

Introduction

As we are making our way through Paul's epistle to the Galatians, we arrive at a momentous intersection this morning. It is the intersection between Galatians 4 and the joy we have to ordain or set apart our brother Joel Ebert to the Gospel ministry. I am not tied to continue my move through a book when there is an event like today's. But when I considered this text in light of today, I could not avoid preaching it. In the midst of one of the most passionate pleas of the Apostle in all his epistles is nestled a particular statement of profound significance for gospel ministry.

It speaks directly to the nature and emphasis of gospel ministry as an exhortation to you, Joel, for which you should strive in the power of the Spirit of God. Here we will also find a model for each of us as we serve in various leadership roles in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. And certainly not least, this statement also points each of us to consider how we relate toward those who have the responsibility of watching over us.

The statement that has seized my attention which sets forth the burden of Gospel ministry is found in verses 18-19, Galatians 4:18-19.

[Read text and Pray]

What Paul says in these two verses is felt in everything he says in the letter. But here it culminates in a riveting expression by which he identifies his relationship to the Galatians. That relationship gives us a glimpse into the burden of gospel ministry. Paul calls the Galatians, "my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you."

Having been called personally by the Lord on the road to Damascus, Paul's entire life became devoted to the ministry of the Gospel. He lived to become more like the Lord Jesus, and he lived to serve him through the ministry of preaching and teaching, evangelizing the lost, and discipling the saved. The Apostle Paul is engaged in Gospel ministry as he writes this epistle to the churches in Galatia. And in this key statement, he bears out just what this ministry comes down to. In a briefer sermon than usual, I want you to see how this statement of identity highlights three aspects of the burden of gospel ministry. We are going to take note of the FOCUS of Gospel ministry, the WORK of Gospel ministry, and the GOAL of Gospel ministry.

I. The FOCUS of Gospel Ministry.

The focus of Gospel ministry is the people to whom we are called to minister. The reason workers are sent out into the fields that are white unto harvest is because there are people in those fields. Jesus was teaching and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every kind of disease as he went about. And it was as he saw the crowds that he was moved with compassion. The people were like sheep without a shepherd. It was then that he said to his disciples that the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out LABORERS into his harvest. Laborers go out into the field for the sake of the people who are like sheep without a shepherd. People are precious and important to those who go out because they are precious to the Lord.

Here in Galatians Paul reflects the heart of Jesus. He is making much of the people to whom he is writing. That's a phrase that he himself used. Paul is in the process of exposing the false teachers

who had come to Galatia. In verse 17 he charges them with making much of the Galatians. They were asserting how precious and important the Galatians were to them. But, says Paul, they actually want the Galatians to join them in their error and so that these enemies of the cross become precious to the Galatians. That is a bad purpose to make someone feel important to you.

Paul asserts that it is always good to be made much of for a good purpose. That is when it is a noble thing to indicate and express to others how precious and important they are to you. And that, says Paul, to the Galatians, is what they are to him. They are the people who are the focus of his ministry. They are dear to him. He holds them in his heart. Paul has the habit of making much of the saints to whom he wrote his epistles. One of the striking examples appears in his letter to the Philippians. Listen to how he makes much of them. He writes, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about you all because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace . . . God is my witness how I yearn for you all with the affections of Christ Jesus." That is Paul making much of the Philippians. We need to make much of each other. We need to let the people to whom we minister know how precious and important they are.

Here with the Galatians Paul has a particular way of making much of them. He says they are "his little children." It matters that we see people as the focus of gospel ministry. And it matters HOW we see them. Paul sees his people as "his little children." This, Joel, is an example for how you should see those who are under your care and influence as a minister of the gospel. And we should see each other as the little children who belong ultimately to the Great Shepherd.

But let's think for a moment about the significance of Paul's viewing his wayward sheep as his little children. First of all they are HIS. They are not someone else's. You may consider all children precious, but there are never any so precious as those who are yours. To be HIS little children means they are truly and deeply precious to Paul.

And they are LITTLE children. What is it with LITTLE children? They need direction. They need help. They need supervision. They need protection. encouragement. They need to know they are loved. They require patience and perseverance. If they are YOUR LITTLE CHILDREN, you will sacrifice for their well-being in ways you just would not do otherwise.

Last weekend you probably saw that Melissa and I had our little grandchildren with us for the weekend. Well, well. We went home Sunday afternoon and Grandad was not feeling so well. But Titus and Rebekah wanted to play, so I manned-up. I wouldn't have done it for just any kids. We played Paw Patrol and a man and his dog camping. I was the dog! Then later that night Titus and Rebekah weren't feeling so good, they got this nasty stomach virus. They were up ALL NIGHT LONG. They were getting sick every 15 minutes around the clock. And I don't need to tell you that was not pleasant. Melissa took Bekah and I took Titus. At every interval we would have to move in close and remind them with urgency to use the bucket. It was a test. I heaved a couple times myself—you know how that is, right? What am I saying? I am saying what we did for them was not fun. It was sacrificial. And part of the sacrifice was knowing we were going to probably get sick as well. But they are "our little children."

