

The Gospel-Centered Ministry of the Church (Part 2) Colossians 1:28-29

Intro:

Our vision statement says, “*Grand Avenue Baptist Church exists to glorify God as a gospel-centered church in Ames, Iowa.*” Our text this morning helps us understand what it means to be a gospel-centered church.

We are at the end of chapter 1 and it sounds like the Apostle Paul is giving us a little biography. He talked about his suffering for the sake of the gospel message in his ministry. What we need to know about Paul’s story here is that it is not just descriptive it is also prescriptive. He is setting an example for us to follow.

Paul was a man who was saturated with the gospel of Jesus Christ. He connects the cross of Christ to all of life. The gospel is not just for getting in the Kingdom it is how you live a Kingdom life. For Paul the gospel is the sum, the center and the root of everything Paul was about in ministry.¹

When I summarize Paul’s vision for ministry, what I see is a man who was, what I call “gospel-centered” in his approach to life and ministry. Now I realize that the phrase can kind of be a hip, faddish phrase in church circles today. I can assure you we are not trying to be hip, cool and faddish. If anything we are trying to be old, orthodox and biblical. So when we look at this text and I call Paul gospel-centered I am not jumping on the gospel-centered bandwagon what I am actually trying to do is press into a Pauline idea of ministry. We are trying to bring the gospel to bear on all of our lives and all of our ministries. We are trying to do ministry where we say that the gospel is not just for evangelism but also the heart of discipleship and the key to killing sin in our lives.

Two Sundays ago, in part 1 of our little **The Gospel-Centered Ministry series**, I said gospel-centered ministry consisted of joyful suffering, faithful stewardship, and ministry carried out in the riches of the Holy Spirit.

This morning I want to make six observations from Verses 28-29 about the gospel-centered ministry for the church and then make application at the end.

1. The message is Jesus.
2. We are the messengers.
3. The message is for everyone.
4. The means is proclamation, warning and teaching with all wisdom.
5. The goal is maturity in Christ.
6. The work is agonizing labor.

1. The message is Jesus (v. 28): “*HIM we proclaim . . .*”

- The “*Him*” in v. 28 points back to v. 27 [read] and vv. 15-20.
- It is Jesus whom we need to faithfully proclaim as a church. Was blown away that the mystery was—Christ in you but not just Christ in you, Christ also came to the Gentiles just like He did for the Jews. It is as Paul said later in the letter: *Christ is all and in all. Jesus is everything! In a gospel-centered ministry we give them Jesus from first to last. At the end of your life it better be Jesus you are hold to and not some religious system, some good work, baptism, church membership.* Not that these things do not have their place, they are out workings of a life that proclaims Him.

¹ Bob Thune, sermon: A Gospel-Centered Philosophy of Ministry, <http://cdomaha.com/sermon-audio/sermons/a-gospel-centered-philosophy-of-ministry-colossians-128-29>.

- **Illst:** Charles Spurgeon, *"You do not really preach the gospel if you leave Christ out—if He is omitted, it is not the gospel! You may invite men to listen to your message, but you are only inviting them to gaze upon an empty table unless Christ is the very center and substance of all that you set before them."*²
- **The first observation we make about the gospel-centered ministry of the church is that Jesus is the message and not just any Jesus but the Jesus accurately found in Scripture.**

2. We are the messengers. (v. 28) *"Him WE proclaim . . ."*

- I don't think Paul meant only himself and his missionary team he lists at the end of the letter as the only messengers. It might be convenient to say this just applied to Paul and his missionary team but it does not. Remember this is not simply a descriptive passage but it is a prescriptive passage.
- **Paul set the example for us, which means WE are the ones to proclaim this message.**
 - Not just the job of the hired staff pastors, elders, deacon and the leadership of the church. It is everyone's responsibility to proclaim the gospel.
 - **A church that loves the gospel makes the gospel the center of all they do.** They believe everyone has the responsibility to proclaim the gospel in whatever way God gives them to do it. Some are called to preach the gospel as a vocational ministry and others are called to proclaim the gospel through all of their lives as they interact with family, friends and neighbors.
- **So the second observation is that WE are the ones who proclaim the message of Jesus.**

