

## MORE THAN A CONTENDER

Colossians 4:5-6

### INTRODUCTION

I want to start with a little movie quiz. I picked a few from among the 100 most memorable lines from movies and want to see if you can identify them. Many are easy. Here they are:

1. I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse.
2. Here's looking at you, kid.
3. What we've got here is failure to communicate.
4. There's no place like home.
5. Show me the money.
6. You can't handle the truth.
7. You're gonna need a bigger boat.
8. Badges? We ain't got no badges.
9. I'll be back.
10. One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas I don't know.
11. Go ahead, make my day.
12. There's no crying in baseball.
13. Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.
14. Hasta la vista, baby.
15. Don't call me "Shirley."
16. Wax on, wax off.
17. I feel the need, the need for speed.
18. I coulda been a contender.

The answers are:

1. The Godfather
2. Casablanca
3. Cool Hand Luke
4. The Wizard of Oz
5. Jerry McGuire
6. A Few Good Men
7. Jaws
8. The Treasure of the Sierra Madre

9. Terminator
10. Animal Crackers
11. Sudden Impact
12. A League of Their Own
13. Casablanca
14. Terminator 2
15. Airplane
16. Karate Kid
17. Top Gun
18. On The Waterfront

In that last one Marlon Brando played a washed up boxer. He had been good, one to be reckoned with, perhaps headed for championships, when his own brother convinced him to throw a fight so that the brother's Mafia friends could bet on it and make a bundle of money. That one decision ruined his life and from there on it was all downhill. He could have been a contender. He could have been somebody, but he wasted his chance.

What a somber tale. But it is a tale that I fear is repeated over and over. Millions of people are wasting their chance and will someday say, "I could have been a contender, but now I'm a bum." In other words, they will realize they have wasted their lives. No one wants that to happen. Today we will look at some inspired words that can save us from that somber fate as we consider Colossians 4:5-6.

### MAKE THE MOST OF IT

The English Standard Version offers the best translation of verse 5. It says, "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the time." That last phrase about making the most of the time is a key in these verses. Paul wrote something similar in Ephesians 5:15-16. "Be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil."

The Greek language had two words that could be translated to mean time. One was *chronos*, from which we get our word "chronology." It generally referred to the passing of time. The other word was *kairos*, and it usually referred to time as a distinct period. It could often be translated "season" or "era." It is the second word that Paul used here and in Ephesians 5. So in both passages Paul tells us we should make the most of the season that we are in. The point is that we do not have an unlimited resource of time available to us. In 1 Corinthians 7:31 Paul said, "...this world in its present form is passing away" and said we should live in light of that. In other words, everything in this

world is transitory. It is constantly changing, and it is not permanent. Most of all, our lives are not permanent.

My favorite season is summer. I love warm weather. I love the summer fruit and the long days of that season. So as the summer begins I get this almost frantic feeling that I want to make the most of it. I want to eat all the cherries and peaches and grapes I can when they are ripe and so delicious. And I want to enjoy the weather. I envision going to the beach and enjoying the water while it is relatively warm, barbecuing outside in the backyard, going out late in the day and enjoying the sunlight. I want to do all that.

In short, I want to squeeze every ounce of enjoyment out of the summer that I can. The sad thing is, I almost never do. Oh, we do some beach time and some barbecuing and I do eat the summer fruit, but mostly life kind of rolls along like normal in the summer. The same demands of life get in the way and most years I come to the end of the summer and think, “I should have enjoyed it more.” Paul is telling us to make sure that we don’t come to the end of the season of our lives, however long they may last, and say, “I should’ve done more with it.” The emphasis here is on the reality that it is a finite season and it will pass more quickly than we can imagine.

The word that is translated “make the most of” is an interesting one. It is the Greek word *exagorazo*. The root of it was the word *agora*, which referred to the marketplace. The verb form of it meant to “buy in the market.” Scholars say the form used here intensifies the word, so it means to intensely buy out of the market. Wait, you mean Paul is commanding us to do power shopping? My wife is thrilled. She’s saying, “I knew it was God’s will to shop till you drop.”

