

# What Does Ministry Look Like?

by Mark Jarvinen

## THE SITUATION

I'm sure most of us are aware of a significant drift away from the Christian Church in recent years. I'm not saying that people are less spiritually interested. In fact, in today's culture, it's quite common for spiritual seekers to say they admire Jesus, but hate the church. In fact, according to research done in 2016 by the **Barna Group**, nearly half of all those in America who self-identify as Christian, i.e. those who have some sort of background or previous involvement with the Church, are now un-churched. There are many reasons why church attendance is down in America, but get this, according to Barna, fully 10% of this un-churched group came right out and said that they actually "**hate the church.**" ([www.barna.com/research/meet-love-jesus-not-church](http://www.barna.com/research/meet-love-jesus-not-church)). In this post-modern era, many are attempting to re-invent or re-cast the church and its message according to their own liking. That said, we need to ask, from a Biblical perspective, "**What does ministry look like?**"

## THE INTRODUCTION

The church in Colossae certainly had its issues. That's why the Apostle Paul wrote to them, even as he sat in prison, probably in Rome. Paul had never met the Colossians in person. It's probable that his colleague in ministry, **Epaphras**, had actually planted the church and had come to visit Paul in prison, arriving to tell him that false teaching had sprung up among the Colossian Church and was spreading like wildfire. This **Colossian heresy** promoted a humanly

based, secret wisdom and self-made religion that emphasized rule keeping, ceremonial traditions,(observing certain festivals and holy days) and self-denial (following strict dietary regulations and codes of disciplined behaviors, as the way by which to tame fleshly desires and create the illusion of holiness and spiritual progress. This striving toward self-improvement had become its own kind of idolatry in Colossae. It bred a kind of spiritual caste system in which those who had attained the highest level of secret knowledge or wisdom, and had achieved the highest degree of self-denial, were among the spiritual elite and worthy of great honor. There was certainly an element of truth that these elitists found appealing in Christianity, with its emphasis on being presented before God as **“perfect”** or **“mature”** in the faith (v. 28). Our series theme after all is entitled **“Rooted and Grounded.”** But Paul sensed that there was something off-kilter about the false teachers’ understanding of “maturity” and the nature of ministry. They seemed more interested in promoting their own glory rather than Christ’s glory. Paul knew that their emphases led to a dead end street – impossible to attain through self-effort. Christians were among **“the perfect”** not by their own works, but by the work of God’s grace through the death and resurrection of Christ, which is sufficient both for salvation and our daily walk of faith. Thus, in today’s text, **Paul introduces himself** to the Colossian Church, while at the same time **refuting the instigators of the Colossian Heresy**, by describing the nature of the Christian ministry, not as **Elitism**, but as **Servanthood** .

## I. IT’S A MINISTRY OF SUFFERING (v. 24)

***“Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.***

Over the centuries, this verse has given rise to a certain amount of dispute, which we will see. However, Paul makes clear that he has endured sufferings in his ministry, but his sufferings were for a purpose, the benefit of the Colossian congregation, and therefore, they were a source of joy for him. **For Paul, there is no thought of elitism, which seemed to be the case with the false teachers.** The supremacy of Christ was so central for Paul, that he found a sense of joy in enduring hardship for the sake of others. Notice that when Paul was called by God to be an apostle, his thought was not **“What’s in it for me?”** **“What am I going to get out of it?”** Rather, by his life, we can see the question for Paul was **“What will God allow me to put into this ministry?”** There’s something incredibly validating about the ministry of someone who is willing to suffer for the sake of others.

**John Piper**, former pastor of Bethlehem Baptist in Minneapolis, in one of his sermons, shared a story first told by **J. Oswald Sanders**, about an **indigenous missionary** (a missionary to his own country) 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 village and tried to speak the gospel, but was soundly rejected and driven out of the village. Dejected and exhausted, he laid down under the first tree he could find as he left the village and fell asleep. When he awoke, people were hovering over him. The whole village had gathered around him to hear him speak. The chief of the village explained to him that they came to look at him while he slept, and saw his **blistered feet**. It was then they realized that he must be a holy man and it was evil of them to reject him. **They were sorry and now wanted to hear the message that**

he was willing to suffer so much to bring them. Piper concluded the story by saying, “**So the evangelist filled up the afflictions of Jesus with his beautiful blistered feet.**” (John Piper, Desiring God, 2007).

When Paul writes in v. 24, “**and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions,**” we may be sure that “Paul did not regard the death of Jesus as lacking in efficacy to make full atonement for the sins of mankind. That death was complete, once for all and wholly adequate to meet man’s need for the forgiveness of sins” (Curtis Vaughan, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Colossians, Vol. 11, p. 190). The word “**afflictions**” used by Paul here is never used in the **NT** to speak of the sufferings of Christ on the cross; only to the tribulations our Lord endured during his life and ministry. In other words, the sufferings that followers of Christ endure in their ministries are simply a continuation of the afflictions and persecutions Christ endured up to his death on the cross.

This leads to a second aspect of the nature of Paul’s Ministry ...

