

“Fruitful Ministry”
Colossians 1:24-2:5
October 2, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

It is appropriate on this day in which we install our new assistant pastor that we should discuss the nature of fruitful ministry. In God’s good providence, the passage in Colossians that we have come to today is on that very topic. Paul felt the need to address this because a group of false teachers in Colossae were making some inroads into the church because they happened to be charming, persuasive speakers. Apparently, Paul and Epaphras, the pastor of this church, were not able to offer such an attractive ministry. I suppose it is a longstanding and universal human trait that we are tempted to judge the quality of something more by its packaging than by the contents of the package. Marketers have long known that and used it to advantage. But we dare not do that when it comes to the most important area of life, one that determines both our present and eternal welfare.

Before we delve into the specifics of this passage, I need to remind you that the biblical model of ministry is not a professional model. That is, ministry is something all of God’s people are called to pursue, not just those who might be paid to do so. So as we consider what Paul says here about the nature of true gospel ministry, be open to applying that to yourself. God calls you to ministry too. There are people you are uniquely suited to reach, and Paul here helps us understand how to be fruitful in doing so.

I. The Messenger

The first thing we see about the messenger of gospel ministry is that he or she is called to a life of suffering. Paul describes that in a puzzling way in verse 24, speaking of **“filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body.”** At first glance, this seems to contradict everything Paul has taught so far. He has been speaking of the fullness of Christ and his reconciling of all things, and now seems to take all that back. What does he mean by this? One thing we can say for sure is that Paul does not mean that there is anything lacking in the atoning sufferings of Christ. Jesus suffered and died to pay for our sins, and these atoning sufferings are completely sufficient, lacking nothing. So what is it that is lacking here? I believe it is Paul’s sufferings for the sake of Christ. I think what Paul is doing here is to use the language of these false teachers to his own advantage. They were constantly speaking of a second blessing after salvation that had nothing to do with Jesus, as if Jesus lacked something. Paul is using that very language here, to the effect that it is Paul’s suffering that is lacking. His point is that at the very

heart of ministry is a call to suffer for Jesus' sake. These false teachers didn't want to have anything to do with this kind of ministry, preferring instead to be in a position of power by their possession of some secret knowledge that they claimed to possess and would offer it to the Colossians. Paul says that ministry is not about power but about suffering. But this suffering draws us close to Jesus, and that's why Paul rejoiced in it. Do you remember what Jesus said to Paul when he appeared to him on the road to Damascus? **"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"** (Acts 9:4). Saul was persecuting Christians, but because of the closeness of Jesus to his people, to persecute Christians is to persecute Jesus. Now when Paul suffers, he is standing shoulder to shoulder to Jesus as a co-sufferer.

Ministry as suffering is a word that is desperately needed today. I come across too many who believe in ministry *until* suffering instead of ministry *as* suffering. That is, they will volunteer for ministry as long as it is satisfying and free of suffering. But the minute it begins to require some suffering, they quit. In doing so, they cut themselves off both from fruitful ministry and from closeness to Jesus.

The second quality Paul mentions of the messenger, the one who ministers, is hard work. **"For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me"** (1:29). The word he uses for struggling is a Greek word from which we get our word to agonize. But at the same time that Paul worked hard, he was firmly convinced that the power for the ministry came from God. The idea most people have of ministry is wrong. Most people think that ministry requires first that we get enough training so that we will always know what to do, and then we simply do what we've been trained to do, much like an airline pilot receives training and then applies the training that's been acquired. This kind of thinking then leads to the professionalization of ministry. "Since I've not received as much training as my pastor," this reasoning says, "I need to leave the real ministry up to him." The truth is that even those with the most training and experience, like the apostle Paul, still feel themselves inadequate, in need of God's power. What you get with lots of ministry experience isn't the kind of knowledge that allows you to minister as if on auto-pilot. Instead, you just get used to feeling inadequate, but pressing through in trust in God and finding him to show up in power.

Paul describes his work in verse 28 as including both warning and teaching—**"warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom."** Fruitful ministry always must include both of these. Warnings must be given about true dangers, and there is no danger more significant than eternal judgment. But we must also teach about the love of God. Without warnings of judgment and teaching about God's love for sinners, we don't have the gospel. To warn without teaching of God's unconditional love yields fearful, insecure people. To speak of God's love without warning of judgment, the more common problem today, yields apathy.

In 2004, a great tsunami hit Indonesia, resulting in the loss of 167,000 people. One particular island hit by the tsunami was remarkable in the very small number of people who died. On Simeulue, only seven people perished. Why? There was a practice on that island called *smong*, a word that refers to a storytelling tradition in which elders tell stories to the children of the island. Every smong story ends with a warning: “If a strong tremor occurs, and if the sea withdraws soon after, run to the hills, for the sea will soon rush ashore.” So when that very thing happened in 2004, everyone understood the danger and knew what to do. Our proclamation of the gospel is aimed at the same thing, that everyone might understand the danger and that they might know what to do and flee to the high ground of Jesus for deliverance.

