

Paul's Philosophy of Ministry

Text:

Colossians 1: 23c - 29

“. . . And of which I, Paul, became a minister.

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, 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, 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. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”

Introduction:

In the previous paragraph we saw how God had reconciled the world to himself through the cross of Christ; how he is overcoming sin through the redemptive work of Christ. We saw that what was true for the world was true for the Colossians and that it is true for us. The hope of the gospel is our hope, and we must remain firmly rooted and grounded in the hope of the Gospel. The last phrase of that paragraph sets the theme for the paragraph we are now considering. Paul says at the end that he had become a “minister” of the gospel. In verse 25 he repeats the same words: “of which I became a minister”. Only this time the subject of his ministry is not the gospel, but the church, the body of Christ. So Paul says that he is both a minister of the gospel and a minister of the Church. The theme of the present paragraph is his ministry. This is one of several passages in his various epistles where he discusses the ministry, and what we will attempt to discover in this passage is something of what we would call today his philosophy of ministry, that is what he does, why he does it, and how he goes about doing it. Of course our reason for doing this is more than historical. Our goal is to learn from Paul; to be taught in order that we too might have a philosophy of ministry that is according to God.

Before taking up the details of the text, a couple of preliminary observations are in order. We have used the word “ministry” in speaking of the theme of the paragraph, but we have done so without defining the word. Since it is used in current English with a significantly different meaning than what Paul meant when he used it, a brief definition is in order. The 1st century world was a world filled with servants and slaves. It possessed a rich vocabulary to describe both their persons and their functions. Without making a special effort on our part to understand that vocabulary, the nuances of the various terms will escape our attention. Paul uses a number of these words to describe his service to God, to Jesus Christ and to the Church--two of them in this passage, “minister” and “stewardship”. The word for “minister” meant a servant. The emphasis in the word is on the work performed. It defines someone who serves others. It is the word from which the English word “deacon” was derived. It was the word Jesus used when he proclaimed: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” This was the original meaning of the word “minister” in English. It came from the same Latin root as “minus”. It gives the importance to the task, not the doer of the task. The “minister” puts the object of his ministry ahead of his own interest. This is what Jesus did as God’s suffering servant, and what Paul did as a “minister” of the gospel, and “minister” of the Church. Unfortunately, in our time the word has become more of a title for those who hold official positions in churches, and in many countries in governments. Therefore, it is probably better just to use the word servant. In Egypt, when the pastors refer to themselves in English they call themselves servants. That gets much closer to what Paul meant when he said: “I am a minister of the Gospel”, than what we mean and understand when we use the same expression.

The second servant or service word that Paul uses is “stewardship” (v. 25) or as the KJV has “dispensation”. A steward was someone who was entrusted with the administration of the affairs of someone else. Often stewards were slaves. A stewardship was the particular task that was entrusted to them, and for which they were accountable. It is not that much different than what we would refer to as a vocation or a calling. Indeed, we could refer to Paul’s stewardship as his calling to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. God gave him this stewardship or calling through Ananais in Acts 9:15-16 when Ananais came to Damascus to restore Paul’s sight and tell him that God had chosen him as a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. “For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” So Paul had been “made a minister” and “given “a stewardship.” His calling was from God, and his calling defined his life. This calling provided his understanding of:

- His Message
- His Method
- His Goal
- His Power

These four elements of his philosophy of ministry are clearly defined in this passage. Let us learn from the Apostle's example as we examine them.

I. The Message

In the passage we are studying Paul uses at least four different words or expressions to define the message that had been given to him as a sacred trust to make known to the Gentiles. He speaks of the gospel, which we have already talked about; the good news about Jesus Christ. He also talks about the mystery hidden from all generation but now made known to the Gentiles, the Word of God, and finally he sums up his message by simply saying that he proclaims Christ. Let us briefly consider the last three, the mystery, the Word of God, and Christ.

