

## **Introduction**

The Apostle Paul spent 3 years (Acts 20:31) in the city of Ephesus preaching and teaching. Luke tells us in Acts that the result was people all over Asia hearing God’s word. A man from the town of Colossae, about 120 miles east, was apparently exposed to the gospel during this time. His name was Epaphras. Believing the gospel, he went to his hometown to preach the gospel to them. People were converted and a church was birthed.

No church is immune to challenges both doctrinally and practically. And such was the case with the church in Colossae. Our best conclusion from the textual data is that during the time when Paul was in Rome, Epaphras came to him with news that the church in Colossae was being racked and threatened by false teaching which undermined the gospel. The letter to the Colossian church is Paul’s response to the situation. I will open this morning by reading the opening words of the letter . . .

Colossians 1:1-14

Today marks a significant point of transition in the life of Grace Community Church and for me. People have asked if I am excited and my response has been more that I am sobered. Yes, I am excited about what God is going to do in these days and the ones to come through our shared ministry. But I am brought to consider the responsibility, the stewardship, of the role of senior pastor. And though I enter into it with joy and anticipation, I am also mindful of accountability to God and no small responsibility to you. At the same time I would remind you that you shoulder certain responsibilities as well.

For this reason I want us to scan through Paul’s letter to the Colossians this morning. Paul was more than a pastor; he was one of the official apostles of the Lord Jesus. His responsibility was not simply for one particular local church but for a number of them. In fact, he wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:28 that every day he bore the pressure of concern for all the churches. So his letter is not that of the pastor to one church but the heart of a pastor for all churches. What emerges from Paul’s letter to the Colossians is what is at the heart of ministry for the pastor as well as for the church. This is the heart of gospel ministry and should guide us as we continue the journey together.

Paul speaks to the priority pursuits for the church, and in doing so expresses priority concerns for the pastor. And not surprisingly, broadly speaking, there are two primary priorities and they are the same for pastors and the people. Though applied uniquely,

the ministry priorities for the pastors and elders of the church and for the church under the leadership of its pastors and elders basically boil down to these: the ministry of prayer and the ministry of the word.

Let's jump right into where we started this morning and see

## **I. The Prayer Ministry of the Pastor**

1:3-5 - - We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.

1:9a - - And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you

### **Paul prays! He prays for the church.**

**A. He prays with thankfulness.** "We always thank God . . . when we pray for you."

Paul loved the gospel of the Lord Jesus and he exulted in the work of God through the gospel in the hearts of human beings who embraced that gospel. And so his heart was filled with gratitude to know that these Colossians had come to faith in Jesus.

Pastors should pray with this spirit. If our hearts are in the right place, we treasure God's work in the lives of people and when we pray for them we will be thankful.

This should be true of the church as well.

**B. He prays with specificity.** He is not unclear at all about what he prays for those under his care. Let's look at some of the concerns he mentions. He prays for the church that they will . . .

1. Know the will of God in spiritual wisdom and understanding

This is a Holy Spirit-given grasp of God's purpose and work in the world he has created and is governing toward a specific end.

2. Walk in a worthy manner, fully pleasing to God, bearing fruit, increasing in the knowledge of God, strengthened with all power for endurance and patience, giving thanks to the Father for so great a salvation. (Colossians 1:10-14)

So the prayer is for their knowledge of God and His plan and purpose such that their lives will reflect a transformation.

And this knowledge will focus on the beloved Son of God: who He is and what He has done (1:15-23)

Now, let's see . . .

## II. The Word Ministry of the Pastor

### A. Paul leaves no doubt that the word ministry is a gospel-centered ministry.

1:21-23 - - And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

The first couple verses are expressive of the beauty of the gospel. It involves a mind and life transformation and heart reconciliation with God through the death of Jesus. It calls for a perseverance in the faith. And Paul sneaks in there at the end that gospel proclamation is part and parcel of the ministry he has received.