When you see an incredible bargain in the market you snatch it up before someone else gets it. Since I am not great at making decisions, my wife and I have had repeated instances of seeing a great deal on something we might wish to buy, but I hesitate. The next thing you know the deal is gone and we’ve missed it. Paul is saying that you see this great deal in the market about how to use the days you have available to you in this life. You should not just buy it, you should *intensely* buy it. You should grab it aggressively.

In the movie, “Dead Poets’ Society,” Robin Williams played Mr. Keating, a teacher at a private school. On the first day of school he takes his class into the hall and shows them pictures of graduates hanging on the wall. He says, “Believe it or not each and every one of us in this room one day will stop breathing, turn cold and die. Step forward and see these faces from the past. They were just like you are now. They believed they were

destined for great things. Their eyes were full of hope. But you see, gentlemen, these boys are fertilizing daffodils. If you listen real close you will hear them whisper their legacy to you. Lean in. What do you hear? Carpe. Carpe diem! Seize the day, boys! Make your lives extraordinary!”

The first thing we can glean from this passage is that there is a sense of **URGENCY** here. This is a season that is finite. Unfortunately, this season can be wasted. We can fritter it away. We need to remember that every minute, every hour that passes is one less minute or hour we have to grab the season.

Pastor and best-selling author Chuck Swindoll and his wife were on a flight from Portland back to Los Angeles. Shortly after takeoff the plane suddenly banked and turned back toward Portland. Something was wrong. Soon a flight attendant announced that they were returning to Portland where they would be on the ground for a short time before the flight to LA resumed. As they neared the airport the attendant made an announcement that got everyone’s attention. She said there had been a bomb threat to the aircraft; and when the plane was safely stopped on the ground, they would hear a chime, and when they heard that, they were to unbuckle seatbelts and exit the plane as quickly as possible. She said, “Go quickly to the nearest exit, you may have to use the slide, take nothing with you, just go.” He was amazed that when the plane stopped and the chime sounded, some people got up and began opening the storage compartments to retrieve bags and briefcases. The flight attendant practically shouted, “There could be a bomb on board. GET OFF THE AIRPLANE!” Clearly they did not perceive the urgency of the situation. Paul is giving us a “get off the airplane” kind of message. He is telling us it is urgent that we perceive that we’re in a short season and we need to seize it and use it in the best possible way. How does one do that?

## BE WISE TOWARD OUTSIDERS

This message to make the most of your life could easily be taken to mean that you need to get your bucket list out and make sure you do all the fun and exciting things listed on it. That was not what Paul was saying at all. He was saying something radical. It is our natural instinct to think that making the most of life has to do with getting stuff for ourselves. That thought is a dominating, seemingly almost irresistible urge. It is our default setting. Our minds revert to it with no conscious effort. The thought is that to make the most of life means have more fun, get more of the world’s good stuff for me, have exciting adventures for me, have more comfort and more pleasure for me, and the worst thing is to go through life and miss out on anything that I think could be good for me. Paul is saying that default human setting is exactly wrong. His startling, hard-to-accept claim is that if we pursue that seemingly irresistible idea, we will waste our lives.

Paul's shocking claim is that what makes the most of this brief season of life is making an impact on other people. It especially involves how we relate to "outsiders." Perhaps you saw pictures of the baseball game played in Baltimore after the riots there. For security reasons they had to play a game with no fans in attendance. The game counted, but it felt weird to everyone. What professional athlete has worked hard to compete with no one watching? What does that tell you? It tells you they want to impact people! We all do. In the end, no matter what we've done, if it is done in a vacuum and affects no one, it will seem pointless. We all know somewhere deep down that life is about impacting others.

