

Growing into Maturity

Colossians 1:15-29

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Let's turn this morning to the book of Colossians. This is the second sermon in the series Gospel GPS, the pathway for spiritual formation. And if you have your Bibles with you, you can turn there. Also, if you would like, we have it available for you on the screens in front of you.

This morning, we are moving into this second sermon in this series of Gospel GPS, and we are asking this question, what does it look like to move into maturity as a Christian? And what we will hear from the words of Paul is that this was his overriding desire, to see the church of Jesus Christ move towards maturity. And this is not always easy work as we looked at last week, but it is a goal that we will see lifted for us in these verses that Paul has given to us. And in so doing, my desire is that we spend a little bit of time this morning in what I would call an application driven summary.

So I want to establish what Paul is saying here asking the question that given these things, what does maturity look like? I'm going to be applying it to everyday life and to things that we are experiencing particularly as a church in the midst of a culture that is pressing in and tempting to shape us. But how do we respond? And how do we respond to each other? And how do we respond to those who we don't agree with and who are very different? And so how does the scripture lead us into maturity in the way that we use our words?

May the Lord guide us in the scriptures this morning as we look at Colossians 1:15-29. Hear now God's word. Speaking of Christ, Paul says,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

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.

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. To them 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. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me briefly.

Now we ask you, O Lord, to be present with us as we look into your word. Father, may you by your Holy Spirit move the church of Jesus Christ increasingly into deeper spiritual discipleship and formation in Christ, that by your Spirit and the words which are revealed to us, may they promote maturity in your people. And, O Lord, may you help us to mature in the deep places of our lives not just in what people can see, but in what people can't see. For the glory of Christ, we ask you, Lord, to be with us. Help us, we pray. And help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

I want to begin where Paul finishes in verse 29 where he says, "For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me." It's a demonstration that all of which Paul has just said and all that he labors for sounds very mild in the English, but in the Greek, it is every part of his being given for this one purpose that he works for, that he strives for, that he hungers for, that he wakes up in the morning and goes to bed thinking about, and that is that those who call on the name of Jesus Christ might be presented as mature in Christ growing deeper in what it means to walk and follow Christ as disciples and to allow the gospel to actually fully shape our lives. And we understand that the gospel isn't just something that we believe at the point in time where we profess belief in Christ, if that is indeed you. The gospel isn't merely bringing you to a place of conversion or confession of Christ, but the gospel is itself the way that the Christian lives everyday life. It shapes everything. And this for Paul is a desire to see the church presented as mature.

It gives us some idea of what he labored for, a desire that he saw in the church. And each church as he wrote to it was dealing with different issues of maturity and weakness. And a part of what he's dealing with here in Colossians is his concern was that there would be those who would come in after he had taught and established the church, and there would be those who would come in and would teach false doctrines to deceive the church thereby removing their hope away from a foundation in who they are in Christ Jesus and what it means to follow Him and put their hope on something else.

And so it is for us. And in weeks to come, we'll be looking at what are some of the obstacles that keep us from growing in maturity in Jesus Christ if you call on Him as Savior? And most certainly, what can happen is either arguments that come from the outside in that distract us from the central truths of the faith, or other things present themselves as greater hopes for security or happiness or joy that displace our hope and happiness and joy in Christ. But then in a deeper way, it is completely possible to have the words of scripture strengthen your beliefs in particular doctrines, your intellect. It is completely possible to allow the scriptures to strengthen your doctrinal beliefs and even thereby enflame and increase your convictions without ever touching your character.

So the scriptures are not just given for us to strength our intellect or our convictions, but if they leave our character unchanged, then the other two are completely called into question. To grow into maturity is making sure that it actually changes our character. And that character is most on display in how we relate to each other and how we relate to those that we disagree with. And how do we live that out?

