

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: “The Fight for Spiritual Maturity” (Colossians 1:28-29)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 5/16/2010

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The Goal of the Christian Life

In Colossians chapter one, verses 28 and 29, the Apostle Paul speaks of spiritual maturity as the goal of the life of the believer. And, he says that striving to bring believers to maturity is the sacred work of every faithful Christian preacher and teacher: “Him we preach,” Paul says, we preach the Lord Jesus Christ, “warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.”

Today I want to focus your attention on the last part of verse 28, and then on verse 29. We do these things – warning, teaching, imparting the wisdom that is to be found only in Christ and His Word, Paul says – we do these things in order “that we may present every man [that is, every believer] perfect [or complete, or mature] in Christ Jesus.” And how does he do it? Verse 29: “To this end I also labor, striving according to His working” – Christ’s working – “which works in me mightily.”

A Two-Fold Presenting

Now in today’s message, I want to follow our usual pattern of digging into these verses, and really understanding what they mean. And then we’re going to talk about how these verses apply to you as a believer today.

So let’s begin with the phrase “that we may present” in verse 28. The word that is translated “present” in this verse means “to stand before,” or “to cause to be in a

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particular place at a particular point in time.” It can also carry the meaning of “to prove,” or “to show to be true,” in other words, to establish that something is a fact. And here in verse 28, Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit uses a form of the verb “to present” which means that in the context, we could translate the end of verse 28 more literally this way: “that we may present and prove your maturity or completeness in Christ as a fact at a particular point in time.”

In the Greek of New Testament times, this was the kind of language that was used when someone was speaking of the scene that takes place in a courtroom. Someone comes and stands before a judge at a particular time and place. Evidence is presented. Facts are introduced into evidence. And the judge hears the evidence, and renders a decision. And that is exactly the kind of situation Paul is describing. He uses this same Greek word for “present” in several other places in his epistles, where he speaks of the same thing. Let me mention just four of them:

In Romans 14:10, he says that we shall all *stand before* the judgment seat of Christ. The words “stand before” are the same root word that is translated “present” here in Colossians 1:28. We shall all be *presented before* the judgment seat of Christ.

In Ephesians 5:27, Paul says that Christ will *present* His church to Himself, and that He will present it as a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, holy and without blemish.

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And just a few verses back from our passage in Colossians, at chapter one, verse twenty-two, Paul tells us that this is why Christ died, that He might *present* believers holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight on that Last Day.

And echoing what he is saying here in Colossians 1:28, in 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul says he labors for the Corinthians in order that He might *present* them as a chaste virgin to Christ.

So what are we seeing here? What we're seeing is that these passages speak of a two-fold *presenting* – Paul and other faithful preachers and teachers presenting believers before Christ, and Christ presenting believers to Himself. Notice how Paul says it in Colossians 1:28: "Him we preach...in order that *we* may present." Not merely that *I* may present, but that *we* may present.

And this is confirmed and expanded as we move on into verse 29 – "To this end I also labor, striving according to *His* working which works in me mightily." Paul is going to present us to Christ, and Christ is going to present us to Himself – this is going to be the only wedding in the universe where the Bridegroom will have the right to give away the bride! And that will be because Christ will be the only one qualified to do it. He is the One who has bought us. He is the One who has redeemed us. He is the One who has placed us in the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ. But we will be there, as members of the Bride of Christ, because of the labors of Paul and of others who brought us to Christ and nurtured us in the faith, by the "working" of Christ, verse 29.

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Maturity: Real and Counterfeit

And in what kind of a state are we going to be presented? We are going to be presented "perfect," Paul says. The word that is translated "perfect" is a Greek word that, when it is used of a believer as it is here, means "mature." Spiritually mature and complete.

And here again, as he has so many times before in this chapter, Paul is using a word that the Gnostics and the other false teachers of that time liked to use. They said that the only way you could become mature, or complete, or perfect spiritually, was to have the hidden knowledge that they claimed to offer. The fact is that these false teachers had nothing to offer but human philosophy and pagan mysticism, perhaps with a little bit of the Bible thrown in. But they didn't have the truth. They didn't have the way to eternal life. And they had a philosophy of life that said that it was pretty much okay to do whatever you wanted to do, as long as you embraced their philosophy. That was what they called being "mature."