The ministry of the pastor is a "good-news ministry." It is not an entertainment ministry. It is not a how to have a comfortable life ministry. It is not a ministry of assuaging peoples guilt by keeping them from feeling bad about their sins. It is not a ministry of trying to keep dying institutions alive. It is not a ministry of pure political activism. The ministry of the pastor first and foremost is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### B. Paul is emphatic that his clear objective is to make the word of God fully known.

1:24-26 - - Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

Paul says here that his stewardship ministry from God was given to him for the church. The word ministry for the pastor is to benefit the bride of Christ.

1. The stress here is on the extent of the word which he is to make known. And the extent to which he is to make known the word is to the **full extent**. In Acts 20:27, when bidding farewell to the elders of the church at Ephesus, Paul declared to them that he had preached the whole counsel, the whole will of God to them.

What does this mean? I would say he did not leave any stone unturned. Doubtless he was not able in his time there to do a verse-by-verse exposition of the entire Old Testament. But, and I quote a man named Don Carson, surely "what he must mean is that he taught the burden of the whole of God's revelation, the balance of things, leaving nothing out that was of primary importance, never ducking the hard bits, helping believers to grasp the whole counsel of God that they

themselves would become better equipped to read their Bibles intelligently, comprehensively.

It embraced God's purposes in the history of redemption (truths to be believed and a God to be worshiped), an unpacking of human origin, fall, redemption, and destiny (a worldview that shapes all human understanding and a Savior without whom there is no hope), the conduct expected of God's people (commandments to be obeyed and wisdom to be pursued, both in our individual existence and in the community of the people of God), and the pledges of transforming power both in this life and in the life to come (promises to be trusted and hope to be anticipated)."

—D. A. Carson, "Challenges for the Twenty-first-century Pulpit," in *Preach the Word: Essays on Expository Preaching: In Honor of R. Kent Hughes*, ed. Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson [Crossway, 2007], pp. 177-178.

This is what Paul himself does in a nutshell in verses 26-28:

"to his saints . . . God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. **Him** we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." CHRIST IS THE FOCUS!!!

I would also say that his preaching of the word corresponded to his prayer that the people would be filled with the knowledge of the will of God in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And I would assert that this kind of preaching and teaching, this kind of word ministry is what results in the kind of lives for which Paul was praying.

### C. Paul reveals that the word ministry is not an easy task.

#### 1. It involves **suffering**.

He makes mention of sufferings in verse 24. Who are they for? For YOUR sake . . . for the sake of Christ's church! He considers his sufferings a part of the totality of the sufferings to be had for the purity and vitality of Christ's church.

#### 2. It demands intensive **labor**.

Not an easy task indeed . . . Look at verses 28-29 and chapter 2:1

"Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face,"

Sanctification, growing in holiness is not a walk in the park, but that is what believers are called to. Just as he who called you is holy, so you be holy in all your conduct. Believers spend our lives this side of heaven in a perpetual state of sanctification. And here's the thing, as John Owen has rightly said, "Either you be killing sin or sin will be killing you." Sanctification is rightly called a work because it is not easy. Neither is it

easy for those who watch over the flock. We can not afford to be slothful, weak-kneed, or aimless. We must be vigilant, steadfast, and persevering. This is work both for the elders and for their sheep.

Moreover, many are the foes who resist sound words. False teaching is everywhere. False teaching pretending to be the gospel is everywhere. It had also worked its way smack dab into Colossae. (2:4) Paul's struggle was also to keep the Colossians from being deluded with good sounding arguments. The word ministry is a truth defense ministry and that cannot be taken lightly.

#### D. Paul demonstrates that word ministry is all-inclusive.

It is both theological and practical.

##### 1. This letter is front-loaded with theology.

Chapter 1 explains the preeminence of Jesus Christ and the deity of Christ and His work of reconciliation.

