

The Pastoral Charge (Colossians 1:24-29)

It seems like our text this week was written specifically for me. At least, that's what it seemed like as I was studying for this sermon. It spoke directly to my heart. It is certainly convicting, but at the same time, I find it quite encouraging.

Paul is talking about the pastoral charge. If you're taking notes, you could really use as the basis of writing my evaluation. This talks about what I, as your pastor, am to be doing. We will start with verse 24, but the teaching really begins in verse 23. There, Paul, speaking of the gospel of Christ writes:

... of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Colossians 1:23)

The key word for this week's passage is the last word in verse 24. It's translated "minister" in most English versions of the Bible, but the NIV translates it as "servant" and that captures the sense of the word. The word in the Greek is *diakonos* (διάκονος) It was most often used to refer to a household servant, one who performed menial duties, like taking out the trash, emptying chamber pots, or waiting on tables. It wasn't a respected position at all. There was no cultural prestige attached to being a *diakonos*.

Nonetheless, it is a term Paul chose quite appropriately. Jesus said:

*"If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."
(Mark 9:35)*

Servant here is the same word ... *diakonos*. Paul's claim to ministry is that of a servant.

From verse 24 through 29, Paul lays out a philosophy of ministry. It is his, but it should also be mine - I need to pay attention. But this isn't just for me. If you are a Christian, you too have been called to a ministry. It might not be a pulpit preaching, but there are to be no slackers in the kingdom of God and every ministry is important to the edification of the church. So this is for you ... not just me. Let's take a look at what Paul has to say:

*I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.
(Colossians 1:24-29)*

The first question I want to address is this: What qualifies a person to be a minister? Now, in the King James translation, both in verse 23 and in verse 25 you have the phrase "I am made a minister". Many pastors and commentators have used that phraseology to conclude that it was God who made Paul a minister. That's true, but you cannot make the case by looking at the grammar of this passage.

The Greek word *ginomai* (γίνομαι) is in the middle deponent voice. I don't want to get too far into Greek grammar, a deponent is passive or middle in form but active in meaning. A deponent verb is almost always translated in the active voice. So that's why

the New King James translates this phrase “I became a minister”. We have to look elsewhere to find out why and how Paul became a minister.

Fortunately, Paul wasn’t bashful at all about sharing his experience, his personal testimony. In Galatians, he writes:

*For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. **But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles,** (Galatians 1:13-16)*

Paul did not set out to become a Christian minister. He wanted to destroy Christianity but God called him to something else. And God installed this burning desire deep within his soul.

I can relate. Seven years ago I was public school administrator. I was well-compensated, comfortable. I was looking forward to finishing up my career in another five years or so ... enjoying a comfortable retirement.

But when Jesus calls, you have to go.

Paul explains:

For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship. (1 Corinthians 9:16-17)

Becoming a pastor needs to be a compulsion.

Lecturing to seminary students, Charles Spurgeon famously said:

“If any student in this room could be content to be a newspaper editor or a grocer or a farmer or a doctor or a lawyer or a senator or a king, in the name of heaven and earth, let him go his way; he is not the man in whom dwells the Spirit of God in its fullness, for a man so filled with God would utterly weary of any pursuit but that for which his inmost soul pants.”

This sentiment has been reduced to the simple advice: “If you can do anything else, do it.” In other words, if you can be happy doing anything else in life, you should not pursue pastoral ministry.

verse 25 nails down the point:

... I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, (Colossians 1:25)

It is God who calls the minister. It is a stewardship from God ... and the ministry belongs to God. **Every ministry is from God** and that is my first point.

My second point: ministry is both a burden and a joy.

I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, (Colossians 1:24)

Now, that’s an odd turn of phrase! How in the world do you rejoice in sufferings? It’s not in our fallen nature, but it is the reality. The fact that Paul suffered should be evident.

