

## The Gospel-Centered Ministry of the Church (Part 1) Colossians 1:24-27

### Intro:

- When was the last time when you received some bad news or a bad doctor's report that you sighed a sigh of relief, "Wow! Thank you Lord! This makes me glad." Right . . . me either.
- In their book, *Creature of the Word: A Jesus-Driven Church*, Pastors Matt Chandler and Josh Patterson and Lifeway Consultant, Eric Geiger said, "The Church is a Creature of the Word . . ." Yes, a Creature. She is alive. A living, breathing movement of God's people redeemed and placed together in a collective community. But she is not alive in her own doing. She has been made alive by the Word. God spoke her into existence through the declaration of the gospel—His righteousness on our behalf. The more the church is tapped into the gospel, the more transformative power will be present by the Holy Spirit in that church. But the more that church gets away from the centrality of the gospel, the more a church will run on fumes, seeing people conformed to a pattern of religion rather than transformed by the Spirit of God."<sup>1</sup>
- **Our vision statement reads:** *GABC exists to glorify God as a gospel-centered church in Ames, Iowa.* **Verses 24-29** describe what gospel-centered ministry for a church is like. Dr. John Piper once said, the Spirit and the gospel fly together. Here is what I think these guys mean when they speak of the centrality of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit . . . I think what they are saying is that you cannot be truly Spirit-filled without the gospel of Jesus Christ and when you are saturated with the work of the gospel in your life you cannot help but be saturated with the Spirit of God. In other words, the power of the Spirit and gospel go together.
- What we are going to do in the next two sermons is unpack from **vv. 24-29** what a gospel-centered ministry for the church looks like.

### I. We have a ministry of joyful suffering for the gospel (v. 24)

"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church . . ."

- **First let's look at the phrase** "I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church . . ."  
When we hear Paul say this we ought to scratch our heads and wonder if Paul has lost his mind.

**What could be lacking in Christ's afflictions? What does Paul mean by this?** First of all there is nothing lacking *redemptively*. Christ afflictions lacked nothing. We know this from the context of chapter 1. There is nothing lacking in its preeminence, efficacy, powering, supremacy and glory. Christ's afflictions have fully accomplished redemption for His people.

**So what does he mean?** What is lacking is this—when Jesus went back into heaven He commissioned His church to carry forward His mission and so He accomplished redemption on the cross **but not everyone has seen or heard of the work Christ has done**. So part of the answer is that it is being filled up as people hear what Christ has done by suffering and dying for them. Previously in this letter Paul has been saying that the message of gospel is bearing fruit all over the world.

**The other way it is being filled up was that Paul was suffering as he preached the gospel and went on his missionary journeys.** Paul said he suffered joyfully for the sake of the church because he had become a *minister*<sup>2</sup> of the gospel. Paul knew the struggles of being a servant of the gospel. It has cost him a lot. He had been publically humiliated, whipped with cords,

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<sup>1</sup> *Creature of the Word: The Jesus-Centered Church*, Matt Chandler, Josh Patterson and Eric Geiger, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> The word *minister* here is the word *servant* not *pastor*.

beaten, shipped wrecked and thrown in prison. In all of this he said he rejoiced in his sufferings for taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

Yet this was not just Paul's biography in these verses there is an example for us to follow. Christ commissioned His apostles and the church to carry forward and make known in all creation and under heaven what He accomplished on the cross. We are to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth.