The Gentiles of the 1st Century were familiar with the mystery religions. They promised salvation through secret initiations. It is not, however, to this kind of mystery that Paul is referring when he speaks of his message as a mystery. For Paul a mystery is something that only God can make known. The key words in the text for understanding what he means by a mystery are: "but are now revealed to his saints." What God had specifically revealed in Christ that had been hidden at an earlier time was his intention to save the Gentiles and put them on an equal footing with Israel. "Christ in you", Gentiles, "the hope of Glory." For Paul, before he met Christ, and received his commission to take the Gospel to the Gentiles, God dwelt with Israel. He had manifested his presence and his glory to his chosen people, but now he has come to understand that God's intention is to make himself known to all, and Paul's calling is to lead the way in announcing the good news to the Gentiles.

The second term that Paul uses in speaking of his message is the Word of God. He says in verse 25 that God had given him the task of making the Word of God fully known to the Gentiles. This is illuminated by what he says to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 when he meets with them on his way to Jerusalem. Knowing what awaits him in Jerusalem, and that it is possible that he will not see them again, he gives them something of a farewell address in which he says among other things: "I have not failed to declare unto you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20: 27). At the end of his life as he is passing the baton to Timothy he tells him to give heed to the Scriptures. It is the Scriptures, he says, that make us "wise unto salvation." They are "Godbreathed" and "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and instruction in righteousness, that the man of God might be perfect thoroughly furnished unto all good works." (II Timothy 3:15-17). Simply put, real ministry, ministry that brings salvation and transforms lives, ministry that accomplishes the work of God is Scripture based.

The power of a Scripture based ministry is illustrated in the preaching of John Calvin. His method of preaching was to simply take the Bible and day after day he would expound it book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse. We are told that after his banishment from Geneva for three years when he was invited to return and resume his work of reforming the City of Geneva his first time back in the pulpit of St Peter's Church he took his Bible opened it to the passage he had been speaking from when he left three years earlier and resumed where he had left off. This was much to the surprise of the citizens of Geneva who had filled the church expecting to hear something special for the occasion. But Calvin, like Paul, knew that the ministry was a ministry of the Word. It is the Word of God that does the work of God. The messenger is incidental. It is the message that matters.

Finally, Paul says simply that he preached Christ. Christ is God's ultimate revelation, and the source of our hope and salvation. As we have seen, the theme of this entire epistle is the sufficiency of Christ. Paul had no schemes or worldly wisdom. Christ had transformed his life, and he knew that the power of salvation is not in any human wisdom or scheming, but in Christ and Christ alone. That is why he wrote to the Corinthians that when he first came to them it was not with eloquent speech or wise discourses, but with the simple good news about Jesus Christ. He says that he "determined to know nothing among them save Jesus Christ and him crucified."

We may summarize by saying that the foundation of any true philosophy of ministry is that the message is from God. It has been fully communicated to us by Jesus Christ, and preserved for us in the Scriptures. If we are to be good servants and stewards of God we, like Paul, will do everything in our power to "declare the whole counsel of God", "to preach Christ, and him crucified". We will remember that we are just the messengers; that the power is not in us but in the message.

II. His Method

There are two ideas in verse 28 that give us insight into Paul's method. The first is his triple use of the expression "every man" or "every person" – warning "every man", "teaching every man", "that we might present every man". This expression could be translated "every individual". There are two implications in this expression. We emphasized the first in the last message when we pointed out that the Gospel is for all, not just for an elite few. The second is that each person must become individually responsible for his or her relationship to God. Today we call that kind of teaching discipleship. Earlier in this series we emphasized the unity of the church and the fact that we are not alone in the Christian life. Here the emphasis is that each one of us must individually accept responsibility for our own growth. No one should be left behind. One

of the Christian leaders from the past who has been a model for me in ministry is Richard Baxter. He was an Englishman who lived from 1615 to 1691. He wrote many books, the best known of which is *The Reformed Pastor*. He was the vicar of the relatively small city of Kidderminster from 1647 to 1661. During that time he saw, not just the church, but the entire city, transformed for the good. His basic method was what we would call today home bible studies. He called it family catechism. It was a time when pastoral authority was more respected and almost every citizen of the city was also a member of the church. He would take certain days of the week when he had his sexton tell people that he would be coming for a visit. He would then go to each home, each family in the city, and individually teach them the truth of Christ and the Scriptures. That effort completely transformed the city of Kidderminster. There is something powerful about getting individuals involved in the study of God's Word on a one at a time basis.