When they are “your little children,” you hold their hand, you show them the way. You make much of them for their good. You worry over their health. You are absorbed with their believing and loving the truth. You have no greater joy than that they walk in the truth with Christ.

Joel, the focus of gospel ministry is people. They are sheep who otherwise would be without a shepherd. You need to see the people in your circle of ministry as “YOUR LITTLE CHILDREN.”

Let’s look next at ...

II. The WORK of Gospel Ministry.

Here in Galatians 4:19, Paul describes his work with reference to his children in a graphic way. He says he is “again in the anguish of childbirth.” They are his little children and he is in the process of giving birth to them as it were. A work is ongoing. He says it is happening again. What is happening again? The anguish of childbirth is what is happening again. He is thinking of the recurring birth pains. They take place with regularity resulting ultimately in the birth of a child.

Paul is saying that he is involved in a life-giving work. That’s what birth is all about—a new life! And that is exactly what the gospel ministry is about. It is about life and development. It is about evangelism and discipleship. This is the work. It is arduous. It is difficult. It is often painful. I can tell you that the Gospel ministry is often joyful beyond belief, but I can also tell you it is sometimes deeply painful. But it is more than worth it for the privilege of serving as Christ’s co-laborer. And it is worth it for the good results he produces.

At least four things are involved in this birthing process.

One. It is a work of instruction. We are pastor-teachers for the equipping of the saints through instruction. It matters what they know. And we must teach them.

Two. It is a work of exhortation. You see this all through the New Testament. Not only does the man of God teach the word of God to the people of God. He also exhorts the followers of Christ with the passion of Christ. The Gospel Minister must reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching. Like Paul writes the Ephesians, “I therefore ... URGE YOU to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” We are to be instructors who are also cheerleaders who encourage godly behavior with great celebration and who rebuke ungodliness with all solemnity and readiness to lift drooping hearts.

Three. It is a work of supplication. All the teaching and all the exhorting will do nothing unless the Lord applies the Spirit. God wants us to pray for this work. And if you stop and think through the letters that Paul writes to the saints, you will grasp the significance of prayer. He is teaching and he is exhorting, but he is always praying. He is asking God to complete what he started. He is asking God to grant his children to be strengthened with power through his Spirit. Don’t expect growth and obedience and holiness in your children without beseeching God to bring it about.

Four. The work of gospel ministry is a work of perseverance. Sometimes the road is indeed anguishing as Paul says here. Sometimes you may lie awake plagued by the reasoning of the flesh: Is it really worth it? I poured myself into this one or that one and look at where they are today! Keep on with determination knowing it is the Lord who is at work to make them will and work for his good pleasure. He is able. And he will do it, but rarely instantaneously. Keep the end in view to keep going when the anguish is its greatest. Remember what Paul said to the Thessalonians, “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.”

Finally, notice with me ...

III. The GOAL of Gospel Ministry.

All of this work. All this instruction, exhortation, supplication, and persistence has a goal in mind. There are many goals that run through the minds of various kinds of ministers in our day and time. Some want to be liked by the world. They try to produce a church in which the world can be at home. Some want to grow large churches. They gear everything for size. Some want to be well-known. They focus on their oratorical skills and clever sayings and charisma. Some want to be scholarly. For them it is all about what you know. Sometimes they want to impress the secular world of science. Paul shows us here what is the right thing to want, the right think to work for, the best thing to invest in the lives of the people for. The goal of Gospel ministry as exemplified by Paul is this: Christ formed in his children. Here is why he is in the anguish of childbirth again. It is because he wants to see Jesus when he looks at his little children.

He wants them to bear the divine nature. He wants them to bear Christ-like fruit, the fruit of the Spirit growing through their lives—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. He wants them to be living out the truth. A big church that is not a godly church would be a disappointment to Paul. A theological church that is not a holy church would be distasteful. An enthusiastic church that is not bearing the fruit of the Spirit would be undesirable. A popular church that is loved by the world would be worthless. The goal of Gospel ministry is seeing Christ Jesus formed in the lives and hearts of one's people. Anything less falls short. So set priorities accordingly. Keep the main thing the main thing. Teach for Christlikeness. Preach for Christlikeness. Exhort for Christlikeness. Counsel for Christlikeness. And you are doing all that for the glory of God.

Conclusion

Joel I am grateful to know you hold these priorities. I urge you to hold fast to them and thus be a useful tool in the hand of the Lord for the advancement of his church on earth.