3. The message is for everyone (v. 28) *"everyone, everyone, everyone"*

- Three times in v. 28 Paul says everyone. He had a responsibility to everyone. He had a responsibility to warn everyone, teach everyone and present everyone mature in Christ. The repetition is there for a reason to drive home the point. In this case, Jesus is for everyone. Everyone possible is to be taught, warned and presented mature in Christ.
- **Paul is going to say later in Colossians 3:11, "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."**
- In **Ephesians 3:6** Paul was amazed that the Gentiles were not simply saved but included as fellow heirs in the family of God, *"This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."*
- You see the Jews knew that God would save some of the Gentiles [if you are not Jewish you are a Gentile] but what they didn't understand because the mystery was not fully revealed and what amazed Paul was that they were not just saved and made second-class citizens of the Kingdom but instead had received full inclusion and were fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise of Christ through the gospel! What many of us simply take for granted floored Paul.
- **Illst:** Paul had been looking at Jesus through the lens of the Old Testament and he only saw Christ in his infancy. He only saw the shadows. The Old Testament is kind of like an **ultrasound and a sonogram** (*Creature of the Word*, p. 119) today . . . after the baby is born the printed sonogram images are nice but now you have the real thing.

² Charles Spurgeon, sermon *Christ's Triple Character*, <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols46-48/chs2787.pdf>.

- **Don't hear what I am not saying.** I am not minimizing the Old Testament. What I am saying is that for Paul he now understands the Gentiles are folded in as fellow heirs of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is bigger than he ever imagined. He now sees that the gospel is for EVERYONE.
- **So our third observation of the gospel-centered ministry of the church is that the message is for everyone.** As a church we do not dictate who gets to hear. We share the message with everyone.

4. The means is proclamation, warning and teaching with all wisdom (v. 28)

- **"Him we PROCLAIM, WARNING everyone and TEACHING everyone with ALL WISDOM"**
- We find both the positive and negative means of proclaiming the message. We proclaim, we warn, and we teach with all wisdom.
- **First let's consider proclamation:**
 - **I have heard some pastors describe proclamation as the air-war.** Preachers preach and publically proclaim the word of God. Is the air-war that is being broadcast from our lives and our mouths Jesus?
 - Proclamation in the formal sense is usually the responsibility of the elders who stand up to preach and proclaim in word in the authoritative sense. These are men with the calling on their lives to preach and proclaim the word of God in a setting like we are in this morning.
 - **Proclamation can also be understood** in the sense of what the life of any Christian is proclaiming. By the way we live our lives we proclaim some message that is heard and understood when word and work come together.
- **Warning and teaching with all wisdom:**
 - **If proclamation is the air-war then warning and teaching with all wisdom is the ground-war.** The ground-war is the face-to-face contact of admonishing and instructing with the gracious wisdom of Christ.
 - Epaphras had planted the church and Tychicus and Onesimus delivered Paul's letter to the church in order to admonish and teach them in all wisdom. Epaphras, Tychicus and Onesimus supplied the face-to-face, life-on-life ground war of wise admonition and instruction in order to present *all of the believers mature in Christ*.
- **The fourth observation of the gospel-centered ministry is that proclamation, warning and teaching in wisdom are God ordained means to keep believers in the love of Christ.** They were to do life together in such a way as to address and correct any confusion about who Jesus was so that people could hope in the gospel.

5. The goal is maturity in Christ (v. 28) **"that we may present everyone MATURE in Christ"**

- **Everything Paul has been saying is moving toward this goal—to present everyone mature in Christ.**
- **The question is when is this maturity going to happen?** Answer—on the Day of Judgment. When we all stand before the judgment seat of God. This is when we will be presented mature in Christ—not before then.
- **What this means is while we are still alive we are still maturing.** We are moving toward maturity but we will never arrive. In the church we will be all over the spectrum of maturity. Some of us will mature faster than others and some of us will mature slower. Some of us will take two steps forward and then one step back.
- **While "maturity in Christ" does not mean you have arrived, it does mean you are getting grounded in your doctrine.** Paul talked about maturity in other places. In Ephesians 4:11-14, ¹¹And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until we all attain to the

unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, **to mature manhood**, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”

Later in Colossians Paul is going to call the believers to not be deceived by plausible arguments. What is going to help them not be deceived? Growth in spiritual maturity! Not that they have arrived but that they are learning the doctrines of the faith. Who is God? Who is Jesus? Who is the Holy Spirit? What is the gospel? What is the church and on and on the doctrines go that help us mature in our faith in Christ.

- The fifth observation in this passage is that spiritual maturity is the goal.