A couple of months ago some friends visited us from out of town after they had been to a Christian conference in Orange County. One of the speakers at the conference was Aja Brown, the mayor of Compton. This woman is 32 years old, the youngest mayor ever of that city. She has degrees in urban planning from USC and was working to try to address the terrible state of that city as part of the city government. She tried to convince some people she thought highly of to run for mayor, but they refused. Finally, someone suggested she do it herself. She did, and won by a large margin. She began instituting a number of programs. One of them was startling. That city is dominated by gangs that have bitter and violent rivalries. She contacted the leaders of all the gangs and said, "You are leaders. People follow you. You've been using your leadership for destructive purposes. The result is our city is in bad shape. I challenge you to use your leadership for positive change. Help make our city better." She instituted meetings every other week with the gang leaders. Crime is significantly down in that city. She is making a difference. When you hear stories like that, doesn't it stir something in your soul? Don't you long to be a part of making a difference, especially when it comes to people entering the kingdom of God?

When we see the word "wise" we tend to think of being prudent. When we urge someone to be wise we often mean "be careful." If that were the case, then this would be telling us to be wary of outsiders and to be careful and prudent in our dealings with them. However, that is not at all what Paul meant. In fact, in some ways it's the opposite. Being wise in a biblical sense meant "mastering life," which we do by making good choices in God's eyes. So he is telling us to make good choices in regard to those who are outside the church.

Being wise toward outsiders begins with understanding that they are in fact outsiders. Have you ever watched what happens around the Academy Awards show? They have a red carpet that leads from the street to the entrance to the theater where the event is

held. The stars are dropped off by the limos and then they walk along the red carpet into the theater. They always have bleachers and crowds of people around the area. There are always lots of media people, but there are also lots of folks just trying to catch a glimpse of some of the glitterati. Those people can't go into the theater for the show because they aren't invited. They are left out, and only the insiders get to go into the theater. There are an awful lot of people who think to be invited in to rub shoulders with the celebrities would be the ultimate inclusion.

Somewhere inside us there is a strong desire to be the one who walks down the red carpet and is welcomed in. We want to be insiders. Who do you see yourself being? Do you see yourself as an outsider? I think a lot of Christians feel they are outsiders. They see themselves, increasingly, as marginalized in our culture. We are not welcome in the corridors of the movers and shakers of our society. And so we feel like we're powerless, left out, not invited in.

That was certainly the case with the first century Christians. They were viewed by many as just a weird, insignificant cult. By others they weren't even noticed. Some saw them as dangerous. It is helpful to remember Paul's description of the Christians in Corinth. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:26, "Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth." They were looked down on. They were nobodies. In verses 27-28 he called them the "foolish things of the world, the weak things, the lowly things, the despised things, the things that are not."

But look at the opening words of verse 27. "But God chose the foolish things of the world." God chose the lowly things, the despised ones. There is a huge message there. God chose you. You may not be noticed by the world. You may not be admired by the world. You may not be included by the world. You may even be rejected by the world. But you have been chosen by God. You have been included in his kingdom. You are an insider in the way that matters most in all of creation. And so many of those who are in the "in crowd" here on earth end up being outsiders. They have not been included, at least not yet. If you are a believer in Jesus you are the one who is dropped off by the limo and gets to walk the red carpet into the theater. The powerful, the influential, the notable of this world, for the most part, are outsiders.

If we don't grasp this it typically produces some unfortunate thinking. It causes us to be envious and to long to be accepted and included by the world. It causes us to scramble for power and be noticed in this world. It can create a "poor me" attitude and a victim mentality. In Romans 8:37 Paul said, "We are more than conquerors." How does that

mesh with a victim mentality? Obviously it doesn't match up at all. You cannot be a poor me victim while you are more than conquering.

We have been included by God. We have been included in the most important way one can ever be included. No matter what great things it may appear that the world has, in the end, they are outsiders and they know it. That's why there's so much restlessness, so little peace, so much hurt and despair in this world. They are all pursuing that default setting and to one degree or another they are confused, frustrated, even despairing because no matter how much they fulfill their quest, they somehow end up empty and feeling they've missed something.

