

Guard the boundary carefully, because flexibility has a limit and your class should know exactly where it is. Adapting the approach is not adjusting the message. Paul became all things to all men, and Paul also said that if anyone preaches a different gospel, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:8-9). Knowing how to answer each person never means telling a man what he wants to hear, softening what God requires, or leaving out repentance and baptism because he will not like them. The door is shaped to the man. What comes through it is the same every time.

Bring it home concretely. Take the person your class named earlier and ask a better question about him than we usually ask: what does he actually think, and how do you know? Most of us have prepared an answer for a question our friend has never asked. Then ask the one that matters. When did you last listen to him long enough to find out what he would need to hear? That listening is not a preliminary to the work. Paul says it is the work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- “Each person” is individual; God gives no script, though a script would be easier (Colossians 4:6)
- Paul adapted his approach at Antioch, Lystra, and Athens (Acts 13:16-41; 14:15-17; 17:22-31)

- He became all things to all people to save some, without changing the message (1 Corinthians 9:22)
- You cannot know how to answer a man you have not listened to
- A script cannot tell a genuine question from a wound wearing a question's clothes
- Adapting the approach is never adjusting the message; another gospel is accursed (Galatians 1:8-9)
- It never means omitting repentance and baptism because a man will dislike them (Acts 2:38)

Discussion Prompts

- What does your friend actually think, and how do you know?
- When did you last listen to someone long enough to learn what he would need to hear?
- Where is the line between adapting your approach and softening the message?

Question 9

Student Question:

How does this passage guard against two extremes: being silent about faith out of fear, and being aggressive or ungracious in how we share truth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let the class see that Paul builds the guard into a single sentence, which is why it works. "Gracious, seasoned with salt." Take out the salt and you have a Christian who never offends anyone and never says anything. Take out the grace and you have a Christian who says everything and is heard by no one. Both men can quote half of verse 6, and both are disobeying it. That is worth saying out loud, because your class contains both, and each one thinks the other is the problem.

Then be honest about the timid man, because he is usually the majority in the room and he has good manners as cover. His silence is rarely a conviction. It is fear dressed as respect, and he has told himself he does not want to push, when the truth is that he does not want to be thought of a certain way. Paul, in chains, wanted a door. Most of us have doors and want a wall. Peter said to honor Christ as holy in your hearts, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks (1 Peter 3:15), and "always prepared" is not a description of most of us. Say that kindly. Shame will not fix it, but neither will pretending.

Then be equally honest about the abrasive man, and do not let the class enjoy this part more than the last. He believes his edge is courage. Usually it is temperament, and he has found a verse to bless it. He wins arguments and loses people, and then reads the loss as persecution, which Peter warned about in the previous lesson when he listed the meddler next to the thief (1 Peter 4:15). Ask the class the test: does the person leave more interested in Christ, or just more aware of your opinion? That question has ended a lot of self-deception.

Now show the class why the passage produces neither man, because the answer is in the structure rather than in a balance of temperaments. This is not a call to find a comfortable middle. Look at what precedes verse 6: prayer that is steadfast, watchful, and thankful; a request for an open door; a walk of wisdom; attention to time and to each person. The Christian who is actually praying for a door is not timid, because he asked for this. And the Christian who is actually walking in wisdom toward a person he knows is not abrasive, because you do not ambush someone whose name you have been praying. Prayer and knowledge, not moderation, are what cure both.

Land it by making each person choose. Ask them which extreme is theirs, and do not let them answer “a bit of both,” because it is almost never true. Nearly everyone knows. Then ask the follow-up that matters: what would obedience look like this week for your particular failure? For most of the room that is one sentence said to one person. For a few it is one sentence not said, and a question asked instead.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Both extremes can quote half of verse 6; both are disobeying it (Colossians 4:6)
- Timid silence is usually fear dressed as respect, not conviction
- We are to be always prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks (1 Peter 3:15)
- Abrasiveness is often temperament that has found a verse to bless it
- Friction we cause ourselves is not persecution; the meddler is listed with the thief (1 Peter 4:15)
- The test: does the person leave more interested in Christ, or only more aware of your opinion?
- The cure is prayer and knowing the person, not finding a moderate middle (Colossians 4:2-5)

Discussion Prompts

- Which extreme is yours? Do not answer “a bit of both.”
- What would obedience look like this week for your particular failure?
- Why does praying for a specific person make it nearly impossible to ambush him?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking at Colossians 4:2-6 as a whole, how does this passage shape the way believers carry the gospel into everyday life with both courage and kindness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Have the class assemble it, because the order is the argument. Continue steadfastly in prayer, watchful and thankful. Pray for an open door for the word. Declare it clearly, as I ought. Walk in wisdom toward outsiders. Buy up the time. Let your speech be gracious, seasoned with salt, so

that you know how to answer each person. Notice the movement: from prayer, to opportunity, to obligation, to conduct, to urgency, to words. Speech comes last. Paul buries the mouth at the end of a chain, and everything before it is what makes the mouth trustworthy.

Then say what the passage quietly refuses to be, because your class came expecting it. This is not a technique. There is no method here, no four steps, no opening line. Paul gives a praying, watching, grateful, wise, alert, gracious, salted person, and then trusts that person in a conversation. That is God's strategy for reaching the world, and it is either wonderful news or terrible news depending on how you hear it. It means you cannot outsource this. It also means you do not have to be clever.

Draw out where the courage actually comes from, since the question names it. Not from personality, and not from working up nerve, which is why most resolutions to be bolder die by Wednesday. The courage in this passage comes from having asked. The man who has prayed for a door has already decided what he will do when it opens; he settled it on his knees, before the moment arrived, when it cost nothing. Courage in a conversation is almost always a decision that was made earlier somewhere quiet.

Then draw out where the kindness comes from, because it has the same root. It comes from watchfulness and from actually knowing the man. Contempt is a form of ignorance; it is very hard to sneer at someone whose story you know and whose name you have carried into prayer. That is why Paul can command graciousness without it becoming a mood we manufacture. He is not asking the class to feel warmer. He is describing what happens to a person who prays for someone and pays attention to them.

End with the mirror, and keep it specific. First: name the person, not a category. Second: what is the door you are asking God for, and have you actually asked? And third, the one this whole lesson has been aiming at from verse 2: what will you say, and when? Paul wrote all of this from a prison cell, to people he had never met, about neighbors he would never see. He assumed they would do something about it, and he was writing to a church that looked a great deal like yours.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The passage moves from prayer, to opportunity, to obligation, to conduct, to urgency, to words
- Speech comes last; everything before it is what makes the mouth trustworthy (Colossians 4:2-6)
- Paul gives no technique or method; he describes a kind of person and trusts him in a conversation
- Courage comes from having already asked, not from working up nerve
- A decision made in prayer beforehand is what produces boldness in the moment
- Kindness grows from watchfulness and from actually knowing the person
- Contempt is a form of ignorance and rarely survives praying for someone by name

Discussion Prompts

- Name the person, not a category. What is the door you are asking God for?
- What will you say, and when?
- Why does courage in a conversation usually depend on a decision made earlier, somewhere quiet?