



Sunday, April 19, 2020

Clifford Baptist Church, Amherst, Virginia
Rev. Dr. Michael R. Fitzgerald, Senior Pastor

(Transcription from the Morning Service that was Streamed Live)

Sermon: “Prayer, Speech, and Presence” Scripture: Colossians 4, verses 2-6 (King James Version)

Jake Garland said this morning there are those worshipping with us from Amherst County, Nelson County, and across Virginia. I have a family member in Texas, and we have people in other nations listening to this broadcast today. We’re so thankful you are joining us as we come together to worship the Risen Lord Jesus Christ. Last Sunday was Easter but today is just as joyous, just as praise-filled, and has just as much potential to lead us to the throne of Jesus Christ as Easter Sunday did. We’re thankful to be together in God’s house.

Before I start my sermon, I want to thank Pam Giles and Roxanne Higgins for the lovely setting behind me for Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. It is so beautiful to see this area as we worship together. Also, I want to congratulate Pastor Tom Doss who finished his Doctorate Degree at Liberty University this past week. He defended his thesis and is now going to be a Doctor! We’re so glad he finished his dissertation and will be “Doctor Doss” as soon as that diploma is handed out.

After Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, we’re moving back to my sermon series called the “GE Power Company Study”—Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Today, we begin the last chapter of Colossians, Chapter 4. As we see the end of the tunnel in sight of this four-book study, the words of these books are from Paul written from a prison cell (he had been arrested as a preacher of the gospel). He wrote this book of Colossians to the church at Colosse, and I’m so thankful these words have touched, led me, and deepened me in the study God’s word and also gave me an understanding of my love for the Lord’s church. The Lord Jesus Christ is the one who established the church; it is the only institution on earth that Jesus Himself established upon His departure. So as we come to the church we know it is a godly expression—this is an arm of Jesus Christ reaching into the world. We pick up the baton where Jesus left so we might take His gospel into the world. The church is charged with that responsibility. I believe every Christian, every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ needs to be a part of the church that belongs to the Lord. Too often, the church is pictured as our weekly responsibility—as our routine, what we’re expected to do. Going to church is something we say we develop as a habit. In actuality as we see the church revealed in the word of God, the church is not what we do but rather the church is who we are! The church is who we become as a servant, a witness of the living Lord Jesus Christ in the world. The church is not an outward activity that can easily be set aside until something more entertaining comes along. The church is the body of Christ; it gets in our bloodstream; it’s who we are. It’s not just somewhere we attend but makes us part of the living body of the Lord Jesus Christ as we take His word into the world.

That's how Paul communicates his belief about the church in these four letters. He loved the church and passes that love on to us so that it becomes part of us; it's our identity in the Lord Jesus as we are collective believers. The church is our identity in life. As we move into Colossians Chapter 4, we're going to see how the love and life of Jesus fills us when we worship. The fellowship of church is important to us; in these days of a pandemic with restricted church attendance and the pews empty we come to realize how much we miss it. I've received so many calls and notes over these last four weeks of how many are missing the church—being here, being a part of the worship of Lord Jesus. My prayer is that when all of these restrictions are lifted, we'll see God's family return here in joy and that we're His church together.

As we step out of the church in worship, we take the gospel of Jesus into the world. We carry our worship and love out of this sanctuary or out of our media connection today, and we're charged by Jesus to spread His gospel into the world where it is desperately needed. Our very existence as the church is taking the sanctuary out in the world where people need to hear the gospel of the living Lord.

Paul is giving great words to the Colossian church and now, two thousand years later, he's giving these words to us about what it means to be the church and how we take our sanctuary, worship, belief, and understanding of the word of God out into the world where people need to hear that good news. There are three words today this sermon is based on; write them down on a slip of paper because they're the keys to taking the church from here to out there in the world. The focal points of the sermon are: **Prayer**, **Speech**, **Presence**. Those are the three topics Paul will cover in these verses today.

Our scripture is Paul's direction of taking the church to the world and is found in Colossians Chapter 4, verses 2-6.

“Continue in prayer and watch in the same with thanksgiving; withal praying also us that God would open unto us a door of utterance to speak the mystery of Christ for which I am also in bonds; that I may make it manifest as I ought to speak. Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.” May God add His blessing to these few words of this very beautiful inspired word of God that flowed from the pen of Paul so many years ago.

