

**May 25, 2007**

*Colossians 1:23-27*

Alright good morning! Hope you are having a great holiday weekend. I'm excited that those of you who were in town chose to be here in worship this morning. Grab your Bibles. Let's go back to Colossians chapter 1. We're going to back track a little today in order to catch all that God has for us in this passage. We looked at verse 24 last Sunday but we'll go back to the end of verse 23 today to get started.

Remember that Paul in these verses is in many ways defending his ministry – his apostleship – his message to the Colossians because not only has the truth come under attack at the church at Colossae, but along with that, Paul as the messenger of that truth will be called into question as well. So let's look at what he writes. Remember in verses 19-23 he has just laid out the gospel and the reality of what God has accomplished for the Colossian believers and now he says half way into verse 23...

TEXT

I told you last week that Paul is not defending his ministry or message or saying any of this out of pride but for the sake of the Colossians. And we see that real quickly when he explains the source of his ministry. Look back at verse 23 again – he says “this is the gospel that you have heard” and then he says “of which I, Paul have become a servant.” Look at verse 25 he says at the end of 24, “for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant...” Where the NIV says “**I have become**” is literally “**I have been MADE.**” In other words, the source of this ministry is GOD. The source of his message is God. This is not about Paul – Paul is under the direction of God.

In fact Paul was going a totally different direction on his own. You probably know about Paul's conversion and calling and I won't go into it here because Paul doesn't, but your notes give you scriptural details to look at if you don't know or want a refresher of why Paul can say “I have been made its servant.” (Acts 26:9-18; Philippians 3:5-14) So God is the source of Paul's ministry. As a result, fundamentally how does Paul see himself? Both times here in 23 and in 25 Paul says he has become a what? A servant. **Fundamentally Paul saw himself as a SERVANT.** That's a pretty typical way for Paul to describe himself and I think it's pretty significant.

Here we have a man who may be the greatest Christian of all time. That's probably fair to say. He wrote most of the New Testament after all. He has to be up there on the list of men and women who have suffered the most for Christ. And time and time again we find him actually living out the truths that he wrote. There are few men whom God has used to make more of an impact on the world and on the church. And yet in spite of all that, how did he view himself? As a servant.

There are few things the world disdains more than being a servant. People don't want to be servants because a servant's basic job is to do what someone else wants. That's the definition of being a servant right? As a result, the servant is not the center of attention, the servant is never supposed to be the focal point. And when it came to his work as a servant, Paul would agree with that. He wasn't looking to be center of attention. In fact listen to how he puts it in

1 Corinthians 3:5

*“What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.”*

Paul is saying stop making it about me – it's not about me – it's about God. And within that, what does Paul say he is a servant of here?

First in verse 23 he says **he is a servant of the GOSPEL.** Look at it – actually go back to verse 19 and start there. TEXT 19-23.

What does that tell us about Paul? It means the message is up here and Paul is down here. **He was not ruler OVER the message – the message was ruler over him.** He was its servant. **The gospel – what he just wrote about – was and is OBJECTIVE truth – it existed outside and independent of Paul.**

You say ok – big deal – I know that. Listen – that had profound implications for the way Paul went about his ministry. Since it wasn't his message, it was God's message, he didn't have the freedom to play fast and loose with it. He couldn't just skip the parts he didn't like. In fact listen to what he said in Galatians 1:8-9

*“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”*

You don't mess around with the truth because it's the truth. But sometimes – actually a lot of times today – when it comes to ministry and to church, men think and act not like they are servants of the gospel, but rulers over it. That they can change it or soften it or make it more acceptable to the people. In fact there is a whole philosophy of ministry that is driven by this idea. The idea that the church is in competition with the world. And for the church to keep up, it's got to get better at “selling” its product. The church has got to market the gospel. The problem is the Bible says the gospel is a stumbling block to the unbeliever so that's going to be hard to market. And what ends up happening is that the ideas that bother people – like preaching about sin and righteousness and judgment – all that is ignored and what the church ends up focusing on is what people like to hear – which is usually not what they need to hear. And as a result it becomes more about the man in the pulpit than the truth in his message.

You know George Whitefield was one of the greatest preachers of all time. Most people haven't even heard of him today, but at his time in history he was literally world renowned. But there was a point in his ministry when he chose to step down as the leader of a particular movement because he thought his popularity was causing people to follow him instead of Christ. His friends begged him not to – even told him that to do so would cause him to lose his fame and be forgotten by future generations. This is how Whitefield responded:

*“Let the name of Whitefield perish, but Christ be glorified. Let my name die everywhere; let even my friends forget me, if by that means the cause of the blessed Jesus be promoted. But what is Calvin? What is Luther? Let us look above names and parties, let Jesus be our all in all so that He is preached – I care not who is uppermost. I know my place – even to be a servant of all.”*

Quite a different world than we are in today. In fact when we are in a culture that cares less about the message and pretty much judges the day on whether or not I enjoyed the messenger – then we are in a scary place. You know a lot of people assume that my greatest fear when I preach is that I'm going to bore you. But that's not it. I mean I don't want to take the incredible word of God and make it boring to you but my greatest fear is that I would be wrong. That I would teach you something that is not in accordance with the revelation given us by God. Why? Because it is up here and I am down here. That's why I pray every Sunday “God hide me and don't let me get in the way of what you want to say.”