## **II. IT’S A MINISTRY OF PROCLAMATION (vv. 25-29)**

**<sup>25</sup> I have become its (the church’s) servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—  
<sup>26</sup> the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people. <sup>27</sup> To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.  
<sup>28</sup> He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. <sup>29</sup> To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.**

In **v. 25**, we learn that Paul had become a servant of the church, not as a volunteer, but by a call from God, a commission, or an appointment. All Christians receive gifts of the Spirit to use for the building up of the church, but there is something of a special mandate from God in Paul's call into ministry, which was to **“present ... the word of God in its fullness.”** This call to servanthood, in this case the call to preach the word in its fullness, is to make clear **the true nature of the gospel** as God's provision for the rescue of sinners intended for all people, which is not only a joy, but a duty, a high privilege and a sacred trust.

In **verses 26-27** Paul uses the term **“mystery”** to specify the more generalized term **“the word of God”** he uses in **v. 25**. By the term **“mystery,”** which the false teachers used to denote a secret form of higher wisdom or knowledge in a more philosophical sense, Paul uses it in the **NT** to mean **“the truth that is undiscoverable except by divine revelation,”** or that which is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Whereas, the false teachers used the term **“mystery”** to denote **“a closed secret,”** a special knowledge for a select few, Paul uses the term as **“an open secret,”** once hidden, but now revealed not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles, not in a system of rules and regulations, but as a **living and glorious Person** who is the fulfillment of the deepest hopes of mankind and the source of new life for all people.” Paul refers to this revealed truth in **v. 27** as **“Christ in you, the hope of glory.”** **The gospel in a word is Christ, the One who opens the door to eternal life, which is our hope of glory!**

Christian speaker and author, **Tony Evans**, illustrates this truth by referring to the ever popular truck commercials we see on television, with their common theme of the ability of the truck to pull something, like a boat, up a hill. We quickly realize after our attention is first grabbed by the beautiful boat, that it is just along for the ride. The power for the tow is located under the hood of the truck. The power is built into the vehicle. The boat can't do a thing on its own, it has to be hooked up to the truck. **The power for your Christian life is not in you. The power for your Christian life is Christ under the hood; it's Christ in you, the hope of glory (Tony Evans, book of illustrations, Moody Press, 2009).**

Sadly, we often try to place our hope in our own temporal glory, what we can do to make ourselves look good in the eyes of others, to bolster our own egos. We still struggle with this because of the battle between the **flesh** (the old nature that is still capable of rearing its ugly head) and the **Spirit** (the new nature marked by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit). This battle is part of the **maturing process** in Christian living. All believers, with boots on the ground, experience this battle on a daily basis. **Having said this, I want you to pay very close attention to what I am about to say.** This daily struggle is made more difficult than it needs to be when we **AVOID THE GOSPEL. What do you mean, Pastor Mark?** The gospel is the old, old story of Jesus and His love. It's the message of salvation. I don't avoid the gospel, I LOVE the gospel. Yes, that's true. We do love the gospel, especially the part about the forgiveness of sins. However, if you're at all like me, we, in our weakness, often find it all too easy to forget the breadth of the gospel's implications. I so easily

slip into a pattern in which life becomes all about building my own little kingdom, complete with my own standards, regulations, goals, and preferences, where my deepest concerns are about me and what I want. It's subtle. I become preoccupied with my own strengths, achievements, and attainments (or the lack thereof).

An example of this took place in my life a few years ago, when a new acquaintance and I met, and he found out I'm a pastor. Newly retired, his successful career had involved opening new HyVee grocery stores all across the Midwest. He asked me a simple question – ***“So how big is your congregation?”*** My old nature often gets hooked by this question, especially when coming from people who have been obviously “successful” in their own right. The fact is, in my 40 year pastoral career, I've never served a large congregation, nor have I planted any new churches. My ego tells me that I, therefore, haven't been a very “successful,” pastor. I wonder if I'm the only pastor who has ever thought this way? **Now, let me ask you this – “Was I hearing this question with gospel ears or ears more attuned to the law?”** I think the answer to this question is fairly obvious, don't you? What was I doing? I was making the size of the congregations I've served all about me. **I sometimes couch my answer in a way that won't be as big a blow to my pride. But in a subtle way, I'm avoiding the gospel as a Christian.** You see, the gospel isn't only the message that saves us initially. It's also the message we as Christians live by. It's the message by which we're rooted and built up in the faith.

**SIN IS MY TENDENCY (AND YOURS) TO AVOID THE GOSPEL** by being more concerned about propping up our own egos, by looking good in the eyes of others, more than honestly and humbly sharing Christ and serving people, while leaving the results up to God. **In Tony Evans' illustration, that's the boat trying to pull the truck up the hill. It's not only exhausting, it's impossible!** At the end of the day, the gospel teaches us that it's all about Christ in us the hope of glory - the One who is under the hood, powering us all the way to our final destination in glory.

To put a bow on this thought, allow me to share the words of an admired proclaimer of the gospel, **Paul Tripp**, who writes:

**The gospel tells us, 'Relax, it is finished.' The gospel grants us the strength to admit we're weak and needy and restless – knowing that Christ's finished work has proven to be all the strength and fulfillment and peace we could ever want, and more" (New Morning Mercies, Paul Tripp).**

And so ministry is all about servanthood, a willingness to suffer with joy, for the sake of others, as part of the gospel enterprise, which through various methods and mediums proclaims the mystery, once secret, but now revealed - Christ in us, the hope of glory. **A-men.**