



Central Peninsula Church

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Colossians 1:24-29

Mark Mitchell

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A Christ-Centered Ministry

SERIES: *Colossians: Complete in Christ*

In an office just slightly bigger than a cubicle, Scott Adams transforms stories of idiotic bosses and meaningless empowerment teams into *Dilbert*, the chinless comic strip hero to millions of cubicle-confined workers.

Since Adams revealed his internet address, he's been swamped with questions from readers who wonder how he knew the exact kind of ineptitude with which their company operates. It's because he has been there. Adams endured 17 years of cubicle employment - most recently as an engineer with Pac Bell, a job he left after 6 years of *Dilbert* syndication.

Adams says, "I don't think I'll ever forget what it feels like to sit in a cubicle and realize you've been there for eight hours and everything you did today will become unimportant in the next reorganization."

Scott Adams expresses in his comic strip what many of us feel about our work. When everything is said and done, infinitely more is said than done. Believe it or not, it's a comic strip that could be written even by a minister of Jesus Christ.

To be honest, there are times in my life I could have written it. There have been times in my life when a kind of discouragement of soul comes on me and I wonder if what I'm doing is really making any difference. Like many of you, I would like to see a revival in the Bay Area. I'd like to see this become a place that is known for its vibrant churches and for its ministries that are making a difference in the marketplace, the slums, politics and the media. As Ryon has told us, there are encouraging bits of fire all over, but there is a long way to go. At times I look at it all and wonder if my efforts and the efforts of this church really matter at all.

When I feel that way I take inspiration from the apostle Paul. There was a time when I saw Paul as a man apart. It seemed that he was superhuman in his passion and his spirit. I could never have imagined him wanting to quit, suffering seasons of discouragement, wondering what difference it all made. But then something happened a few years back as I studied his second letter to the Corinthians. I began to see the human side of Paul. I saw his weakness. I saw his anxiety. I saw his doubts. I think I began to see Paul as he truly was. History says he was about five foot seven, bald head, large nose, bow legged, bad eye sight. I began to see him as a man, full of doubts and fears, wanting to be liked, his spirit as well as his body having taken a beating. Someone once said, "I've seen the tracks of a wounded rabbit red across the snow." Those could have been the tracks of the apostle Paul across the Roman empire. It was a terrifying, harsh, demon-infested world that Paul lived in. We face

obstacles, but he faced more. He ends his life in a lonely dungeon in Rome. He's killed in Nero's persecution. Yet somehow this man made an imprint on his culture and changed the history of the world. Today we name our dogs after Nero and sons after Paul.

I want to ask, what made the difference? How did he do it? We can say, "Well, he didn't do it; God's Spirit did it through him." That would be true, but it's also true that you and I have that same Spirit living in us and I don't think he's changed. We say, "He had a commission from God. He was knocked off his horse on the road to Damascus." Well, though perhaps not quite so dramatic, we have a commission as well. The last words of the King before he left were, "Go into all the nations and make disciples." I think there was something else; something that came out of the very center of Paul's existence set him apart. We see flashes of it in his letters. We see it especially in Colossians. What Paul had was a love and a passion for the person of Jesus Christ. He summed it up once when he said, **"For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."** In Col. 1:24-29 we see this passion come out as he describes his ministry. Unlike his critics in Colossae, his was a ministry that was centered in his love for the person of Christ,

"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions. Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me."

I. Christ-centered suffering (v. 24)

We see Paul's passion and love for Christ first of all in v. 24 as he describes his sufferings. We know that Paul wrote this letter from prison in Rome. We know that Paul suffered to bring the Gospel to people living in Asia.

To the Corinthians he wrote, **“Five times I received from the Jews 39 lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep...”** (2 Cor. 24-26). No one could say that Paul wasn't willing to pay the price.

But Paul says he rejoiced in his sufferings. He did not rejoice because he enjoyed being beaten up. He didn't take some kind of bizarre delight in pain. Paul rejoiced in his suffering because he saw them as connected to Jesus Christ. He says his sufferings are on behalf of Christ's body, the church. Without Paul's willingness to suffer, there would have been no church in Asia. For Paul, to love Christ meant to love his church, with all its flaws and hypocrisies.