### BEING WISE INVOLVES OUR ACTIONS

The Bible consistently says that we who are included as members of God's kingdom should live in such a way that we will have an impact on the world. We are to be a blessing to the world. When God called Abram and promised him descendants he said in Genesis 12:3, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you." The ultimate blessing, of course, was that the Messiah who brought life to all the world would be a descendant of Abram. But there is this sense that God's chosen people should be a blessing to the world.

In Matthew 5:13 Jesus said to his followers, "You are the salt of the earth." By that he didn't mean they were to be stuff that would make the water undrinkable or ruin the land so that it cannot grow crops. He meant you are to be this distinctive thing that has flavor. It is noticeable and it is good. I love popcorn and I love French fries, but I must tell you that they are way better with some salt on them. Without salt they're okay, but with salt they're delicious. Jesus said his followers are to be distinctive. There should be something different about them that is noticeable and flavorful. Not only is it noticeable, it is good. It is really good.

Jesus went on to emphasize that idea by giving another illustration. He said his followers are "the light of the world." Once again there are two obvious qualities of light. The first is that it is quite noticeable. I have a clock radio on the nightstand next to our bed. It has a digital readout that is lit, but it has three brightness settings. I keep it on the lowest setting. During the day it is basically invisible because it is so faint. But Laurie says she doesn't know how I can sleep with the thing near me. When I wake up in the middle of the night and it is totally dark in our room, or would be, that little tiny bit of light glows like a beacon. In the darkness there's no way you could miss it. It almost lights up the room. That's how powerful, how obvious light is. Even a little bit of light is glaringly obvious in the dark.

The point is that Jesus said his followers would be light; they would be obvious goodness in the darkness of this fallen world. In verse 16 Jesus went on to say, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” Be wise; let them see that you are noticeably different. Let them see that you are different in a good way.

So the question is how are we to be different? I have encountered people who focus on things like how we dress and whether women should wear makeup, even things like not dancing or in the past even playing cards. It’s helpful to remember that in the first century pretty much everyone, men and women, wore robes that covered them completely. Some were fancier than others, but I think we can feel safe in assuming that whatever Jesus was thinking the difference was, it wasn’t in the manner of dress.

Perhaps it will help us to think about how the world is. I know some very nice, really good people who are not believers in Jesus. So I don’t mean to slam and mischaracterize people who are outsiders. However, there are some obvious qualities that are common in the world. There is a lot in the Bible about how people are, but I will key in on three ideas this morning.

Ephesians 4:22 says the old self, the way human nature is without God’s work to change it, is “being corrupted by its deceitful desires.” That doesn’t mean they all have foul desires, it means their desires deceive them. Something inside all of us tells us if we can just get certain things in this world for ourselves then we will be happy and fulfilled. We chase those things and discover they are an illusion. The fulfillment doesn’t come. As we chase those things it messes up our lives. The whole world buys into the idea that getting things for self is what makes life full. James 3:13-18 contrasts the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of heaven. James says the wisdom that does not come from heaven has “bitter envy and selfish ambition.”

The world is totally focused on this life. It is self-oriented and, in fact, totally preoccupied with self. It is, as a result, competitive, unforgiving and vindictive and it is fearful. The world is totally lacking in peace, it knows almost nothing of grace, and it is woefully lacking in unconditional love. To be wise toward the outsiders is to be different and to let them see that difference. In his commentary on Colossians, Petr Pokomy said that in a secularized society, “Christian conduct itself takes on a missionary function again.” Pastor David Dykes said, “We turn the other cheek. We go the second mile. We pray for our enemies. We don’t *act* different, we *are* different.”



We are to let outsiders see that we live by grace and we give that same grace. David Garland in his commentary on Colossians wrote, “The experience of grace should make us gracious.” The truth is that you can measure how much a person comprehends the grace of Christ, how much of a grip that grace has on him, by how much grace that person gives to other people.

We are to be characterized not by an obsession with self and this world, driven by our personal desires, but we are driven by an obsession with God’s glory and grace. Primary in our thoughts is not this world, but the next. Because of that, we don’t seek to get for ourselves and protect ourselves and serve ourselves, but we are ever seeking to give, to bless, to love others and to serve them. We don’t mirror and reflect how people treat us, we don’t serve ourselves, we give and bless and serve others just as Jesus does with us. We resist the powerful pull to make life about self, and instead, make it about serving God by spending ourselves to love others.

