

Text: Colossians 1:25-29

Title: Ministering the Mystery of the Gospel

Truth: Christian ministers and people must work hard toward maturity in Christ.

Date/Location: Sunday September 13, 2015 at FBC

Introduction

Let us start by reading Colossians 1:24-29, and then also the parallel passage Ephesians 3:1-13.

I. The Stewardship of Ministry, v. 25

- A. The last part of verse 24 speaks about the body of Christ, which is the church. This has to refer to universal church, not a single local church only. **Of which** (or **its**, NIV) refers back to the church and informs us that Paul became a minister of the church.
- B. God made Paul a minister of the church and **for you**—for the benefit of the church. This is what Paul means when he says **I became**.
1. Stewardship is a term that means a responsibility of management. An employee has a stewardship over certain areas of the company's work—the ones listed in his job description. The executor of an estate has a stewardship; a politician has a stewardship; a public servant; an administrative assistant; a pastor for his church; a husband over his home, a wife in her work in the home, and the like. Ministers as well as non-ministers have life stewardships. Note the parable in Luke 16:1-8 and the statement of Paul's stewardship in 1 Cor. 9:17.
 2. God has an assignment for me, and for you too. It may not be as specific or pointed perhaps as it was for Paul, but it is there nonetheless. For me, 1 Peter 4:10-11 comes to mind, in addition to the passages that indicate my stewardship responsibilities in the church—to keep myself pure, to work hard to be an example, to preach the Word whether it is seasonable to or not, to lead the church in carrying out its worship and ministry. I do this while seeking to be pleasing to God and not men—and assuming that believers are close enough to God that they would be pleased if God is pleased. For you who are not pastors, there are a good number of Bible portions that direct you as to what your motivations and priorities are to be. We don't see a lot of what the world values on that list. We should sit down and ask God what are the principles and priorities of my life supposed to be, then formulate our action plan around those.
- C. God gave Paul the task in order that he would **fulfill the word of God**. What does it mean to fulfill the word of God? The idea doesn't seem to be "fulfilling a prophecy." There is no past prophecy about Paul in particular that needs to be fulfilled. Rather, it means "filling the task" of the message so that it is proclaimed completely and has a life-transforming effect on those who hear. It means to spread it abroad. This is the content of his stewardship assignment.

II. The Mystery of the Gospel, v. 26-27

- A. Word of God. The word of God doesn't mean the entire Bible in this use, but rather refers to the "message" that God was distributing at the time then present. This is also called "the mystery."
- B. Gospel Hidden. This particular message was hidden from ages and generations. Some truths and future events had already been revealed in the past. For instance, it was known that God had a place for Gentiles in salvation (Isaiah 9:1, Isaiah 42:4, Matthew 12:21). It was also known that God would establish a kingdom on the earth that would involve all nations (Isaiah 9:7, Daniel 2:44, 7:14, 7:27). God revealed that the house of David would, ultimately, continue forever (2 Samuel 7:16), but there would be a falling down of that dominion and it would be rebuilt (Amos 9:11). But some things were not revealed for thousands of years to millions of people. And they had no possible way of figuring those things out unless God revealed them (1 Cor. 2:11).
- C. Gospel Revealed. What has now been revealed? Here is a sampling of truths now openly disclosed by God:
1. The church, a body of Jew and Gentile together with no ethnic dividing line. The truth is that the church is mainly composed of Gentiles.
 2. The indwelling Christ, which verse 27 says is the core of the mystery.
 3. The baptism of the Holy Spirit, by which God forms the church.
 4. The place of the church in the kingdom, as co-regents with Christ.
 5. Details of the second coming, the kingdom, and heaven.
- D. Stop to ponder the privilege that we have. People for the first four to five thousand years of world history had no knowledge or experience of the things you have in Christ. And we have those things!
- E. To the saints God often makes known what He is doing—like Christ said to his disciples (John 15:15), God to his prophets (Amos 3:7), and God with Abraham (Gen. 18:17-19). That's part of a close relationship between God and man. But God has ordained not to disclose other things to us regarding certain events in our lives, for example. For those things he does not reveal, we are encouraged to trust Him because He is loving, just, and omnipotent. God may reveal more later. That's up to Him. We do not worry.
- F. One of the reasons for wanting to make the gospel known is that this mystery is one that is **rich in glory**. It is the best news that could be shared. Think of being a former rebel enemy of God, to whom God graciously makes known His love and the propitiation of His wrath through the substitution of another person in your place. But then add to that the future glory of living without sin with God in heavenly bliss every day multiplied by forever.