When my oldest daughter was young we bought her a Cabbage Patch doll. Ugliest thing you ever saw! But she loved that doll. She took it everywhere she went. Over time, not only was it ugly, but it was dirty and smelly. But we all knew, if you loved my daughter, you had to love her doll as well. Paul knew it was that way with Christ. If you loved Christ, you had to care for his church as well. It was a package deal.

But that's not all. Paul says that his sufferings “fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.” This verse has confused preachers for centuries. We know that Paul CAN'T mean that somehow Christ's suffering on the cross was deficient in paying for our sins. Right up in v. 22 he says Christ's death on the cross was all it took to reconcile us to God and present us before him as holy and blameless. Paul is not saying his own sufferings help pay for our sins. So what does he mean? It's clear he sees a radical identification of Christ with his church, so much so that when his church suffers, Christ suffers. Remember when Paul was knocked off his horse on the road to Damascus? He was on his way to persecute Christians and Jesus said to him, **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute ME?”** (Acts 9:4). Jesus says he was being persecuted in the bodies of his followers. Christ's sufferings didn't end on the cross. They continue today as his people suffer. It's in this sense that when we suffer for him we fill up what is still lacking in the sufferings of Christ. This is why Paul could rejoice in his suffering. This is why we can rejoice. Our suffering is an expression of our unity with him. That's why Paul says in Philippians he wants to know **“the fellowship of his sufferings”** (Phil 3:10).

I'm not even in the same league as the Apostle Paul. But those who know me well know that the weekly task of preaching takes a lot out of me. When people ask me if I love preaching, I usually tell them I have a “love-hate relationship” with preaching. I love to study the word, but I hate the weekly grind of preparation. I love to communicate the Scripture, but I hate the stress I feel as Sunday nears. I love to see people's lives change as a result of my preaching, but I hate having to preach truth to others that I know I often don't live out myself. But this week, as I studied this passage, I felt the Lord nudge me. I

felt him say, “These are not your sufferings; they're my sufferings.” Knowing that our sufferings, as small and insignificant as they seem, are his sufferings, helps us. It brings even joy.

II. Christ-centered service (vv. 25-28a)

Secondly, we see Paul's passion and love for Jesus Christ in his service. In v. 25 Paul calls himself a “minister” of the church.

Recently I was at my son's baseball practice and a woman introduced me to her son as “Mr. Mitchell.” She caught herself and said, “I'm sorry, should I have called you Pastor Mitchell? What DO they call you at your church? Pastor? Reverend? Father?” I said I'm not sure what they call me behind my back, but to my face they call me Mark.

When Paul calls himself a “minister” he's not using a formal title. That word means “servant.” Paul knew that true ministry is all about being a servant. In v. 23 he calls himself a servant of the gospel. Here he calls himself a servant of the church. In other places he calls himself a servant of Christ Jesus. For Paul that was the greatest title a person could have.

Paul says his service was a “stewardship from God” given to him not for his benefit but for the benefit of others. In Paul's day a steward was usually a slave who was given a charge to keep or a commission to fulfill by his master. He was to be faithful in the management of what the master entrusted him. As followers of Christ each one of us is a steward. We've been given gifts and talents and opportunities that we are to manage for the master. Peter says, **“As each one has received a special gift, employ it as good stewards of the manifold grace of God”** (1 Peter 4:10). He gives us freedom to make choices in how we do that. A day will come when we'll stand before him and give an account of our stewardship. These gifts are not there for our own self-improvement or so we can become self-actualized. As with Paul, we're to use them to build up his church.

Paul says his stewardship was to fully proclaim the word of God. His commission was to lay out the word of God in its entirety. He calls the core of its message a “mystery” of infinite value. We talk about a mystery as something difficult to unravel or explain. There are those who might listen to a sermon and come away scratching their head, saying, “I don't know what that was about. It was a mystery.” We see bumper stickers telling us to visit the “Mystery Spot.” I've never been there, but it must be something that's hard to explain. But that's not what Paul means here by “mystery.” A mystery in the Bible is a truth which we can only know if God chooses to reveal it to us. It's a truth that for a time remains hidden, but then becomes clear to those God chooses to reveal it to. He says this mystery has now been revealed to his saints - ordinary believers like you and me.