Let's go back to verse 2 as we see the three points of prayer, speech, and presence. “Continue in **prayer** and watch in the same with thanksgiving.” We must be a church based on the foundation of prayer. I believe we need to be a praying church when we corporately meet together, and I believe we need to be a church based on prayer in our own devotional separate lives in the Lord Jesus Christ. As we think about these words on **prayer**, let's talk about the overall gift of **speech**—the gift of God He gave to us in that we're able to have speech. When God created the world, He populated it with all kinds of animals; some have a voice and many that have no voice. I've never heard a fish say a word! The animals that have a voice are very limited in using their voice as a mode of communication. In general, most animals can make one or just very few sounds. Cows moo; frogs croak; donkeys bray which, Jake Garland, is one of the ugliest sounds in the world I've ever heard; horses whinny. You get my drift that animals are limited to very little speech. While animals were limited in their communication, God breathed His breath of life into Adam. When He made Adam a

living soul and made man and woman in His image, God gave us this articulate, amazing ability to speak—to put our thoughts into speech. Sadly, speech can be misused and abused. The Bible says it can be used for good or bad purposes. In the book of James, Chapter 3, it says speech can be so offensive it can be like a hellish fire or a poisonous animal. On the other hand, the Bible says our speech can be used for godly blessing, for lifting up the Lord Jesus Christ, for giving Him praise, honor, and glory. I believe we will use our gift of speech throughout eternity and will lift up His praise in heaven with all the thousands upon thousands of multitudes as we lift our voices in praise to the One who went to the cross and rose from the grave so we might have life everlasting. Speech is an amazing gift God gave to us but we have to choose how to use it.

Let me ask you this—what is the highest form, what is the greatest usage of our speech? What are the highest words we could ever speak? The pinnacle of speech is **prayer**—that is the greatest usage of our speech. God created humanity beginning with Adam and Eve that He might have fellowship with His creation. He gave us speech that we might communicate with Him as He communicates with us. Paul says we are to continue in the great speaking of prayer on a daily basis. The Greek language as you know is very expressive and what Paul says in Colossians 4:2 is “Continue in prayer.” In the English language we have one word for continue but there are ten words in the Greek language for the word continue. In its usage here, the Greek word is “proskartereo” which means pensive, strong, steadfast—moving forward with our speech to God. Continuing in prayer means we never quit, never give up, never falter or fail—that we’re going to continue on a daily basis to be men and women of prayer so that God will use us and bless us as we serve Him; that He’ll expand our ministry and increase our borders. I believe in this day of a pandemic God is answering the prayers of our church and is increasing our borders of ministry into the world—outside of Amherst County, outside of Virginia, outside of the United States. We push ahead and continue in that prayer asking for His blessing. We have this living communication with the God of the universe that He uses our lives. When we pray, it is improper to pray and think we’re going to convince God He’ll do what we’re asking Him. He’s not a “holy hell hop!” He does not respond to our convincing Him for what we want but rather our prayers, always in a godly way, are to surrender to what He wants. We surrender to His will. We ask Him how do You want me to walk in the footsteps of Jesus; how do You want me to fulfill the great commission; how do You want me to live my life so that You are constantly speaking through me to the world? We pray to surrender and to follow what He wills us to do.

I know we’re not largely in a sanctuary today but if we were gathered here at Clifford Baptist Church, could you tell me, without looking, where the fire extinguishers are in this sanctuary? There are a couple here and many of us don’t know where they are unless we take a good look. I believe if a fire broke out we would rush to the fire extinguishers and pick them up (they’re at the sides here, by the way). But would we be comfortable using them? If there was a dire emergency in the sanctuary of Clifford Baptist Church, I’m not sure I would know exactly what to do to operate that fire extinguisher because I’ve never worked with one before. Maybe it’s very easy to operate—pull a pin and the lever but I’m not sure. For many people—people of faith, perhaps—prayer is treated kind of like a fire extinguisher. It gets put in a corner until an emergency comes. Prayer is that mode of emergency speech—you go to the Lord God Almighty and

say I have this immediate need and need Your help. But you haven't based it on prayer you've been praying daily. It's an emergency means of getting attention and like a fire extinguisher, when you need it and never use it, you might not be comfortable when you have to use it. So the Bible teaches us we're to continue in prayer; it is to be daily; it's to develop a relationship and walk with Jesus Christ. He teaches us that prayer is most useful when we use it every day—when we continue and push ahead in seeking His guidance, will, and blessing day by day. We should use our speech in its highest form every day by going to the Lord in prayer asking for His next step, as we take His word into the world. It's the highest, most honorable usage of our speech as God gives it to us.