We are to be noted for our peace. Confident of God’s love for us and of our eternal future, certain that he is sovereign and at work in our lives, we accept what happens in our lives and trust. We are hopeful about the future, not that we’ll get what we want, but that God will bring good out of everything that happens.

I love the story that pastor and author Vince Antonucci tells about his wife, Jen. Jen does a lot of things that let her light shine. She goes every week to a nursing home and visits with aged women, many of whom are suffering dementia and think she’s new every time she comes. Jen takes their daughter to swim lessons. Vince does that on occasion, but he always brings work to do during the lesson. Jen just goes to connect with people. One of them she got to know was another mom named Stephanie. After several weeks in which Jen had talked with Stephanie, had expressed interest in her and compassion for her and had listened to her, Stephanie told Jen about another child she had. The child had been three years old, but had died 11 months earlier of a genetic disorder. Jen listened, asked questions and cried with her. At the end of the hour Stephanie told her that she hadn’t really felt comfortable telling many people about her loss and the few that she told didn’t seem to care. Jen said, “They probably care. Maybe they just don’t know what to say.” Stephanie agreed, but then thanked Jen for showing her compassion. On the anniversary of the death of her child Jen bought her a gift and a card, first sitting forever at their kitchen table picking out each word of an encouraging note carefully. That is making the most of the season by acting wisely toward an outsider.

## BEING WISE INVOLVES OUR WORDS

Making most of the season will also mean using our words well. Paul says, “Let your conversation always be full of grace, seasoned with salt.” There’s that salt again. I love that picture of making sure that our speech is always full of grace. Every time we open our mouths grace should pour out. Note the use of the word “always.” Even if someone is unkind, or abrupt, or rude, or unfair with us, what we say should be full of grace.

Proverbs 18:21 says, “The tongue has the power of life and death.” When we open our mouths we have the chance to give life to people. We also have the chance to be like a nuclear bomb going off, devastating all around. The ancient Hebrews believed that to speak is to create something, a thing that has power. That’s why in Genesis 1 we see that God spoke and things came into being.

It is important for us to remember that every time we speak we create something that has power. You may not be aware of this, but your words create physical effects. Researchers have discovered that words can actually cause our pituitary glands to secrete hormones that have physical effects. Those effects can last for days or longer.

Proverbs 12:18 in the older NIV translation said, “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” The definition of reckless is “without thinking or caring about the consequences of an action.” To speak recklessly is to just fire those words out without caring or thinking how they are going to impact the hearers. That verse says they can pierce like a sword. I have a sword that my father brought back from Japan after he had been there as part of the occupation army. It is sharp. It can inflict horrific pain and damage on a body it is used against. That’s true of our words as well.

A long time ago I was facing one of the lower moments in my years of ministry. Laurie and I had been through the devastation of a child dying. It took us three years to fully recover from that. During that period our church was going through a down turn. Some of it was because we were in a difficult facility situation, some of it was because we were bumping against a barrier that churches often have a hard time breaking through, and some of it was because Laurie and I had just not had the energy to push through all of it. We were still recovering. I dealt with a number of discouraging things during that period. But I recall one day when a friend, a guy I counted on, came to my house to talk to me. He essentially said to me, “Maybe you’re just not cut out to lead a ministry. Maybe you should think about something else you could do.” That was nearly 30 years ago. My point here is that those words were powerful, so powerful that I still feel the

impact of them three decades later and I can still recall the sadness and discouragement that they engendered.