There are two aspects to this mystery. One has to do with “Who?” Prior to the coming of Christ, the Jews

enjoyed a unique relationship to God. He chose them from all the nations of the earth. His plan always was to extend that blessing to Gentiles, but that plan didn't become fully revealed until the coming of Christ. Christ said, "For God so loved the WORLD..." This was a hard thing for Jews to get. This is why they crucified Christ and persecuted Paul. The Jews believed they had a copyright on God, but now Paul preaches this Gospel as if it's computer software that anyone could download for free. This was the "who" of the mystery.

The other aspect has to do with "What?" Paul says the what of the mystery is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Here again we see Paul's passion and love for Christ. He loved to teach the wonderful truth that not only did Christ die for us, but he came to live in us. We don't serve a dead Christ. He's not hanging on that cross anymore. He's not in that grave. He's alive. And he's not just alive way up there; he's alive in here. And it's his life in us that guarantees our future share in his glory. I remember as a kid we used to hate "glory hogs." These were guys that tried to hog all the glory; they always had to be in the limelight. But there is nothing wrong with wanting glory. In the Bible the word "glory" means to be weighty. There is something in all of us that longs for that. We want to be weighty people; we want glory. God made us for glory. Not just to see it, but to participate in it; to actually be glorified. That's what Christ in us guarantees us of - we will be glorified; we will become weighty people.

We see Paul's passion and love for Jesus in his suffering. We see it in his service. Thirdly, we see it in his purpose.

III. Christ-centered purpose (v. 28b)

At the end of v. 28 Paul says his purpose was "to present every man complete (perfect) in Christ." In the Bible that word "complete" means to be perfect in the sense of being mature. Remember the Marines had that slogan, "Be all that you can be." That's what it means to be perfect or mature in Christ. It means to be all that you can be in Christ. That's what the church needs today. It needs Christians to be all that they can be. This isn't for just a few super spiritual people. Three times in this verse Paul says this is for every believer. It's attainable for all. We wonder sometimes what God's will is for our lives. We focus far too much on where we are supposed to go; God's will has far more to do with who we are supposed to be. He wants us to become complete and mature.

We might wonder how a baby Christian could be presented to God complete if God just started the process of changing him or her. Think of a seven-year-old boy or girl. We look at that boy and we think, "That boy is a mature seven-year-old. He is all that a seven-year-old should be." He's not all that a thirty-year-old should be, but he's all that a seven-year-old should be. If he was all that a thirty-year-old should be we would think something was wrong with him. I think that's how it works with us. At any stage of our Christian life we can be considered all that God wants us to be. As a baby Christian we can be complete in Christ because we are all that a baby should be. It's when a thirty-year-old acts like a seven-year-old that we cringe.

What do you do to make mature believers? Do you send them off on the mission field? Do you run them through a discipleship program? Paul says "We proclaim him..." His methodology was very simple - he just preached about Christ. That involves two things. He says it involves "admonishing every person." That means to warn, to correct. If people are going to become complete in Christ there will be times we need to tell them what they are doing wrong. We say, "How could I do that when I'm not perfect myself." We do it in humility and gentleness and love. Tell me, how could you possibly ever parent a child without admonishing them? Without admonishment, we would all raise criminals.

It also involves "teaching every man with all wisdom." This is the positive side of proclaiming Christ. It means instructing people in how to live; applying the word of God to our lives. This is why the exposition of the word of God is central to our life together as a church. This is why we open the Scripture here on Sunday mornings and study line upon line, book upon book. We see this as central; as a non-negotiable. It's not just one thing among many that we can do; it's the center of our ministry.