The second focal word from this passage of Colossians Chapter 4 is **speech**. Certainly prayer is a form of speech—talking with God, but this second point is speech to other people and relating the love of Christ to them. As we think of conversing with people, look at verses 3-4. “Withal praying also us that God would open unto us a door of utterance to speak the mystery of Christ for which I am also in bonds; that I may make it manifest as I ought to speak.” Paul is saying I desire for God to give me the opportunity to use my speech to tell others about the mystery of Christ. What is the mystery of Christ? I've preached on that before, and I'll remind you of what the Bible says: A Biblical mystery is the truth of God that He wants us to know but we'll only know it by God giving us that truth. Here is the mystery of Jesus Christ: He came to the world to save **all** people, not simply Jews, not only Gentiles but all people. He did not come to save a particular color or a particular nation but He came to save people of all color, all nations—the entirety of the world. The mystery of Jesus Christ is the truth of God that Jesus wants every person, whoever they are, to know Him as Lord and Savior. He came for us all; the gospel is for every living soul. When the doors of the church are open, the gospel of Jesus Christ is to be heard here. Anyone who comes seeking the word of Jesus should be welcome no matter who they are, where they're from, or what color, they're welcome to come seeking Jesus the Christ. The highest usage of our speech in human form in the human world is to teach, preach, and tell about the love of Jesus Christ—that is the primary use of our voice and speech in a human sense. We're to tell others about His love.

Paul expresses that desire in Colossians Chapter 4. Remember as he writes this, he is in a prison cell in Rome. He had been arrested as a preacher of the gospel, and the Roman Empire decided for them to squelch the gospel going into the world they were going to imprison the greatest missionary in the world at that time—Saint Paul. So he is sitting in his cell and thinking how are you going to get my speech out of this cell and into the world. He's expressing his desire to God to stretch his speech outside of his prison cell. He didn't care so much about his body being released but he said Lord I want to seek you and know how to release my voice from this prison cell. How can I, even in confinement, take the gospel of Jesus to the world? That's still our desire. We know God granted Paul's prayer—these letters that fill our New Testament take his voice into the world. His voice continues to ring under the inspiration of God Almighty two thousand years later. God indeed is using Paul to this day taking his speech out of the prison cell and putting it into the world so human beings might hear the glory of God. It's still our desire. Lord God, how can You use my voice to take Your love and Your desire to save people? How do we speak the name of Jesus to those who need Him?

There are thousands of people who don't visit a sanctuary, who never hear the word of God in a place like this, who are not connecting us by streaming today, and yet they also need to hear the love and invitation of Jesus Christ. All of us, as God's people, are commissioned to use our speech to tell others about the love of Christ. If we don't speak His name, who will?! Who would be commissioned to do it outside of us, we who are believers in the Lord Jesus? It's not somebody else's call, it's our call to take the gospel into the world that others can know Jesus.

This past January my wife, Gwen, and I were in Florida. Every day in the Orlando area there was an airplane flying and writing messages in the sky. It was so interesting and here were the messages: "Jesus loves you." "Prayer works." "Jesus saves." Obviously, these messages came from a believer or a church or some organization so I "Googled" until I found who was writing those messages in the sky over Orlando. It's an interesting story—centered on one man. His name is Jerry Stevens; he retired in 1998 as a crop duster. He was a believer and after he retired from that profession, he sat down and said OK God, what do I do now? How are You going to use me now that I'm retired? What can I do to get Your message into the world? God gave him the answer—that same year, 1998, Jerry fitted his little crop duster airplane with skywriting equipment and put words about Jesus 10,000 feet in the air. All of Disney World and all of Orlando could see these words of "Jesus saves", "prayer works", "Jesus loves you." Folks at Disney World could see these words while standing in line. It's amazing to me—this man had a vision from God to write Jesus' words using His speech in a very unusual way so others would know of His love, grace, and salvation. Nobody can stop Jerry Stevens—he uses his own money and equipment, and the sky is open for him to write on.

