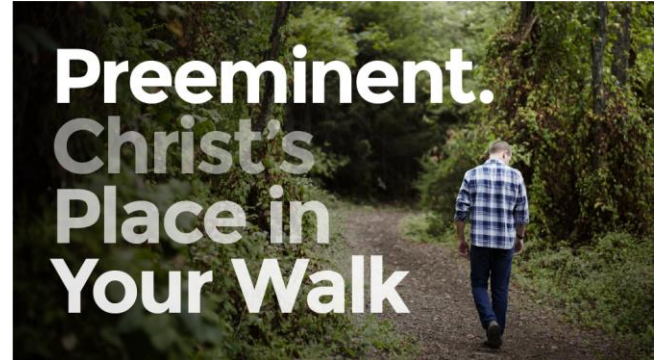




VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Streamline Your Life

Preeminent. Christ's Place in Your Walk | Part 17
Chad Reeser | April 26, 2015 | Colossians 4:2-6



My wife is very interested in simplification. I don't know how many of you are into reading blogs on ways to simplify your home décor. She was talking to me this week about how she wants to simplify her wardrobe. This means eliminating costs, so I am all for that. As long as it doesn't touch my books and some of my stuff, I'm all for simplification.

The word "streamline" is a common word on these simplification blogs. You have probably come across the phrases like "streamlining your life," "streamlining your decorations," or "streamlining your wardrobe." Well, the definition of streamlining is:

Improving the efficiency of something through simplification.

In terms of the Christian life, simplifying or streamlining is not the easiest thing in the world.

I laugh to myself when I think about the end of my time in seminary. The professors would go through all the things you needed to read to stay on top of your studies during their final class. Each professor had his or her regimen, "Thirty minutes of this. Thirty minutes of that." By the end of the day, I remember calling my wife saying, "Julie, I need 14 hours a day, seven days a week to just maintain my seminary education, let alone minister when I actually get there."

In our lives, a wave of information constantly bombards us. The Internet is great. The information age provides us with a lot of tools and resources. The only problem is that the wave of information is hard to sift through. How do you select what you're actually going to read? There are materials on educating your children. You can get stuck on that. There are materials on your marriage. It is difficult to process. It's almost like being hit by a tsunami.

Then, at the end of the day when we lay our heads down on the pillow, we think to ourselves, "You know, my retirement portfolio looks good. I went through those ten steps. Now I know how to deal with a hyperactive eight-year-old boy, but I forgot to do my devotions this morning. I didn't even really pray today. Oh well...." We get swept away by this wave of information.

How can a Christian reasonably streamline his or her life? Thankfully, we have a great example in the Apostle Paul, right? He wrote Colossians sometime around 62 AD. Through Paul's example and the way he wrote, we have seen that he was an excellent streamliner. What do I mean by that? There are a couple of things that I want to look at today.

Just to review where we've come from, Paul was an ideal streamliner in that:

1. He knew that Christ was supreme. Christ was preeminent for Paul. We saw this in chapter one in Paul's opening hymn. One of the reasons that Christ is preeminent is because He reconciles lost sinners to the Father through His death on the cross. Colossians 1:19-20 says, "*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*" So Christ is preeminent. Christ is supreme because He reconciles lost sinners to God. Paul was about Christ and His preeminence.

2. He strove to advance the message of Christ's preeminence and to present others mature in Christ. Colossians 1:27-28, *"To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ."*

What was Paul about? He streamlined life around Christ's preeminence, the proclamation of the gospel and presenting people mature in Christ. Paul is a great example for us to imitate. What does this look like day-to-day? How does imitating Paul look in our daily lives? I think we will see how to streamline our day-to-day lives in Colossians 4:2-6.

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.

The first way we streamline our lives has to do with spiritual discipline.

1. Streamline so that you can pray for effective Gospel communication

The first command that we see is *"continue steadfastly..."* Sometimes when studying Scripture, it is good to do a word study with a concordance so that you can understand the nuance behind the word. This word, "continue steadfastly," conveys the idea that "there are a lot of options out there in life, but you need to be about this."

A great example of this is found in Acts 6. In the book of Acts, the church has begun to grow, Jesus has ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit has been given and new believers are coming to Christ all the time. The Apostles are dealing with the problem of what to do with all of the new believers. In chapter six, a problem comes up. There are Greek-speaking Jews who aren't receiving any of the food that is being distributed among the Christian community. In Acts 6:2 we see how the Apostles dealt with this problem:

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

The word, "devote," in that text is the same word that we see in Colossians 4:2 translated, "continue steadfastly..." The Apostles were saying, "Guess what? There's a problem that needs to be addressed and so we will appoint others to do it. However, we need to be selective in our lives about what we do with our time." What is essential? In this case, even though it was good to serve food, the Apostles decided to devote themselves to prayer.

In Colossians 4:2, Paul is saying, "Streamline your prayer life for this." What should they devote themselves to? Effective gospel communication. The first part of our prayer is:

The open door for the Gospel | 4:3b

We see this in the second clause in Colossians 4:3: *"...that God may open to us a door for the word..."* Some interpreters think this means that Paul is praying for release from prison. They believe Paul is literally praying for an open door for himself. I think Paul usually shoots pretty straight. If that was his intention, he would have asked for that. No. What does he ask them to pray steadfastly and devote themselves to in their prayers? An open door for the gospel. That was his concern. The word, "word," in your text refers to the gospel.