It's not my job to come here and comment on world affairs. I have to tell you most of you could do that a whole lot better than me. It's not my job to pat you all on the back and make you feel better. It's not my job to make you laugh, although we enjoy a good laugh once in a while. But I make you laugh because when your mouth is open I can insert some truth in there a little easier. You see, it's my job to proclaim him, admonishing and teaching. It's the word of God that changes our lives. It's the word of God that allows us to be all that we can be.

By the way, it's not just me. In 3:16 he says to the whole church, "**Let the word of God richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another...**" Isn't that great? The same words are used, but here it's not some apostle or pastor who is to do it, but each one of us. That doesn't mean you ought to just walk up to someone and admonish them. There has to be relationship. There has to be trust established. But with that we have the right and the responsibility to admonish and teach one another.

We've seen Paul's passion and love for Christ in his suffering, his service, and in his purpose. We read this and we might begin to feel worn out. When did the guy take a day off?

IV. Christ-centered power (v. 29)

At first sight it might appear that he doesn't. In v. 29 he says "**for this purpose we labor...**" That word for "labor" means to work to the point of exhaustion. He adds that he strives. That's a word from the Olympic games of Paul's day. It means to agonize. The Greeks took the Olympic Games very seriously. We date time forward and backward from

the birth of Jesus. They measured time from the beginning of the Olympic Games. Athletes went through strict training. In gymnasia all over Greece they worked for nine months to be able to compete in a contest. Paul says that's the spirit I bring to the ministry. I'm not like some fat business man puffing around the high school track trying to lose a little weight. My spirit is that of an Olympic athlete striving, agonizing for the prize. That's what we are to be like. D.L. Moody was a shoe salesman turned evangelist. His prayer on one occasion as he rolled into bed was, "Lord, I'm tired. Amen." There ought to be times in our life when we say that because of our service for the Master.

But how do we keep going? Even in this Paul can't leave Christ out. Paul says he strives according to Christ's power within him. Literally he says, "I am energized by Christ's energy which powerfully works with me." Earlier he talked about "Christ in you" as a source of hope for the future. Here we see that Christ in you is also a source of power and energy for the present. We ask, how can I know that power? How can I keep from being burned out in my service of Christ? There is no secret here. The only way to know his power is to enter the contest and start striving with Paul. When you do that you will discover something. You will discover that it taxes you to the breaking point; it's agonizing. But at that moment when you know you've nothing left to give you will discover Christ giving you something to give. As you run out of strength, he'll supply you with strength. You don't get to experience his power until you run out of your own. It's like one of those camcorders that has to have the battery drained before it can be recharged. You only get recharged once your own strength has been drained.

CONCLUSION

What Paul wants us to know in this passage is this: anything we endeavor to do for God apart from a passion and love for Jesus Christ is meaningless. Any suffering you endure apart from a love for Jesus Christ is meaningless. Any service you render apart from a passion for Jesus Christ is futile. Any purpose you seek apart from a passion and love for Jesus Christ misses the mark. Any energy you expend apart from a love for Jesus Christ is wasted.

It's a lesson anyone who endeavors to make his or her life count must remember. The church at Ephesus had to learn this. They were busy with good deeds, they had solid teaching and could sniff out heresy like a bloodhound, they suffered for the name of Christ and did not even complain. But Jesus wrote them a letter and said, **"I have this against you, that you have left your first love."** (Rev. 2:1-7).

Peter had fallen into the same religious trap. He thought of himself as the only disciple man enough to take the heat of persecution. He said to Jesus one night, "I will never deny you." But before the morning sun was up, he had denied him three times. A few days later he sat on the shores of Galilee with the risen Christ unable to even raise his head and look his Master in the eyes.

Jesus asked him three times, "Do you love me, Peter?"

Each time Peter nodded, "Yes, Lord, I love you. You know I love you."

Jesus said, "Tend my lambs. Shepherd my sheep."

Jesus was telling Peter to connect the dots: "Anything you endeavor to do for God must come out of your love and passion for me." You see, it's possible in the midst of all the business of ministry to lose touch with the One who ministered to you. And when you do that, serving God becomes as meaningless as sitting in a cubicle and waiting for the next reorganization. Don't let that happen. Keep your love for Jesus Christ and your passion for him at the center of all you endeavor to do for God.

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