**Application:**

- **It is hard work.** There will be opposition. **Some of us may** undergo persecution, suffering and encounter some of the same sort of struggles and difficulties Jesus did. In all of this we are filling up to the full what Christ purchased on the cross. We carry forward the affliction of Christ so that all the world may know what Christ has done on the cross in order to save sinners.
- **How did Paul do it? How can we fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions with joy?** We will do the same thing Paul did- fix our eyes on Jesus. Jesus . . . for the joy set before Him endured the cross scorning its shame. He knew Jesus had endured the worst of it in order to purchase redemption. We will follow in His steps. This is no prosperity gospel.
- **We look to Christ.** We preach to ourselves the gospel and remind ourselves of our Savior's sufferings and how He endured.
- We read the Bible to learn from how God's people have both succeeded and failed as they served God with joy through difficulties. There are many more examples of failure than successes.
- We should read stories of other Christians who have endured. J. Oswald Sanders was a missionary from New Zealand and wrote over 40 books in his lifetime. At age 70 almost until he died he wrote a book a year. That is pretty incredible. His book on *Spiritual Leadership* was written in 1967 and is still used today to train Christian leaders. Sander's life is a picture of what it means to joyfully fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ by making Christ known.

Sanders was always telling stories of other missionaries. Once he told the story of an indigenous missionary who walked barefoot from village to village preaching the gospel in India. His hardships were many. After a long day of many miles and much discouragement he came to a certain village and tried to speak the gospel but was driven out of town and rejected. So he went to the edge of the village dejected and lay down under a tree and slept from exhaustion.

When he awoke, people were hovering over him, and the whole town was gathered around to hear him speak. The headman of the village explained that they came to look him over while he was sleeping. When they saw his blistered feet, they concluded that he must be a holy man, and that they had been evil to reject him. They were sorry and wanted to hear the message that he was willing to suffer so much to bring them. So the evangelist filled up the afflictions of Jesus with his beautiful blistered feet.<sup>3</sup>

- **We are going to keep working on mission trips** here to go on and we are going to keep striving to take the gospel to our neighbors in our neighborhoods by being missionaries on our streets and in our city.
- **Next Sunday we will be commissioning some summer missionaries that will be going to the ends of the earth.** This past Thursday the Navigators had a commissioning service where they commissioned all of their college students that are going. Parker & Emily are going to Zimbabwe and Jenna and Alex are going to Indonesia.
- **We serve together in the church.** We draw strength from one another as we are exhorted and encouraged by our brothers and sisters in Christ to endure with joy.

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<sup>3</sup> John Piper, *Sermons from John Piper (1990–1999)* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2007).

- **So here is my question:** Have you ever been called out for not filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions with joy? I have. I need others to speak words of affirmation with they see growth in me and words of confrontation when I fall short and words of comfort so they let me know that they are not going to leave me just because I am not perfect.
- **Have you ever considered the struggles you encounter as a Christian are all part of God's plan to make the gospel known to those who do not believe?** It is not going to be easy.
  - You may suffer simply by how you live your life in light of the gospel or because you proclaim the gospel.
  - It may cost you some time out of your busy schedule.
  - It may cost you some money. If you are not able to go perhaps your role is to support others who take the gospel to places you cannot go so you sacrifice financially to help others go.
- **Have you ever considered that if you suffer with joy or anger it will affect your brothers and sisters in Christ?**
  - As far as we know the Apostle Paul had never been to the Colossian church but he and the others he listed at the end of the letter were suffering with joy for those believers. Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. The people he listed were with him, helping him serve the church. He felt a kinship with the church just because they were fellow believers. How he and the others suffered with joy helped them.
  - **I am not saying to put a bold face on it or fake it for the sake of others.** No, we need to be genuine when we struggle with this. C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Joyful Christian* said, "You would like to know how I behave when I am experiencing pain . . . You need not guess, for I will tell you; I am a great coward . . . If I knew of any way of escape I would crawl through sewers to find it."<sup>4</sup>
- **Here is my point: joy and rejoicing is not circumstantial happiness.** Joy and rejoicing in Christ is more like gladness and a deep abiding confidence and hope in Christ no matter the struggle. Paul was able to rejoice because of the object of his rejoicing and the confidence that he was following Christ.

**For Paul it was NOT the circumstances that gave him joy but the object of his efforts—Jesus.** Christ controlled the circumstances and the outcome of his efforts were certain—joy, the presence of Christ, the gospel goes forward and people are saved.