6. The work is agonizing labor (v. 29) *all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*”

- “For this . . .” = “Him we proclaim (v. 28) . . .”
- What does he mean by “For this”? He means all of vv. 24-28! It is the rejoicing in suffering to fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions, the stewardship of the ministry of making the word of God fully known, the proclaiming the riches of Christ’s glory and the mystery of Christ in them, warning and teaching and presenting everyone mature in Christ.
- Here Paul did again what he has done so often in this letter. He stacks descriptive word on top of descriptive word to describe this ministry:
 - I Toil: to labor to the point of weariness
 - I Struggle: is used to describe an athlete competing in a contest
 - At times Paul gave us a peek into his struggles in ministry so that we will have hope when we face struggles and trials. We find it here in this text and we see it in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 he says, ⁷But we [we=all Christians] have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you.”

At the initial reading you might think Paul is saying he works hard so they won’t have to but that is not simply his message. Yes . . . he is working hard to see life produced in them but it is not supposed to stop with him. Paul is clear they are to be imitators of him as he imitates Christ. They are to serve others in the same struggle.

- Listen if we ended v. 29 there we might all throw in the towel. How in the world can we continue on with all of the afflictions, toil and struggle? We have a promise at the end of v. 29. The strength to do the work is supplied by Jesus. Christ, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross. You see Jesus is the One who was all powerful and filled with joy in Heaven. He stepped out of Heaven, laid down His power, became weak and faced the toil, struggle, the strain, the afflictions of life and even death on the cross so that He could give us His power to carry on. You see on the cross Christ purchased power to be given us by the Holy Spirit to do what He has called us to do. He purchased the ability to rejoice in our sufferings (v. 24). He will take us to the end of our strength and ourselves so He can fill us with His power, strength, and endurance. The question is will we be humble enough to receive it?
- The sixth observation is exactly what the text says—the ministry of the church is hard work.

Application:

1. **A gospel-centered church proclaims “Him, the fullness of His gospel” to everyone for salvation and for discipleship.**
 - a. **We proclaim the gospel is for evangelism. What is evangelism?** *“Evangelism is to declare on the authority of God what he has done to save sinners, to warn men of their lost condition, to direct them to repent, and to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.”*³
When we evangelize, we are teaching, admonishing and proclaiming Him.
 - b. **We proclaim the gospel is for discipleship.** We want to make sure that Jesus and the fullness of His gospel is the message we proclaim. We want people to understand fully all that Christ has done for them to save them.
 - **The problem is in church we can very easily and quickly drift away from proclaiming Jesus.** If we are not careful our message as a church becomes a Jesus-plus message or a message where we just assume everyone knows the gospel and so we never explain it in detail.
 - **So our first mistake comes when we think that the gospel is only for evangelism and getting us into the Kingdom of God.** What happens when we regulate the gospel to only evangelism is that we miss how the gospel is designed to apply to all of life.

So . . . what happens is that if we only see the gospel as useful for evangelism then when we have struggles with sin and suffering we begin to turn to others strategies to add to Jesus. So we very subtly become a Jesus-plus this strategy approach to the Christian life.

For example, let’s say you struggle with perfectionism. You might go to a Christian friend and tell him what your struggle is and he might pray for you and then give you a list of strategies to help you overcome your struggle. He might say you need to have a quiet time every day. You need to meditate on verses that describe grace of God. He might tell you to once a day just be completely messy or out of control.

The gospel would affirm that you are intended for a perfect world but it would also confront the mindset that that world is now. None of the things he told you to do are bad. They might be helpful but they have not dealt with the real deeper issue of the heart. They have only addressed behavior. This approach adds to the work of Christ.

The gospel proclaimed to you would address the deeper issue of your heart. The gospel causes us to ask the question, “Why?” Why do I desire things to be perfect all the time. You might have an idol of control in your heart, which, in short means you want to do God’s job. You don’t trust Him to rule well and you think you can do better. The gospel is going to address that.

The gospel turns your attention to Jesus the only spotless, sinless, perfect person who ever lived but died as the sacrifice for imperfect people who are wholly wicked and depraved even to the core of their hearts. Jesus died for all of your imperfections and He no longer holds them against you as His child.

The gospel would comfort you by calling you to rest in the Perfect Savior and challenge you to stop holding yourself and other people to a standard you cannot and do not meet. Instead it calls you to begin looking to the gospel as it works to bear fruit in your life and in the lives of others.

In a gospel-centered church our aim is to proclaim the gospel to address the heart issue and not simply the behavior.

- c. **Who are we proclaiming the gospel to? EVERYONE.**
 - **In a gospel-centered ministry the gospel gets proclaimed to everyone for evangelism and discipleship.**

³ John Cheesman, *The Grace of God in the Gospel*, p. 119.