But Paul says, "No. That is a fraud. True spiritual maturity can only be found in one place. True spiritual maturity can only be found in one Person. True spiritual maturity can only be found in one Book. That person is Jesus Christ. That book is His inspired, infallible, inerrant Word. Don't go looking for maturity anywhere else. You won't find it.

You don't need to become initiated in the philosophy of the pagans — past or present. You *do* need to become fully initiated into Christ, into all that He is, into all

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that He has done, into all that He is now doing, and into all that He will do. And the way you are initiated into Christ is by receiving Him as your personal Savior from sin and death and the wrath to come, and by following after Him, walking in newness of life.

That is how you will be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, chapter one, verse nine. And the purpose of that wisdom and spiritual understanding in Christ is not so that you will be puffed up, not so that you will become proud. No! The purpose is so "that you may walk worthy of the Lord" – verse ten – "fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing the in the knowledge of God, strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy..."

Notice once again, at the end of Colossians 1:28: Where is the maturity? Where is the completeness? Where is the perfection? It is "in Christ Jesus." Nowhere else. We do not become perfect or mature or complete in ourselves, in our own power and wisdom. We do not become perfect or mature or complete in the power or wisdom of any earthly teacher or leader. We become perfect or mature or complete in Christ Jesus. He is the One who has made perfection possible. There is nothing more profound than this.

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The Fight for Maturity

And because this is true, Paul says in verse 29, "To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily." And once again, we need to dig into what Paul is saying here.

He says, "to this end also I labor." Paul is speaking of the fact once again that He has entered into labor in Christ, in the same vein that he speaks of "filling up that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" in verse 24. This is not suffering for salvation. Christ has done that. It is complete. Neither the Apostle Paul nor we ourselves *can* add anything to what Christ has done. We don't *need* to add anything to what Christ has done. He has suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, once for all.

What Paul is talking about in verse 24 and again here in verse 29 is sacrificial service *for* Christ, and sacrificial service *by the power of* Christ. The word "labor" here in verse 29 does not mean, simply, work in a generic sense. The word Paul uses here means hard work, ongoing work, work to the point of exhaustion, work that spares no effort. That, Paul says, is the kind of work that I am doing, preaching Christ, "warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus."

And, he says in verse 29, I am "striving" in this work. The word that Paul uses here is the Greek word from which we get our word "agonize." The word in the original language means to engage in an intense struggle – an intense struggle against

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strong opposition. This is another word that the Apostle Paul uses several times in his epistles. Again, let me give you some examples.

Later on in Colossians, at chapter four verse twelve, Paul tells the believers that Epaphras *labors fervently* for you in prayers – the same word, intense struggle against strong opposition. And why does he do it? So “that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.”

In 1 Timothy 6:12, Paul encourages young Timothy to “*fight* the good fight of faith” – the same word, intense struggle against strong opposition.

In 2 Timothy 4:7, as Paul is nearing the end of his life, he says, “*I have fought* the good fight” – the same word, intense struggle against strong opposition.

And we also have the same word in the epistle of Jude, verse three: “*Earnestly contend* for the faith that was once for all delivered unto the saints.” “Earnestly contend” – the same word, intense struggle against strong opposition.

And although Paul uses different Greek words in Ephesians chapter six, beginning at verse ten, the thought is the same: “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

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That is why we struggle, and that is why the struggle is intense. There is strong opposition. And it comes from Satan and his hosts. Satan doesn't want you to pray. Satan doesn't want you to hear the Word. Satan doesn't want you to study the Word. Satan doesn't want you to sit under sound teaching. Satan doesn't want you to become mature in Christ. And so, what are we to do? Paul says, Ephesians 6:13, "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."

Paul is engaged in this struggle on behalf of the Colossian believers. And he says, chapter one, verse twenty-nine, that his labor to the point of exhaustion, his intense struggle against fierce opposition, is "according to *His* working" – Christ's working – "which works in me mightily." Literally, Paul is saying, that it is "according to Christ's effectual power, which is the power that is working in me." This is not a boast about himself, it is boasting in Christ. Whatever is happening that is powerful, Paul is saying – whether in me or in you – it is not my power, it is not your power, it is Christ's power.

Characteristics of Spiritual Maturity

Now that we understand what Paul is saying in these verses, let's move into the area of application. Let's apply what he says, to your life as a believer in Christ.