## II. We have a ministry of faithful stewardship of the gospel (v. 25)

"... of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known . . ."

- **What does Paul mean by *stewardship*?** A steward is someone who has been entrusted with a particular responsibility to carry out a plan or to be commissioned to administrate for the benefit of others. Paul often referred to his apostleship as a stewardship or a commission given to him by God to make the gospel fully known by taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

So . . . Paul was saying he was suffering joyfully because I am serving the church because God has entrusted to me a certain stewardship or a certain responsibility. Just like Paul has been entrusted with a particular responsibility so have we.

**In fact in 1 Peter 4:10-11, Peter says this to the church, "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good *stewards* of God's varied grace:"<sup>11</sup> whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by**

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<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Joyful Christian*, p. 212.

*the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”* Along with stewardship; gifts are given to accomplish the task.

**Application:**

So . . . just like Peter and Paul were stewards of the gifts they had been given to further the work of the gospel and to serve the church we are given gifts. If you are a Christian, the Holy Spirit has given you a certain set of spiritual gifts with which to fill up what is lacking in Christ's affliction by taking the gospel to others.

**Verse 11 of 1 Peter 4 mentions two gifts: teaching and serving but the New Testament mentions others.**

- **Some of you may have been gifted with the ability to teach.** As I visit with people and listen to the talk and read what they write I recognize that there are some of you that have the gift of teaching.
- **Some of you have the gift of serving.** The word for serving in v. 11 is to deacon or serve. You just like to help people. It does not matter what people need you just want to help. You don't mind being behind the scenes blessing others even when they don't know you are serving them. I can name lots of people who have that gift. I watch you serve and bless others.
  - **Illst:** Nate and Audrey, Nate with cars and then they showed up when Mac wrecked his Blazer.
- **Some of you have the gift of hospitality.** You enjoy helping people connect by having them in your home. You welcome strangers and help them connect with others.
- **Some of you have the gift of administration.** You are good with logistics and planning. You like computers and can use a variety of software like Adobe, Microsoft Word, Excel and Outlook. You are good with the Internet and social media and able to make it useful for Kingdom work and so you admin people are able to help guys like me who teach but aren't gifted in admin look good. You get the word out.
- **Some of you have the gift of music.** I learned really fast last fall who was gifted in music. It was amazing when we said we were going to "in house" our music how many of you stepped up, came to me and said I can do music. You jumped in and saved my bacon.
- **Some of you are still learning and developing your gifts.** You are like my daughter Sam, who I knew could play the piano and sing but just needed a little confidence. The more she used her gift the better she has gotten.

I am using music as an example here because some of us mistakenly believe that you either have the gift or you don't. Often spiritual gifts work like Sam and her music. Sam loved music but did not know beans about music until she took lessons and she has worked at using her gift since she was 6 years old.

One of the best ways to determine your spiritual gift is not a spiritual gifts inventory but to just get involved in the church and learn what you are passionate about.

Steve and Jo Ellen Vardeman are passionate about teaching little kids. They have done it for years and have gotten really good at it but I am sure they are still learning how to improve.

So . . . begin serving somewhere and learn from others and see what God does. You may learn that you like working with children or working with teenagers or not. Just keep serving and learning because sometimes your gifts change, grow and develop.

- **The point is that we are all stewards of the gifts we have been given for the good of the ministry of the church.**  
Those gifts are to flow out from you to serve others. You have been placed where you are to carry out the gospel mission there.
- **The temptation you are going to have is to compare yourself to others and their gifting.** Don't do that. Be who you are not someone else.
- Now . . . if someone is gifted in something you enjoy and they seem particularly talented perhaps have them teach you. For example, if you want to learn how to do hospitality find others who are good at it and learn. You can strengthen your hospitality from Terry and Debbie Martens. If you want to grow in your ability get with someone who teaches well.
- **Sometimes the gift you have is not a talent but something like a car or a house or property or finances that you can leverage for kingdom work *in order to make the gospel known.***
  - So with joy when you open your house to host your small group you are making the word of God fully known.
  - When you give someone a ride to someone who needs a ride to the hospital you are blessing others by making the word of God fully known.
  - When you give to Annie Armstrong Easter offering or to our Navigators who are going on mission you are making the word of God fully known.
  - When you give to the budget financially you are making the word of God fully known. When you contribute in any way in order to serve others for the glory of Christ you are making the word of God fully known.
- **All of these things point people to Jesus.** All of these things mean we are carrying out a gospel-centered ministry in our church.
- **This is how we are faithful stewards of the gospel ministry.**