- **Some of us are called vocationally** to preach . . .
- **Everyone proclaims the gospel for evangelism and discipleship.** Let me use stay-at-home moms as our example. I know what stay-at-home moms think, “*I am here all day with kids . . . how can I contribute to the proclamation of the gospel?*” Well your mission field is right there in front of you—your children. But here is a thought. We have college students in our church. I have noticed that some of our moms have been diligent to bring college students in to involve them in their home lives and proclaim the gospel as they show them what their lives look like with all of their ups and downs. I am not saying life has to be perfect. Actually I hope it is not. *So in the chaos of your lives show others Christ Jesus in all His sufficiency, all the riches of His glory, in all the fullness of who He is.*

2. A gospel-centered church proclaims the gospel for the goal of presenting everyone mature in Christ.

- **Spiritual maturity is not a destination you arrive at in this life.** Maturity in Christ is not going to be fully realized until we stand before Jesus on the Day of Judgment. However, until that time comes what we must do as a church is be intentional about growing in our maturity as believers and helping one another grow in maturity. You may have a misunderstanding of maturity and think that I have to be mature before I can make disciples or proclaim the gospel. Listen, if you think this then you will never participate in the mission of the church. You will never be mature until you see Christ face-to-face but until that time you will be growing in maturity and part of your growth is making disciples by proclaiming the gospel in whatever context of life Jesus gives you
- **At Grand we want our air-war and our ground-war to work together: GATHER, GROW AND GO.** We want to be faithful to proclaim and then to do face-to-face ministry with one another where we speak into one another lives. What we talk about is GATHER, GROW AND GO. We want to gather on Sunday mornings and to hear the word of God proclaimed, grow in our small groups, Foundations and participate in a culture of discipleship by being disciplined by another believer or discipling another believer.
- **We talk about growing a culture of discipleship here at Grand to spur us toward maturity in Christ.** It takes a long time to develop a culture of discipleship but when it takes hold it will give shape to all areas of life. So this means discipleship is occurring in all kinds of ways and means.

Warning and teaching are not just taking place in Bible studies or from the pulpit but they are occurring in life-on-life situations like small groups or social gatherings where, because the gospel is central to who we are, we talk about the gospel. It is giving shape to our conversations and so regular conversations naturally become gospel saturated or gospel conversations. Discipleship becomes a natural part of life.

3. A gospel-centered church thrives on the eternal power Jesus provides.

- **How was it that the Apostle Paul never burned out in his ministry?** The answer is that Paul thrived on the eternal power of Jesus. Paul’s union with Christ gave him the riches of the glory of Christ that filled his heart. Quite simply it was Christ in him that was his hope of glory.
- **There is no doubt this point in the text is the one that is most challenging for me.** I think because I know I am prone to get weary. Just the burden of ministry, the discouragement, the battles with my own sin and struggling with the sins of others. These things and many others weigh heavily on any pastor’s heart. It is so easy for me to get disheartened and discouraged. Yet even through all of these difficulties I have noticed a quiet strength that keeps me going.

Are you like me and sometimes just want to throw up your hands and quit? Do you know what keeps me going?

Yes . . . it is the eternal power of the Jesus and it is a supernatural power but it is not some abstract mystical power that is like a weird experience. It seems to be God's providential ordering of the means of grace that God uses to keep me plodding along in the work of ministry. It is sometimes a note of encouragement, a visit or phone call from a friend, seeing someone make strides in maturity, and rehearsing the gospel with you all every Sunday. Yes it is a supernatural power, a peace that is beyond my ability to know where it comes from except to say the Holy Spirit but it is also the normal means of the grace of being connected to and involved in the body of Christ.

Listen ministry is hard but the promise is that Jesus will provide His eternal strength to keep us going and not just grudgingly plodding but pursuing a joy that is found in Him because our eyes are fixed on the One who for the joy set before Him endured the cross. You see Jesus emptied Himself of all of His strength on the cross so that you may be filled with His power to carry on. This is the riches of the hope of glory—Christ in you.

Conclusion

Silence and Reflection

Lord's Supper:

- The Lord's Supper is the application of our sermon, we celebrate what Christ did by establishing the new covenant in His blood to give us Himself. We renew this covenant this morning.
- We have some information about the Lord's Supper in the worship guide so if you have questions please consider those instructions.

Benediction:

May you know the hope to which God has called you,

May you experience the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,

May you trust his incomparably great power for you. Amen.

—based on Ephesians 1:18-19