Paul says our words should be full of grace. Every time you open your mouth the people who hear should experience grace. That's not always easy, is it? Back when Toby was in high school I coached his high school hockey team. In their league we would encounter several of the same referees periodically. There was one that I loved. He was very good, but he also had a great sense of humor. He was a lot of fun and we were able to have a great time going back and forth with him. There was another one that wasn't so great. In fact, I groaned every time I saw he was assigned our game because I knew all the calls would go against us. We had never done anything to him, but he seemed to be biased against us anyway for some reason I never understood. It hit its peak in one game when our opponent had a guy who was a dirty player. Of greatest concern to me was that by this time it had become known that our strength was that we had an outstanding goalie that gave us a chance to win every game. This guy apparently decided the way to beat us was to abuse and harass our goalie, who happened to be my son. So he took every opportunity to whack at Toby with his stick, to bang into him, to crowd him, get in his way, even try to knock him down. Most of what he did was blatantly against the rules. I had been yelling at the ref at every offense, but he called no penalties. Finally during a break between periods I called the ref over to our bench and said, "That guy should have had 15 penalties called on him by now. You're letting him get away with murder out there. He's committed blatant goalie interference, slashing and roughing multiple times and you haven't called any of it. Are you going to enforce the rules or not?" He said, "You're goalie can protect himself." He started skating away and I yelled, "That's your job." It didn't make any difference. Seeing that he wasn't being penalized for his actions the player just got worse. Finally Toby had enough. The guy skated into him, hitting him, knocking him backward then stood right in front of him, shoving up against him. Toby put both hands on his stick and with all his strength blasted the guy in the back. He knocked him flat on his face. Immediately the ref blew his whistle. He called a penalty, two minutes on Toby for cross-checking. I was outraged. I'm going to confess to you today that though I didn't use any words that would be censored this morning, my speech was not full of grace. As soon as I had launched my tirade against that guy the thought hit me, "What if he comes to church Sunday and sees that I'm the pastor?" Oops.

Words that are full of grace express love, appreciation and affirmation. They bless and bring hope and healing. Such words bring honor to our God and they bring health to others. In Christ we have the hope and the peace that the world is dying for. We should speak in such a way that they hear that hope and peace. They hear that our God is good,

merciful and forgiving, and that he is great. We have the chance to bring life to people, not by condemning, not by pounding them, not even by preaching at them, but by letting them see and hear that grace; letting them know that hope and peace are possible in Christ. Wouldn't you like to be the kind of person that makes people glad when you show up because whatever you say they know it will bring a refreshing, it will bring hope? For that to happen I suggest we should all do three things:

**Filter.** Filter everything we say. Laurie is a coffee lover, sadly condemned to go through life married to a coffee hater. I see her making coffee every day. She puts a filter in the coffee pot before she puts the grounds in. The filter lets the good stuff flow through but stops the bitter grounds from falling into the coffee. That's what we need. Our filter should be to ask, "What will bring grace to these people? What will bless them? What will bring healing to their souls? What will bring honor to God? What will make them thirsty for Jesus?" Only those words that will do those things should come out of our mouths.

**Fill.** Fill your heart with Jesus. Jesus said in Matthew 12:34, "The mouth speaks what the heart is full of." He told his opponents they could never say anything good, because their hearts were bad. One morning this week I wanted to have grape juice at breakfast. So I took the orange juice bottle and poured the juice into my glass, and all of it was orange. No grape juice came out. Of course not. It was an orange juice bottle. What was in it was orange juice, so there was no way grape was going to come out. If what is in our hearts is Jesus, what do you suppose will come out when we speak? It will be Jesus. It will be full of his grace. It will not be ugly, selfish, cruel, impatient, angry, unkind or hurtful, ever. If all that is in there is Jesus then that's all that will come out.

**Fear.** In Matthew 12:36 Jesus said, "I tell you that everyone will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken." Every word we say is going to be judged. That suggests to me that we should be beyond careful whenever we open our mouth. Your words have power that can have an impact that will last for decades. When we speak out of selfishness, anger, impatience or envy it is like launching a nuclear bomb. The words can create immense devastation lasting for years. But we can also launch "blessing bombs" that can heal hurting souls, give hope, encourage, draw people to Christ, honor God and give life. Be a blessing bomb launcher every time you speak.