### III. We have a ministry of the riches of the Spirit of the gospel (vv. 26-27)

*" . . . the **mystery** hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 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."*

- **What does Paul mean by *mystery*?** After all he just said we are to make the word of God fully known and now he is talking about a mystery that has been hidden for ages and that his mystery is Christ in you the hope of glory.
  - The word mystery is used about 20 times in the New Testament to refer to the coming of Christ and specifically to Christ in you.<sup>5</sup>
- **It might help us to think of mystery in two ways: magnified and majesty.**
  - **First is the mystery as magnified!**  
I use the word magnified because it is not that God was trying to be sneaky when the mystery was hidden but that it was just not made clear.

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<sup>5</sup> First there were these *mystery cults* within the Gnostic false teachers that taught about the hidden knowledge that the people needed in order to be fully accepted by God and to be truly spiritual. It was all about the newest technique, latest knowledge and latest revelation. Without calling them out directly, Paul is going after the false teachers in his letter. He is saying that the real mystery is not a mystery. You see the lie of false teaching always piggybacks on truth. It takes just enough of the truth to sound similar and then twists it. The Apostle Paul knows this and so he what was a mystery is no longer a mystery. There is no new revelation. All is fulfilled in Christ and the only mystery left is that mind blowing fact that you Gentiles are folded into God's plan and are recipients of the Holy Spirit, which is what it means to have Christ in you.

We use magnification to make something clear that is hard to see but it is not magnification as if to make something small appear larger than it is. The magnification I am speaking of like a telescope where you view something so large like a planet it is hard to see. This kind of magnification brings something in so we can comprehend it.

Since Genesis 3 God has been unfolding His redemptive plan to save sinners by coming in Christ to die for the sins of His people and defeat evil. It was His plan to not only redeem His people, the Jews, but to save all of God's elect from both the Jews and the Gentiles. Many of the Jews understood that there was a Savior coming but the Gentiles certainly did not.

Gradually throughout the Old Testament God revealed more and more of His redemptive plan. In Genesis 3 we have the promise that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent to deliver His people. The seed is the Deliverer we have been waiting to come. All throughout the Old Testament we had types of Deliverers that looked like the One that would come but they all fell short because they were sinners.

Kings would come and go and even the best of them, King David, who was a type of Messiah fell short. There were prophets who preached the law and in all of their preaching the law none of the law changed the people. They only heightened the people awareness that they needed something more than the law and a prophet to deliver them from their sin.

The priests taught and performed sacrifices but their sacrifices never took away the sin of the people nor did it transform the lives of the people. Something more than rules, laws, obligations, sacrifices, sinful kings and mere human prophets and priests. These things were good and gracious of God but none of them changed the people.

The Law and the prophets could tell them what they ought to do but it could not transform them so they would actually do it. Rules don't empower obedience. We needed something more.

**Look at 2 Corinthians 3:6, "[God] . . . who has made us [all of us] sufficient to be ministers of a *new covenant*, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the *letter [old covenant]* kills, but *the Spirit gives life [the Spirit is given in the new covenant]*."**

We must understand the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. It is often said that the Old Testament conceals what the New Testament reveals. When we study the Old Testament we find hints and pointers of what was to come. **Jeremiah 31** and **Ezekiel 36** help us understand what was coming.