So Paul viewed himself as a servant of the gospel in verse 23 and then in verse 25 he adds something to his description when he says he has also been made a **servant of the CHURCH.**

We saw this in detail last week – that Paul was not only willing to suffer for the church – for the body of Christ – but that he actually rejoiced in what was suffered if it built up the body of Christ. You can get last week's sermon for more explanation of that in verse 24, let me just give you a simple example of it from Philippians chapter 1 – turn there with me – to Philippians 1:21-26. TEXT

Paul says I would rather die & be with Jesus but if I continue to live I can serve the church. So that's what I'll do – I'll choose life – not because of my own pleasure, but because I can serve the church through my suffering.

So Paul sees himself as a servant – a servant of the message – a servant of the truth and he knows his ministry comes from God. As Paul continues in chapter 1 we see the purpose of his being a servant. What the NIV says in verse 25 is that “I have become its servant **by the commission that God gave me...**” **The word there means STEWARDSHIP.** God has given me a stewardship and the purpose of that stewardship he says is **to present to you the word of God in its FULLNESS.** (We’ll come back to that in a minute) but for now he explains that comment by saying to make known *“the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. 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.”*

When Paul uses the word “**mystery**” here he doesn’t use it in the sense of the Hardy Boys or Agatha Christie where there is this big build up and then some twist ending – it doesn’t mean something that is just out there and we’ll never understand it – and it isn’t some secret teaching or rite or ceremony that is hidden from the masses and revealed only to an exclusive group of people. That would be more in line with what the false teachers are saying back in Colossae. **No a mystery is merely something that was hidden or unknown in the past which is now REVEALED in the New Testament.** And the source of its revealing we see in what Paul says. Look at it – in verse 26 he says it “is now disclosed” and in verse 27 he says “God has chosen to make known” – in other words **these mysteries are not DISCOVERED by the genius of man, but are revealed by the will and act of God.** It is God’s purpose that His people know this truth. And if God wants His people to know it – then I want to know it, right?

Now one aspect of this we probably would normally just miss or skip right over. Remember, Paul is writing to primarily Gentile – non-Jewish believers. And he actually points out in verse 27 that God has made all this known “among the Gentiles.” But in Paul’s day this was huge. Everything up until Jesus – really even up until Paul spread the message – was about the Jews. The Jews had the conviction that they and they alone were God’s people – God’s plan – they had the Law, they had the Prophets, the Messiah was coming to restore honor and privilege and standing for the Jew. Gentiles were on the outside of that – that’s what Paul says in Ephesians 2:12, you can look it up later. But **part of the mystery here was that God INTENDED to save the Gentiles from the very beginning.** Christ among the Gentiles was not Plan B after the gospel had been rejected by the Jews – it was God’s eternal purposed. Listen to Ephesians 2:15-16 – really we ought to read verses 13 through 22 but for time’s sake we’ll focus on 15 & 16, he says:

*“His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two (Jews & Gentiles), thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.”*

Folks that was huge. And thank God it is true or you and I would not be here today. We wouldn’t know Jesus. We wouldn’t understand his Word. And we wouldn’t have a chance at heaven instead of hell. So we’ve got to respond & say Praise His Name!

But the inner content is even better – **the heart of the mystery Paul is talking about is the end of verse 27 – “Christ IN YOU, the hope of glory.”** Of all the mysteries God has revealed in the NT, the most profound is right here – Christ in you, the hope of glory. Here’s the deal real simply. **The OT predicted the coming of the Messiah. But the idea that He would actually live in His redeemed church – made up mostly of Gentiles mind you – but that he would DWELL in us – that wasn’t revealed.** That was news to everybody. 1 Peter 1 tells us even the angels long to look into these things – they don’t get it – they can’t get their immortal minds around the idea of the God of the universe in flesh Himself and then in us.

Unbelievable. Or rather not really unbelievable I guess – that’s the whole point – we do believe it – but nevertheless – wow! We could spend days and days talking about this but Paul doesn’t here – he just puts it out there and moves on – so we will to, BUT – I challenge you to put some brain time

into this. Make a point this week to bat this around up here – **all of GOD – in all of ME – all of the TIME.** Again – Praise His Name!

Now before we get out of here today, let me pull out some applications for us. Because it would be really easy to hear all this today and go great Brett – thanks – I know a lot more about Paul and his ministry and how he saw everything – and you've given me a brain teaser for the week – let's go – and then just to leave it all here. But that would be a mistake.