G. Paul's audience, like us, was mostly Gentiles. We were far away from God—apart from His chosen people, separated by sin, etc. The core of the mystery Paul was preaching was this: that Christ would dwell in Gentile (and Jewish) Christians, by His Spirit.

1. The **in you** refers to the fact that Christ through the Holy Spirit lives in each and every Christian (Eph. 3:17). The church is indwelt by the Christ, in a manner that we know from other Biblical revelation is implemented through the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9, 1 Cor. 3:16 corporately, 6:19 individually).
2. This indwelling is a guarantee and seal of things to come. This is the earnest/down payment of the hope of future resurrection and life in a redeemed earth and body.
3. The "Christ in you" idea causes us to do a careful check on our thinking. If we have a "death-centered" gospel, in which our focus is on professing faith so we can get to heaven when we die, then we have a very impoverished view of God's plan. We must have a "life-centered" gospel that recognizes that we preach Christ living in us today (Galatians 2:20), freedom from enslavement to sin, forgiveness, righteousness, fellowship with God, identification with God's people, and eternal life, all beginning the day of your salvation.

III. The Proclamation of Christ, v. 28-29

Paul is concerned therefore with preaching Christ, that eternal hope. Paul gives three thoughts in this connection.

A. Proclamation includes warning and teaching

1. The previously unknown information has to be made known by messengers of the gospel. And, like a new product announcement or a politician's political speech, the message is repeated over and over for people everywhere to hear it. A mammoth task followed the work of Christ on the earth. The 12 disciples, the 120, and their followers had to spread a message world-wide to every generation subsequent to them.
2. Warning – negative. It means to advise to avoid or cease a wrong course of action.¹ Warning is helpful for unbelievers and believers.
3. Teaching – positive. Providing instruction inside or outside a classroom. Teaching is helpful for unbelievers and believers.
4. In all wisdom. This may refer to the gospel of God's wisdom as opposed to the wisdom of men (1 Cor. 2:5-7). More likely in this verse it refers to Paul using wisdom in his warning and teaching ministry.

¹ BDAG, s.v. "νουθετέω".

B. Goal of proclamation: to present people mature in Christ. Jesus said we are to be ‘perfect’ (fully developed, mature, Matthew 5:48). Paul’s ministry is working to make that happen, so that Christians will be righteous and more holy in conduct.

Application: “Perfect in Christ” is the goal of Christian, church ministry today.

That means I am working toward that goal—on you. Your deacons are helping us work toward that goal. Our Sunday school teachers are working toward this goal. Churches need to be working toward that goal, instead of aiming to entertain and fill their schedule with programs and social work. Are *you* working toward that same goal?

C. Hard work: Paul works very hard to carry out the proclamation in order to bring people to perfection in Christ. This is life-and-death work, and it is worthy of hard labor. His striving for these goals presses him on through sufferings and afflictions for Christ (v. 24).

1. Application: Ministry is hard work today too. It is not a vacation all week. To provide spiritual meals, to be available for counsel, to administrate so that there is a functioning body here to come to each week and invite people to and so forth takes work also. The main thing is getting the Word of God to people in teaching and warning so that they may be perfected. That’s worthy of all of our efforts.

2. It is hard work, but we have to remember that we can do nothing apart from Christ. That is why Paul reminds us that he strives with the divine power that works mightily in Him. John 15:5 is ever true—we can do nothing apart from Christ. “The Lord’s servants cannot *serve* Him in their own strength, for they cannot even *live* unless his grace abounds towards them” (Charles Spurgeon).

Conclusion

We would not even have spiritual life, much less any further blessings, unless it were for the mystery of the gospel made known by God through His apostles and prophets. God is at work through His servants, and in you, to accomplish His great goal to perfect you. Each of us needs to strive toward that goal according to His working which works in us.

The gospel took you from *where you were* in sin and death to *where you are* in life and freedom. But God is not done! He wants to take you from where you are to perfection in Christ Jesus. I want to encourage you to take every responsible step you can to help that to happen. Participate in the formation of the character of Christ in you—in every department of your life. If something comes out of you that is not like Christ, work to eradicate that thing. Perhaps God would have you take up the mantle of more involvement in warning and teaching people before it is for them too late. Christ is the eternally blessed God and is worthy of every effort in life and ministry to honor Him.

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