Paul's life was complex. In some ways, he stuck to the essentials. He wanted his disciples to stick to the essentials as well. This included praying for an open door for the gospel. If Paul was in prison today, we would—with the best of intentions—try to give him materials on Christian liberties. We would give him a stack of books on fighting for his freedom and the liberty to proclaim the gospel in the world. We might look at his wrists and ankles and think, "My goodness, the corrosion on the chains is affecting your wrists. I have the perfect cream for you to put on them." We might come to Paul and say, "You're looking kind of scraggly Paul. I have a book on health and diet tips for when you're low on nutrition. Or maybe you're a little anxious. I have some breathing tips that I picked up from a Christian publisher." There's nothing inherently wrong with any of those things. Because Paul was so driven, because he streamlined his life so well, he would look at us with a confused scowl if we said these things to him.

When do we make time to pray for an open door for the gospel? This wave of information can cause us to get lost and forget about the essentials. I think if Paul was alive today, he would eliminate 99.9% of the information available to him. Why? He was about the preeminence of Christ, the proclamation of the gospel and presenting his disciples mature in Christ. Here he urges the Colossians to be about the open door for the gospel.

As a missionary in Spain, one of the crazy things about our little church is that I put on my church health hat. We have been invited to become part of this church community and when prompted, I can point out a number of ways that our church needs to grow. However, a fascinating thing happens month to month in our little church of 40 people in Madrid. Individuals who are honestly seeking God walk in, sit in the back row and listen to those messages, authentically interested in what's being said. That is amazing in a place like Madrid, Spain. Why is that? Why do people in a secular, humanistic society where most people have no interest in spiritual things walk into our church? I think one of the main reasons for that has to do with a Tuesday night prayer meeting. A few people gather together and passionately pray, "God, would You open doors? Would You bring people to our church? Would You work by Your Holy Spirit in their hearts to be interested? Would there be an open door for the gospel message in their lives?" I'm so challenged by this little group in our church in Spain. The second part of our prayer is that:

Messengers share the gospel as they should | 4:4

This may seem like an obvious point, but it is important for Paul. Look at what he says in Colossians 4:3, "*At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare...*" Now, you declare with your mouth, right? "*...to declare the mystery of Christ.*" The mystery of Christ is something that was hidden in the past, but has now been revealed—particularly that Christ reconciles lost people to Himself through His death on the cross. For Paul, this includes Gentiles.

Let's look at the word "declare" and also the phrase in Colossians 4:4, "*That I may make it clear... (another term about communication) ...which is how I ought to speak.*" Declare, communicate, speak. Second Thessalonians 3:1, "*Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you.*" Then in Ephesians 6:18–19 Paul again uses language of communication, "*Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.*" I think one of the reasons that Paul so intensely used language of communication here was because of his intense dedication to maintaining the purity of the gospel message.

Why does Paul talk so much about the declaration of the Word? There are many distortions of the gospel in the world. St. Francis of Assisi, the twelfth century catholic mystic, supposedly said, "Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words." Now, this is bad theology. You can't preach something just with your life. I know what he's getting at. It's easy to be frustrated with hypocritical Christians who proclaim the gospel but who don't live it out. Matthew 5:16, "*In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*" Ultimately they come to the message of the gospel and believe it through communication. We back up our message with our lives, but we don't give the gospel message just with our lives, just with the way we act.

The gospel is something that needs to be declared. It needs to be communicated. If you ask Paul for a succinct statement of the gospel, he would repeat 1 Corinthians 3:3–4, "*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.*" Paul is urging the Colossians to pray that he would communicate this message clearly. Romans 10:14, "*How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*" Paul says, "Pray for me Colossians. I need an open door for the Word. Once I have that open door, pray that I can speak the gospel message clearly."

This passage first teaches us to streamline our lives. In particular, we must streamline our prayer lives for effective gospel communication. There are a few ways to apply this, but I'm going to address one in particular.

Think about your small group ministries. Village Bible Church does a great job with small groups across the four campuses. I'm sure that prayer requests come up during small group meetings. It can be tempting to focus our prayers on our cultural values. What does the American culture value? Safety, health, prosperity? If we're not careful, we can pray for only those things. These things aren't wrong in themselves, but I would encourage you to pray for an open door for the gospel. Are you praying for an open door? Are we praying, "God, open doors for the gospel on these campuses"?

My wife Julie and I covet your prayers. We need prayers that God would open doors in Spain. If God doesn't open a door for the gospel, we are just going to be spinning our wheels. Pray for the missionaries of this church, that God would bring an open door for the gospel. I would encourage you in your small groups to evaluate what you pray for—streamline your prayer lists around an open door for the gospel. We can get caught up in waves of information. Let's be more like Paul and say, "No. I'm not going to go to sleep before I pray for open doors for the gospel. I'm going to streamline my prayer life around the advance of the gospel."