- **Jeremiah 31:31-33**, "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, <sup>32</sup> not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. <sup>33</sup> For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."
- **Ezekiel 36:26-27**, "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."
- These are Old Testament texts that are unveilings of the new covenant that was coming where the Spirit would be given to God's people by it being applied to their hearts. You see in the Old Covenant the people lived by the law. The

law told them what to do but it never changed them. It gave them no ability to obey. It would be just like you telling your children what to do but that in no way gives them the ability to do what you tell them to do.

**In the new covenant God put His Spirit in His people and gave them the ability to obey.** I love the little John Bunyan rhyme that says, *“Run, John, run, the Law commands but give me neither feet nor hands, better news the gospel brings, it [commands] me to fly and gives me wings.”* This is what the Holy Spirit does. The Spirit and the gospel fly together to give us the ability to obey the Lord not by looking to the Law but by fixing our eyes on Jesus. We look at His life, His work, His crucifixion and His resurrection. How did Jesus live, what did He do, and how He kept the Law in my place and for me and how He purchased on the cross my righteousness and put His Spirit in me to not just show me how to obey but Christ purchased my very obedience on the cross. This is better news—it is the best news!

THE NEW TESTAMENT MAGNIFIES THIS MYSTERY SO IT IS NO LONGER FAR OFF AND WE NOW SEE THE BIG PICTURE OF HOW GOD WAS PROGRESSIVELY UNVEILING HIS PLAN SINCE GENESIS 3.

- **Second is the mystery as majesty!**

**This is why the mystery that is magnified is so majestic.** This mystery that has been revealed has blown his mind and so he does his typical thing of stacking superlatives on top of one another, *“**To them [the Gentiles] God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles [second mention of the Gentiles for emphasis] are the riches of the glory of this mystery [second mention of mystery], which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.**”*

This is standard Pauline language when he is filled amazement. It is like his heart just overflows and so he just stacks phrase on top of phrase to describe the wonder and majesty that has captured his heart.

- **Illst:** the majesty of a full-grown tree, the tree over my house is Texas.

**Application:**

If you are a Christian, if you have turned from your sin and trusted Christ as your Savior then God has written His law on your heart by giving you His Holy Spirit. You have in you the riches of the glory of the mystery and that is Christ is in you and He is your hope of glory. Once you fell short of His glory now because of Christ you have His glory in you.

It does not mean you obey perfectly but it means you desire to and it means you have been given the grace of God to give you the ability to obey. It means your efforts to obey are not simply you doing more and trying hard it means they are grace-driven efforts to glorify God. It means you have the power to change. Jesus purchased your transformation and gives you His Spirit to apply the gospel to your heart and life.

It means when you sin there is a sacrifice to cover your sin and for that we worship Him who has made perfect and eternal provision for our sin. It is very important that we understand this because when we get to Colossians 3 Paul is going to start telling us some things to do and how we should live. All of these commands and exhortations stand on the foundation of the gospel that empowers us by His Spirit to live for Him. It is Christ in you. This is how we live them out—Christ in you. This is what gives you hope in repentance—you can change. You can die to sin and live to righteousness.

So now we find the key to that we have been looking for . . . for this is how we rejoice in our sufferings as we fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. It is because Christ is in you—REJOICE because He is your hope of glory!

Friend if you are here and you realize you are not a Christian, I need to make clear being a Christian is not simply about living a better life. It is about knowing God and being saved from the wrath of God against your sin. Romans 3:23 says that we have

all sinned and fall short of His glory. You see when you do not have Christ you have no hope but I have good news for you—Christ is your hope of glory. Turn from your sin and trust Christ as your only hope today.

#### **Conclusion**

- **Reflection & Prayer**

- **Song:** *Thy Mercy*

- **Benediction:**

*May you rejoice in your sufferings and in your flesh fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church for God has made you an ambassador according to the stewardship from God that was given to you to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

*May you proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*

*May we toil, struggle as a church with all his energy that Christ powerfully works within us. Amen.*

*Blessing adapted from Colossians 1:24–29.*