From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:24-28)

Paul's ministry was certainly not a life of ease. In fact, he was in prison as he was writing this very letter. But Paul's ministry was also a joy. In fact joy was the very spirit of his ministry. "I now rejoice," he says. He could rejoice because he understood the grace of God. He understood that he was given the privilege of participating in God's plan of redemption. It wasn't because he deserved it. He deserved to be chucked into hell but God called him anyway. God didn't need Paul to evangelize the Mediterranean basin, but God chose Paul to march in Christ's victory parade.

God doesn't need me, either. I'm not suffering anywhere close to the degree Paul suffered, but make no mistake: ministry is hard. Ministry is a burden. I'm not whining, I'm just telling you what it is. I suppose it would be a pretty easy gig if you didn't give a rip, if you didn't realize that it was a stewardship given by Almighty God. After all, I only really work a couple hours a week. (At least, that's what a lot of folks seem to think.)

Most of my suffering is vicarious. I see the burdens so many of you carry. I see the heartache of broken bodies, broken relationships, the consequences of sin. I know the answer to everything is Jesus Christ, but so many people don't want to listen. That's what keeps me awake at night.

I know I fall so far short of the calling, of the stewardship God has given me, but He lets me be your pastor anyway. I think I've always been a pretty diligent worker, but I've never worked as hard as I do in this position. Yet there is so much joy in this!

I am so thankful to be able to conduct this ministry. I am so thankful for this church, this community. I am so thankful to be here because it is the source of so much joy.

God calls a person to ministry, and ministry will be both a burden and a joy. The next point is that God-ordained ministry is always purposeful. Ministry has a purpose. This is really the meat of this passage.

... I became a minister ... to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. (Colossians 1:25-26)

What does Paul mean by the phrase "to fulfill the word of God"? He uses similar language in writing to Timothy:

But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:5)

Paul is not talking about adding something to the word of God. He is referring simply to everything you have been called to do. As a pastor, I am to:

Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. (2 Timothy 4:2)

And the word is the mystery which had been hidden but has now been revealed to God's saints. It is the Gospel of Christ. The entire Old Testament was pointing to Jesus. It was all about Him, but He was revealed in types and shadows. In the New Testament, we have those types and shadows explained to us. The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.

This mystery reveals that you are a sinner, a rebel, a traitor and your sins have separated you from your God. But God loves you anyway.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

And the mystery is that ...

... God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

And if you will only ...

... confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

For you to come to saving faith in Jesus Christ and to have your faith nurtured and grown by the truth of God's word, well, that is the purpose of my ministry. Because if you are in Christ ...

... God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. (Colossians 1:27-28)

Is Jesus Christ in you? There is nothing more important. Your standing in eternity depends on your relationship with Jesus Christ.

As I studied for and prayed about this sermon, I found myself profoundly humbled. Who is sufficient for these things? The calling to ministry is of God. Because of its nature, ministry is both a great burden and a great joy and the purpose is delivering the greatest, most important, eternal truth in the universe. Oh Lord, who is sufficient for such things?

I'm sure glad Paul included verse 29.

To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily. (Colossians 1:29)

Yes, ministry requires labor. It requires diligent effort. It is often hard work. But in fact, it is God who is working in me and through me and Paul asserts that it is a mighty work.

He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:24)

I cling to that verse every Sunday morning. It is the only thing that gives me any confidence at all.

God does the work! It is true in pulpit ministry, if it is to have any positive impact for the kingdom and it is true for your ministry too. Make no mistake; if you are a Christian, you have a ministry. You are to be a witness for Christ by your lifestyle, by your labor, by your testimony. And your ministry, however humble you think it might be, is just as important to God as the mega-church pastor with a global media outreach.

God will call you to your ministry. It will be a burden, but it will also give you profound joy. Jesus will use you to edify and build up His Church and as you labor, it is God who brings forth the harvest.

I want to close with the very same passage I read at the top of our worship this morning. It is 1 Peter 4:10-11, or you can read it from your bulletin.

*As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever.
Amen. (1 Peter 4:10-11)*