Maturity in the language of Scripture is the process of coming to completion in growth and development, in Christ. That is God's work of sanctification in the life of the believer – setting the believer more and more apart from sin, apart from this

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world's ways, apart from this world's thinking, apart from identity with the world. It is a process that will come to completion, or perfection, when we see Christ, when we're glorified with Him. And this process, as Paul says, is always "in Christ." It is all about Him. It is all about His preeminence. It is all about His headship over the Body of Christ of which you are a member. It is all about His lordship over you as an individual believer.

This is the great point to which Paul has been building through this whole chapter: Here is who Christ is. Here is what Christ is like. You need to be in Christ.

And as Paul unfolds the rest of this letter to the Colossians, his theme is this: Now that you have a better understanding of who Christ is, what Christ has done, what Christ is doing, and what Christ is going to do – you need to be becoming more and more like Christ in every aspect of your daily lives. Nothing left out. Everything for Christ. Everything *because* of Christ, because He is preeminent. He has first place.

Spiritual maturity is not necessarily a function of years in the faith, although it should be. Once you become a believer, you should be seeking after, you should be constantly striving after, that growth and maturity in Christ. Day by day, month by month, year by year.

Spiritual maturity is not a function of chronological age. Some people come to faith in Christ at a young age. Some people come to faith in Christ later in life. Some people grow and develop in their spiritual maturity to a considerable degree at a

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young age according to the calendar. For others, spiritual maturity is a longer process, or it begins later in life.

Spiritual maturity is not equal in everyone. Spiritual maturity is not obvious in the same areas in everyone. Some people are very mature in their Christian walk in certain areas of life, and very immature in others.

And spiritual maturity is never complete in any one of us. None of us has any kind of an elite status in the eyes of God. Every Christian needs to be warned, Paul says. Every Christian needs to be taught. Every Christian needs to come to the place of being presented mature in Christ. And that process will not be complete, and it will not be equal and perfect in all of His saints, until we all stand before Him, glorified like Him for eternity.

Developing spiritual maturity among the saints through the expository preaching and teaching of the Word is the sacred duty and responsibility of every Christian preacher, every preacher who is a true preacher of the one true Gospel.

And spiritual maturity is not by our own power. It is not by any power of those who are striving to help to bring us to maturity. It is all by God's power. The power of Christ. The power of the Holy Spirit. The power of the Word of God, which Hebrews 4:12 tells us is "alive and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner [or critic] of the thoughts and intents of the heart." That is the power that brings about maturity in Christ.

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Why Spiritual Maturity is a Struggle

And spiritual maturity is a labor. It is a fight. Satan opposes you. He doesn't want you to become mature in Christ. And so the work of cultivating spiritual maturity must be the never-ending labor of the faithful pastor, and the constant work of other teachers and spiritual mentors, the constant goal of Christian parents with their children.

And so also the work of spiritual maturity is the labor of the individual believer. Wrestling against the powers that oppose you. Putting on the whole armor of God, because you don't wrestle against flesh and blood in this fight for maturity. You wrestle against spiritual forces.

And so you need to gird your waste with the truth, and you will find it in only one place, in the Word of God.

And so you need to put on the breastplate of righteousness. You need to fight the battle in Christ's righteousness, and you need to pursue holiness, you need to walk worthy of the Lord.

And so you need to place upon your feet the preparation or the preparedness or the firm foundation of the Gospel of peace. Your salvation in Christ is the foundation.

And because you are in a fight for spiritual maturity, you need to take up the shield of faith, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, so that you can quench the fiery darts of the wicked one, so that you can repel his attacks.

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You need to put on the helmet of salvation. You need head protection. The head is always a major target in battle. Satan wants to fill your mind full of wrong thoughts. He wants to displace the truth in your mind. Spiritual maturity comes by thinking Christ's thoughts. "We have the mind of Christ," Paul says at the end of First Corinthians chapter two. Get into God's Word, and let it protect your mind.

In the fight for spiritual maturity you need the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. The sword of the Spirit is the only weapon in the believer's equipment. Everything else is defensive armor. Let the truth of Scripture destroy and bring to nothing the devil's offensive strategies against you. Say, just as Jesus said when he was tempted by Satan, "It is written." "It is written." Stand on the authority of God's Word, and use God's Word to defeat spiritual foes.

These are the ways in which you will grow in maturity in Christ.

About the Broadcast

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