The question today is how can you and I use our speech, who we are and where we are, with the talents God gave us to tell the world about Jesus? Where are your opportunities to talk about Jesus? We're seeing doors of opportunity opening to us in these days of Clifford Baptist Church. I'm so grateful God uses me, nothing more than a sinner, to stand behind this pulpit with His holy word—a sinner handling the perfect word of God. It's amazing God gives me that privilege. I'm so thankful God can use my speech and my limited way to speak a good word about Jesus Christ. How does He want to use your speech? There are numerous ways for our voices to be heard day by day; we're learning that in church through the media connection we're developing. We know the Lord asks us to use our speech to lead someone else to Jesus Christ.

Here's the third focal word from this passage—**Presence**. Look at Colossians 4:5-6. "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man." We are to walk in and live in this world as the very **presence** of Jesus; we are to be a witness for Him. Look again at verse 5; underline it! "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without..." Without what? Outside the sanctuary. Walk in wisdom toward them living in the world not knowing Christ. So he's saying walk in wisdom to those outside the boundary of Christ, outside the love of Jesus. And look at what Paul says "...redeeming the time." Redeeming your time daily to live and walk in such a way that we're showing and witnessing to the world about Jesus Christ. We redeem every day. When I think about that word "redeem" it reminds me as a kid I would take empty Coca-Cola bottles back to the store and redeem so they could be filled. I think about redemption every day; we cash in

every 24-hour period to represent our Savior. That's the reason, believer, God gives us every single day. We have a lot of things we do every single day—be it working, shopping, catching up around the house, spending time with your family—whatever it is, but every day no matter what we're doing is a day of opportunity to be a representative and witness of His. We're called to walk intentionally in Christ, and we're called to represent Him every single day. Why is that important? Because when every 24-hour period ends that day will never come back again. There's no such thing as a "do over day." When those 24 hours end, that day is closed for all eternity. What we did that day is over and done, never to be repeated again. So we redeem every day realizing we have 24 hours of opportunity that we might live for Jesus Christ. Every day is a very important day. We're called to walk with Him, walk with intention, and to represent Him wherever we are. To quote from a sermon I preached some months ago: "We are Jesus with skin in this world." We're the ones who are living, walking representatives of Jesus Christ. I love the church; I love being with like-minded people in the church; I love worshipping with the church. But the church is not a monastery. The church is not a place where we separate ourselves from the world and sit in seclusion. Rather, we're called by God to go out and live in the world and be part of the world that we might witness for Jesus Christ there. We live in this world that we might walk in Him and represent the Savior who many people do not know. There's an old saying that we may be the only Bible a lost person reads; they've never opened the literal Bible but they see the words of Jesus living in you and me. They truly read the Bible's words looking into our life.

Believer, please do not underestimate your witness, do not underestimate your life and its impact in the kingdom of God. You are watched and you are followed by somebody. Every one of us has some little group that may be watching our lives—it may be one person picking up Biblical truths from you. I pray we will covenant together to serve our Lord well and wisely that our speech, words, actions, and walk will represent Jesus Christ well. Will be we perfect? No. But our desire is we will grow in representing Him well every single day.

Paul says our speech is to be seasoned with salt. What does that mean? As you know, salt is a good seasoning—sometimes we add a little too much! It's also a preservative—that our walk and talk in Christ should always be pointing to His goodness. Our speech should always be preserving His good character; it should always be pointed to the love which is available to every single person. We are to exemplify the character, love, and word of Jesus Christ in our lives. We season the world with the presence of Jesus. You know when salt is present in your food, and the world knows when Jesus is present there. People know Jesus lives in you, not because you're bragging, not because you're seeking a pat on the back but simply because He's reaching out of you to them. He's reaching out to them through your words and your walk. Always remember the Lord is using you every 24-hour period, believer, to reach somebody else.

We want to take the sanctuary today, wherever you are, with that media connection and take the love of Christ out into the world. We're a witness for Him in the way we have a daily devotion, in the way we bow our hearts and heads to Him using our speech to communicate with our Creator, our Savior, our God. Then, too, we will use our speech to every single person to show the character of Jesus, to invite them to know Him as Lord and Savior. In some way the Lord is

reaching through speech to other people, and He reaches through our presence and our walk so that others can see Jesus in me and in you as we live in this world. I pray today we'll redeem every day for Him today.