II. The Message

Paul’s summary of the message he proclaimed is remarkably concise. It is **“Christ in you, the hope of glory”** (1:27). Let’s start with the first of those statements, “Christ in you.” This is not the normal way Paul speaks. He writes often of our union with Christ by saying that we are “in Christ.” And when he speaks of God in us, he usually refers to the Holy Spirit. Technically speaking, Jesus has a body and is seated at the right hand of God in heaven. It is the Spirit sent by Jesus, the Holy Spirit, residing within us. So why does Paul summarize his message by saying “Christ in you?” I think he breaks his normal pattern here because he wants to highlight the fact that this fullness of Jesus he has been talking about is ours because of our union with Christ. There is a sense in which this great Christ Paul has been speaking of is so close to us as to be in us. This is the richest experience of God available to any human being, and it is available not to some spiritual elite but to any poor sinner who calls upon the name of Jesus.

Sometimes it helps to become a little childlike in order to understand the most profound truths. Less than one month before C. S. Lewis died, he wrote this letter to a little girl:

Dear Ruth... Many thanks for your kind letter, and it was very good of you to write and tell me that you like my books; and what a very good letter you write for your age! If you continue to love Jesus, nothing much can go wrong with you, and I hope you may always do so.

That’s something of what Paul meant here. Nothing much can go wrong with you when you love Jesus. That doesn’t mean that we can’t or won’t suffer. It actually means that we should expect to suffer hardship, just like Jesus. But even in the suffering there is joy and meaning when you love Jesus. And at the end of the day, there is his next phrase, the “hope of glory.”

The hope of glory speaks of the bright future to be experienced by every Christian. Richard Lucas expresses it like this. “The experience of Christ dwelling in our hearts by faith gives not the possession but the promise of full salvation. The greatest gift of Christ in the present is hope for the future... for this life, grace is sufficient. Glory (Paul’s ‘second blessing’) belongs to the age to come.” When we think about this future glory, the blessings promised to every single one of us who know Jesus are truly breathtaking. Not only will there be no more sin, but there will be no more desire to sin. There will be no disease, no old age and no sorrow. You will never know a fearful or anxious moment again. No more anxiety attacks and no more depression. Every last vestige of the curse placed upon this world because of the entrance of sin will be permanently removed.

This glory is marked not only by the bad things that will no longer be present, but by the good things that will be present. You will have a material body that is healthy and strong, full of life that will never end. You will have meaningful and deeply satisfying work, not the toil that we know, but something like the hobby in which you lose yourself for hours at a time and can hardly stand to stop to eat or sleep. There will be rich relationships with complete joy and unity. And the richest relationship of all will be the one with your triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There will be a growing knowledge of God that will bring ever increasing levels of joy to your heart. And all of this will last for eternity. As John Newton wrote in his famous hymn, “When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’ve first begun.”

How do we know all of this is true? Skeptics say that these teachings are just coping mechanisms. They are nothing more than a religious drug people take to help them cope with the misery of their lives. How do we know they’re not right? One answer to that question is found in Paul’s repeated use of the term “mystery.” He calls the gospel **“the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints”** (1:26). A mystery is something that used to be hidden, but has now been revealed by God. This point is easily overlooked. The gospel has been revealed by God, not concocted by religiously gifted people. No one would make up something like this, for the simple reason that it is an insult to human pride. This is good news not to those who work hard, or to the insiders who have all the privileges. Rather, it is good news to the outsiders, those with evil hearts who know they are evil and need outside help. And the gospel is totally contrary to the direction these false teachers were taking things. They believed in some secret knowledge that was available to certain insiders. Paul’s gospel, on the other hand, was far more democratic, and it was the gospel revealed by God.

III. Receiving the Messenger and the Message

Paul begins to move toward application in the first part of chapter 2. His concern is that his readers might **“reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”** (2:2-3). He wants us to have all the treasures available to us in Christ. But notice that he says of these treasures that they are hidden. They’re not as evident as the way you hide Easter Eggs for a two-year old, just sitting on top of the ground in plain sight. So how can we find these treasures?

There is an individual side to this and a corporate side to it. Let’s talk first about the individual side. Did you notice how Paul uses the word “everyone” three times in 1:28? His repetition of that word is aimed at countering the elitism present in these false teachers. Their teaching led to a division between Christian “haves” and “have nots.” The “haves” were the ones who had entered into this “second blessing” that we spoke of last week. But Paul would not have this. He was indiscriminate in his ministry, aiming it at every individual. There is a strong “individualism” present in Christianity, because every individual must respond to the gospel him or herself. If we are to experience the hidden treasures found in Jesus, we must receive it as individuals.

There is also a corporate side to receiving these treasures. Paul says that it is as our hearts are **“knit together in love”** that we come to know the hidden treasures in Christ. There are parts of knowing Christ that are undiscoverable by yourself. You need others to help you see these things. This is one of the big reasons to be in a Bible study with other Christians. They will see things you don’t see and will be able to help you. Not only that, but you will see things they need to see, and you can be of help to them.

CONCLUSION:

Let me summarize this all like this. In all ministry, there is one central truth to remember. I often need things to be simple, because I forget what I’m doing and lose my focus if I don’t keep it simple. So here’s the simple truth to remember. All ministry is centered on Jesus. George Whitfield once said, “Other men may preach the gospel better than I, but no man can preach a better gospel.” We must take people to the treasures of Jesus.