First of all go back to the source of Paul's ministry. Paul became what he was because of the intervention of God in his life. He was remember "made" a servant. What made him a minister? Was it his education, his ability, his grades? Was it his professors, his desires? No – not really any of those. What made Paul a minister was the sovereign call of God. And I think that is a perspective we need to be reminded of.

People look at me – God has a plan for your life. **Whether you have a vocational call to full time ministry or not, you need the perspective of the PLAN of God.** Listen to God's Word:

*Prov 16:9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.*

*Prov 19:21 Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.*

*Ps 33:11 But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.*

*Ps 37:23-24 If the LORD delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand.*

To ignore that truth – to pretend it isn't there – is to put yourself in peril. Our decisions are to be based on Him – seeking His will – His Word – His heart – His glory – His plan. We need the same mentality of Paul – that of a servant who rejoices to do the will of our God. Which of course is a throwback to last week – the reason we miss the joy that Paul had is because of our pride. But when we see our selves as servants and live with the perspective of God's plan, then our selfish pride can never steal the joy that is ours in Christ.

Secondly – again it would be easy to hear all this and say this doesn't really get to me because I'm not like Paul – God hasn't called me to be a pastor or a missionary or a minister. Listen, yes He has. God has given each of us a tremendous responsibility. **No matter who you are as a Christian, the Spirit of God has given you certain GIFTS and called you to minister those gifts to the body of Christ.** It's a serious responsibility. When you possess a gift of the Spirit of God, you possess something that literally belongs to God and as a steward; you are to use that gift for those in need of it. In 1 Peter 4:10-11 the Bible says:

*"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen."*

Plus we saw two weeks ago that every single one of us has been given the ministry of reconciliation – that we are God's ambassadors to our world. That means – going back to number 1 – that **wherever God has planned you to be, He has placed you there so you can SPREAD the ministry of reconciliation.** That's not about being a pastor – it's about knowing Jesus. I met a guy this last week who is a new manager at a work out facility here in town who has more passion for God to use his job – his work – his influence where he is for the glory and spread of the Kingdom of God than most pastors I know. And that's what it's all about. That's what we have got to think like because someday we are going to face Jesus Christ and the record of our stewardship is going to be based on what you did with the gifts and abilities and relationships and time you were given. You may not be a pastor – but every one of us is a minister and a servant.

Number 3 – quickly – back in verse 25 Paul said his commission from God was to present to you the word of God in its fullness. We talked about making sure the message is up here in our lives. And that is crucial – not just for salvation – but in all things. Too often, we read only selected portions of God’s Word or we try to reshape it to fit our preconceptions rather than allowing it to challenge and inform and judge us. People, the **SCRIPTURE is our only weapon against the incursion of culturally based values into our lives. Rightly heard, it fends off the danger that we will mistake our false, selfish hopes for divine TRUTH and recast the true God into a false one of our making.** Before we can beware of lies, we have to be aware of the truth. And yet too many of us as Christians are underexposed to the Word of God. When trouble floods their lives, they can call up to memory nothing from Scripture. Don’t let that be you. We live in a day where we have more access to scriptural truth and explanation of it and application of it than any generation in history. So we are without excuse. Hunger for it. Those of you who are military and move from base to base, as you do and as you look for churches wherever you are at, never let feel of an atmosphere, the style of the music, or even the events for your kids outweigh the importance of the message that is preached and taught. All of us need to immerse ourselves in the Word every chance we get.

Lastly and I’ll close. Number 4 – and this is what I want you to hear most. **The gospel message is Christ IN you not heaven FOR you.** To reduce the gospel message to Christ died for your sins so you can go to heaven when you die completely misses the point. The ministry of reconciliation – the message that we share is that God wants to change your life – God wants to come and live in you! And **when Christ comes to live in a believer, His PRESENCE is the anchor of the promise of heaven – heaven is a byproduct.** Paul says Christ in you, the hope of glory. And that’s what we are all about.

Moving people –including ourselves – not to a home in heaven when you die - but to life in Christ one step at a time together. A life NOW surrendered by faith to truth – a life NOW changed by belief into obedience – a life NOW linked through relationships into family – a life NOW shared by service to our world.

Christ in you. And that means something awesome. Listen to me – that means it doesn’t matter what situation you are going to go into this week, what conversation you will be a part of, what activity you will do, what troubles will hit, what questions you’ll face – no matter what it is, you do not go into it alone. When you go in – you take Jesus with you and that changes everything! Your prayers don’t have to get past the ceiling – he hears you when you think. God isn’t just out there watching – God is in here living. And if that doesn’t blow you away, then you don’t get it. But if you do – then once again we say – Praise His Name! Christ in you, the hope of glory. Let’s pray.