Chapter 2 deals with the believer's identity with Christ and God's work of regeneration, with the real intent of ceremonial regulations and the struggle with the flesh.

##### 2. This letter is back-loaded with practical how-should-we-then-live implications of the theology that gets it started. The saints must put off immorality, impurity, evil desire, covetousness, anger, wrath, and malice. And the saints must put on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forgiveness.

Godliness is to be evident in the home and at work.

Word ministry is balanced as to doctrine and practice. It does not see a disconnect between the two but an indissoluble link.

And so there you have it. The priorities of pastoral ministry are prayer and the word. And I take this to heart. God being my helper, this is the ministry that will characterize me and the elders with whom I serve.

But I quickly want you to also see

### **III. The Priority Pursuits for the Church**

#### A. It begins with prayer.

4:2 - - Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

Prayer is not only a ministry priority for pastors and elders but also for all the saints.

1. Paul's words emphasize three **characteristics**:

Prayer is to be characterized by **steadfastness**. Don't let anything stop you from consistent in prayer!

Prayer is also to be characterized by **watchfulness**. What is that? Well, I'll tell you what it is not. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus told his disciples to "watch and pray." Those guys went to sleep. Paul is saying don't go to sleep in your prayers! Stay awake. The NASB translates this imperative as "keep alert." Prayer is an offensive assault weapon against the forces of darkness. You don't go to sleep on the front lines. This is where battles are won and lost!

Prayer is finally to be characterized by **thankfulness**. This is precisely what Paul exemplifies in the first verses of the book. Every time Paul prays he gives thanks. That's because if there is anywhere at any time that we recognize we are the recipients of the mercy and grace of God, it is in prayer when we come before Him to plead yet again for more mercy.

2. Specifically, however, Paul requests prayer for himself. The church's ministry of prayer should not neglect to **pray for pastors**.

Colossians 4:3-4 - - At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

The saints' ministry of prayer has a specific aspect to it particularly in the context of the ministry of the church and that is to pray for its leaders—and that means especially pastors and elders. Moreover, that prayer which Paul peculiarly desires is prayer for his word ministry.

Pray for opportunity.

Pray for perseverance in the face of opposition.

Pray for clarity in preaching.

The very thing that is needed by the saints from their pastors is what they should pray for. It in turn impacts not only the pastors themselves but the saints as well.

I am convinced that fruitfulness in my pastoral ministry is attributable of course to the Lord but in a very real way to the prayers of the saints. Pray for me. Pray for my family. Pray for Pastor Tted and Pastor Jarrett. And pray for each of your elders Todd, Randy, Dale, Al, and Nels. And pray for their families. Pray for wisdom in leadership. But above all pray that the Lord will provide opportunities for the word and effectiveness and clarity in the preaching.

B. Priority pursuits of the church add to prayer ministry a word ministry.

1. Learn it.
2. Apply it.
3. Spread it.

Notice what Paul says in 3:16-17

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Teaching is not only the responsibility of the pastors and elders. It is a mutual responsibility. The load born by leadership is lightened amazingly as the body tend to itself one to one and within small groups.

Hebrews 5:12-14 says, “though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”

I exhort you not to miss that every believer is supposed to be a teacher in some sense. In fact in a special sense. Pastors cannot be everywhere. But as the church is a building made of many blocks so every stone is in contact with other stones. And the mortar between the joints is a mutual word ministry. None of us is to be a simple reservoir; all of us are to be channels to whom the word comes and through whom the word flows.

One other thing about the word ministry: it is the ministry of the word that ushers in sound doctrine and all the practical commands Paul passed along to the saints.

## **Conclusion**

What we have here is an incredible circle of spiritual vitality in the church of the Lord Jesus. It is revealed in terms of ministry priorities. For pastors and all saints the priorities are the same fundamentally. For both there is to be a priority on prayer and the word, both praying for each other and both teaching one another the word of Christ so that we may walk in a manner worthy of our merciful calling in Christ Jesus.