I'm so thankful to tell you about a representative of our congregation. She traveled to New York City yesterday; she's a nurse and therapist and she went into the hot spot of the pandemic to be a nurse in a hospital there. I'm so thankful there are those who are willing to lay aside their lifestyle and protection where we live to go into the heart of the danger zone to represent Jesus and to give the love of Christ through their medical knowledge. What a wonderful thing that is! Don't waste another 24 hour period of time. It will never be lived again. When midnight strikes tonight, this day is done. Our prayer together is that we'll do something today that will stand for eternity as we witness for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It's a day used well—through our prayer, our speech, and our walk in Christ.

Today if you're joining us and have never come to Jesus as Lord and Savior, I want to tell you how you can give this day eternal significance. Come to Jesus as your Lord, as your Savior. I'm not asking if you're good, moral, or know the Bible through and through, or if you go to church—I'm asking you to come to Jesus to bow before him and say "Lord Jesus, I am a sinner. The Bible assures us we're all sinners. We've stepped out of Your will, out of Your glory, out of Your desire for our lives. I'm a sinner." All of us are; I am. This is not my invitation; this is Jesus' invitation. He's saying to you this is the day you can come to Him and say "Lord Jesus, I believe You died on the cross for me, You shed Your blood, You laid down Your life literally and died on the cross to take my sin away. To take it away as far as the east is from the west. I also believe Lord You just didn't die on the cross; You weren't just laid in a tomb but You rose from the grave on the third day and You're a living Savior." I believe the Lord's hand is on your shoulder right now, friend. I believe He's touching you, encouraging you, and leading you to know Him as Lord and Savior. I'm so grateful he allows me to speak His invitation. He's with you wherever you are at this moment—sitting by a media computer connection, in your car, out in the world somewhere that you're hearing my voice, Jesus is with you right now asking you to allow Him to come into your heart, to save you, forgive you, be Your Lord and Savior and to keep you forever in His heavenly home. Today, you can give your heart to Him. Before this 24-hour period closes, you can make the most important decision of your life—to put your heart, your hands, your life in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. I invite you to Him. Just say simply "Yes Lord, I believe, I trust You, I do have faith, I will worship You, I will serve You, and I want to grow in You. The first step is giving You my life and asking You to save me." If you made that decision there are resources on our web site. There's a form you can fill out to let us know you made that decision. Get in touch with me, Pastor Clyde, or Pastor Jeffrey; we'd love to know you made that decision so we can reach out to you and show you how to reach out to Jesus Christ. God bless you as you say yes to Him. God bless you church, God bless you every friend of Clifford Baptist Church as we worship the mighty Savior through our prayers, our speech in the world, and our walk in Him.

Let's pray together: Our Father and Our God, thank you for these precious moments that we spent together worshipping You. I pray you will build up the body of Christ. We're in strange days going through this pandemic and our church attendance has been restricted. The pews are empty in this sanctuary today, Lord, but I thank You that truly the church is

full. I pray You will give us the guidance to increase our borders. Give us Your blessing, strength, and power that we can reach more people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It doesn't matter that people know our name; it doesn't matter that people know our church name. The important thing is they know the name of Jesus Christ—that they put their love and trust in You. I pray You will help us to continue in prayer daily, to walk in this world to represent You, to use our speech to show the love of Christ to others. Bless us as believers, bless as a church, Lord, to get the sanctuary out into the world. Father, for the one who needs You today, I pray he or she will pray this simple eternal prayer with me from their heart: "Dear Lord, thank You that You love me. You love me so much as a sinner that Jesus went to the cross and died there to take my sin away and to forgive me. I thank You, Lord, on the third day Jesus rose from the grave to be my living Savior. Lord, this morning, I give my heart, my life, my future to You asking You to be my Savior and my Lord. Bless me, Lord, as I walk with You."

Father, if one person prayed that prayer with me today we know his or her eternity has changed. Bless us as we continue to walk, speak, and pray in the name of Jesus Christ. It's in His name we pray together now. Amen.