The second thing to notice about Paul's method in this verse is the succession of the three verbs proclaim, warn, teach. The first "proclaim" predominates. We could paraphrase the sentence: "We proclaim Christ by warning each person, and by teaching each person in all wisdom." The proclamation of Christ is part warning and part teaching. It is making people face the consequences of not heeding Christ, but it is also leading them into a living relationship with Christ. We must overcome obstacles to the Gospel, but we must also positively teach those who have heeded the warning.

III. The Goal

Paul states that the goal of his ministry is to present every person perfect or mature in Christ. The very word that he uses that is translated "perfect" in the KJV and "mature" or "complete" in other translations means to reach the goal. Last week we discussed the goal of God's reconciliation that we might be "holy without blame, and without reproach in his sight". Such thoughts are never far from Paul's sight as he goes about his ministry. He sees himself as a teacher preparing people for a great examination; that examination will be given at the court of heaven, when we all give an account of the "deeds done in the body" (II Cor. 5:10). Paul labors so that each one may be able to give a good account. He labors to help each one become all that God has intended them to be in Christ. He understands the principle that Jesus laid down in the parable of the talents; that not all are given the same calling, but all are like him stewards of something that God has given them. We all have a mission to accomplish, and Paul prayed and labored to the end that every one might give a good account.

His goal for others was not different than his goal for himself. In Romans 15:15-16 he states:

“Nevertheless, brethren, I have written the more boldly unto you in some sort, as putting you in mind, because of the grace that is given to me of God, that I should be the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Ghost.”

The word that Paul uses for “minister” here is not the same as the one in our text. It is a word drawn from the Old Testament priestly ministry of offering sacrifices to God. Just as those offerings and sacrifices, if properly offered, were accepted by God, so Paul says that his calling was to offer up the Gentile believers in such a way that they “might be acceptable being sanctified by the Holy Ghost.”

Paul was faithful to his task. At the end of his life he could say “I am ready to be offered. . . I have finished my course” (II Tim. 4:6-7). He understood his goal and he achieved it through great effort and suffering.

IV. His Power

Paul would have been the first to say that in his own strength he could do nothing. The task he was called to was humanly impossible. Seen from a purely human perspective it appears grandiose, yet he fulfilled his calling and he did it in spite of great suffering and obstacles. He tells us how in verse 29: “Whereunto I also labor, striving according to his working, which works in me mightily.” The words labor and striving are very strong words that indicate exerting oneself beyond the maximum. Paul labored with superhuman effort. Just reading the accounts of his sufferings and difficulties leaves us in awe of his effort. Great work for God requires great effort, and there are two things about that effort that I want us to notice in conclusion.

Let us first consider the first and most difficult verse of the passage, verse 24: “Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is lacking in the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church.” This is one of the most difficult passages in all of Paul’s letters. It will be impossible to give a full explanation of it in one short sermon, but let me say two things about it. First, whatever Paul means by “fill up that which is lacking in the afflictions of Christ”, he does not mean that his sufferings or anyone else’s are redemptive. We have already stressed the finished work of Christ. God has finished the work of reconciliation in the cross of Christ. We add nothing to the work of Christ. We cannot suffer for the redemption of our own sins or the sins of anyone else. To that we must add that Paul understood that the gospel did not advance easily or automatically, but required effort and suffering on the part of its servants. Paul did not consider his suffering for Christ, and hence for his church, to be something unusual or exceptional, but he saw it as a necessary part of his work. Indeed, a part of his commission had been that he would “suffer many things for my name.”

Finally, Paul knew the power of the resurrected Christ. His epistles are filled with passages that parallel what he says here “striving according to the working that works mightily in me”. Allow me to reference just one that brings together the double themes of suffering and power in conclusion. In a well-known-passage, in I Cor. 12 Paul tells how he had implored the Lord three times to remove what he calls “a thorn in the flesh”. We do not know what that thorn was, but it caused him to suffer in the flesh. The Lord’s answer was to leave it and to tell Paul: “my grace is sufficient, my strength is made perfect in weakness.” Paul ‘s reaction to that was: “Most gladly therefore will I glory in infirmities, that the power of Christ might rest upon me” (II Cor. 12:9-10). Paul would tell us that suffering for Christ and experiencing the power of Christ are not unrelated, but are two sides of the same coin. Both are required if we are to fulfill our ministry.