2. Streamline so that your very life advances the Gospel

The second way to streamline your life is found in Colossians 4:4–6, *"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."* If you take a look at this, I think there is a specific order of events. What is that order?

"Toward" is a preposition implying movement or approach | 4:5

First, you walk. You live. You conduct yourself. This is the day-to-day living of your life. It means you are regularly and habitually walking "toward" something or someone. This preposition implies movement or an approach. Who are you walking toward? Who are you approaching? Outsiders. Outsiders are the people who don't share your worldview or your values. Why? They don't know the gospel. They haven't trusted Christ. Therefore, they are outside the family of faith.

The form is just as important as the content | 4:6

Then, when you're with them, when you're living life around them, make the best use of your time. How do you make the best use of your time? I think verse six is an explanation of how we use our time wisely. You must *"Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."*

I had a professor in seminary who used unfortunate metaphors to describe some evangelistic techniques within the American evangelical church. One metaphor he used was that of a foxhole. You're in the middle of a war, hunkered down in your foxhole with other believers and you have your gospel grenade. Perhaps you peek over the foxhole and see the unbelieving outsiders. You have your gospel grenade, pull the clip, chuck it and say, "Surrender to Jesus, you dirty rat!" Again, I think that goes a little far. This metaphor is a challenge.

We have a tendency to hunker down with people who are like us, who think like us and have the same worldview and values, occasionally chucking a gospel grenade here and there. The text says to live your life *toward* someone who doesn't share your values or your worldview. Didn't Jesus do that? He came to seek and save the lost. He had dinner with them. In the ancient world, this was incredibly radical. It displayed a close, intimate connection with someone. The point is to win the person, not the argument.

I remember one time working at UPS in the back of a trailer stacking boxes. It was probably 4:30 AM. We were all sweaty. A new guy came in—fresh blood. We were joking around about how hot it was in the trailer. Eventually I got into a conversation with him about who he was and why he was working at UPS. He asked me the same thing. I told him, "Well, I'm preparing to be a pastor. I'm studying at seminary." I'll never forget his response. "Oh! Preacher man! Oh, preacher man! Ha-ha."

My hunch at that moment was, "You know what, I think this guy has fallen victim to the foxhole-chuck-the-grenade mentality." I said to myself, "Well, I could do a number of things. I could fight that point of view. I could defend myself by saying, 'Being a pastor is an honorable profession.' Or I could try to win the argument." However, winning an argument is not what we're after. We want to win the person. You know what was the best thing I could have done—and by God's grace I did—in that moment? I shut my mouth. I let it roll off my back.

As the weeks went along, I moved toward him. I asked him questions about who he was, why he thought the way he did, why he had the worldview that he had. There was a reason and it did have to do with the chuck-the-grenade gospel. That affected him.

I like another illustration, which fits a bit better with our passage. Imagine taking someone out for a steak dinner. That person doesn't share your worldview or values, but over that dinner you share how phenomenal it is to know Christ as your Savior. "The good news of the gospel is that I was a messed up sinner and Christ came and reconciled me to the Father by dying on the cross for my sin. I care about you so much that I want to tell you about this over a steak dinner."

Salt is a flavoring agent | 4:6

The crucial idea here is that when we communicate, we must communicate in a way that appeals. We move toward an outsider. In that relationship, we make the most of our time by saying appealing things about the gospel truth.

In terms of application, there are a few questions that we must ask ourselves. I constantly need to ask myself these questions because I have a tendency to hunker down in my bunker:

- Do I actually streamline my life to move toward people? Take a look at your calendar over the last month. Have you intentionally taken steps to live in relationships toward outsiders? Paul tells us to do this. It is easy to spend time with people who look like you, act like you and think like you. It can be easy to get caught up in those relationships and then find yourself at the end of the month thinking, “Did I move toward outsiders this month?”
- Am I getting caught up in the chuck-the-grenade mentality of evangelism?

Streamline your life so that your prayers and your life advance the gospel.

One thing about streamlining in the information age is that some people do it better than others. They communicate messages effectively. There is a movie called “Supersize Me” which follows a guy for three months who ate nothing but McDonald’s. He wanted to see what it would do to him. It was fascinating. One of the scenes in the movie showed the man with a few posters with pictures on them. He asked kids on the playground to identify the people on the posters. On one poster was a picture of Jesus Christ. He showed that picture to a bunch of the kids. And these kids in 2004, in the United States of America, had no idea who Jesus Christ was. Then he had a picture of Ronald McDonald. Kids knew who Ronald McDonald was and what he was about—selling them juicy hamburgers with a free toy. McDonald’s pays their marketing people to market that message well. Their message revolves around the person Ronald McDonald.

What would it look like if Christians across the world streamlined their prayer lives so that outsiders knew who Jesus Christ is, what He came to do, what He is about and how He transforms lives for the glory of God? We have a message that we can market and we need to market it well. There’s a wave of information coming at us that tempts us to think about our retirement portfolio and overactive eight-year-olds. These things must be secondary to the gospel. By the power of the Spirit, be like Paul. Streamline your life so that you pray for open doors for the gospel. When you have those open doors, live in such a way that your life advances the gospel message in word and deed.