Let's look at this together. First, I want you to see that what Paul is establishing here is moving from alienation to reconciliation. Secondly, moving not just in those ways, but as Paul describes here, the desire to move from mystery to revelation and then, finally, immaturity to maturity. So it's alienation to reconciliation, mystery to revelation, immaturity to maturity.

What Paul means here moving from alienation to reconciliation is he wants this to serve as the ground for everything else he says which is why Paul gives to us in this passage one of the most tightly scripted hymns to Christ that has served as the ground for a lot of hymns throughout the singing of the church. But what he establishes here in this moving from alienation to reconciliation is he's describing why Christ is preeminent. He is before all things not just because He was made man, but He was preeminent and is preeminent and has always been preeminent. We learn from this important passage teaching on the person and the work of Christ that He is the one through whom the Father has made all things. And he also tells us that even though the world doesn't recognize it, the purpose for all things was

to bring preeminence and to go towards Christ. As Paul says, "All things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." So there is not a single thing that has been made or has ever existed that wasn't intended to bring glory to Christ because of His preeminence.

But not only is Paul establishing His preeminence, he's also establishing His power when he says this. "And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead." What does he mean there? He's demonstrating that Christ who is preeminent was intended to be revealed by God as the one through whom redemption was to come, and that redemption required that Christ would give His life and His blood, and in so doing, He would be buried in a grave and counted as a sinner even though He was never sinful because He took on our sin, and in so doing, death came to Him. And yet, He was the firstborn from among the dead. Yes, Lazarus was raised from the dead, but Lazarus would eventually die. Christ goes to the grave but is raised on the third day and is alive forever. Christ is the firstborn who goes before us. What is true of Him is true of us. So Christ demonstrates His power because He cannot be held down by sin or death. Paul is establishing not just His preeminence but His power.

Beyond that, Paul doesn't just establish His power. He also establishes His glory. Verse 19, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." Two things are happening there. He's talking about His glory. Paul is saying that it is God who decided to make Himself known. God the Father made Himself known through the revelation of His Son who took on a human nature as we have a human nature, yet He was without sin. He was born as we are born, grew up as we grew up, yet was without sin. And that glory of God was due to Him.

But then you also understand the purpose of His glory. That's the thing. There's His preeminence, His power, His glory, but it's also purpose. His purpose was that that glory, as Paul says, wasn't something that we were to somehow wrap our brains around for Christ laid down His glory that was due to Him and made Himself nothing, becoming a servant to reconcile to the Father human beings like you and me, to restore us to a relationship with our heavenly Father. And it was then that Paul says, "And you, who were once alienated and hostile in mind."

This idea of alienation isn't just that before you are a believer, before you became a Christian that you were somehow in this neutral holding pen with regard to how you viewed God. What he's telling us here is to be outside of Christ, to not know Him and to refuse to know Him is itself an establishment of hostility, to be at enmity with God because of our sin, and that sin most preeminently being seen in our rebellion in not wanting to bow the knee. It's not just in what we do but it's also not wanting to call Him God. Paul says that before we knew Christ, we were alienated enemies. And yet, now, through the glory of the cross, we are reconciled. So we go from being enemies to being family. We go from being separated to being united. This is what Paul is getting at when he's describing to us the glories of Christ in bringing us from alienation to reconciliation.

I want you to hold that in your mind and to expand your imagination. That had absolutely nothing to do with anything we've ever done or will do. It was established purely because of His unmerited grace. No failure kept us from the grace. No success enabled us to earn the grace. It is all grace. So if there's nothing in us that brought us from alienation to reconciliation, then what kind of people ought that to make us? An incredibly humbled people. Paul establishes here that this is what the ground is for the Christian life, all of it from beginning to end. We never graduate out of these truths because it is about Christ, His preeminence, His power, His glory, His purpose.

But not only does he want us to see alienation to reconciliation as a part of our maturing process, he also wants us to remember that there was once a mystery that has now been revealed. He says, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings," well, because I wanted to make Christ known to the church. And he says, "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." And then he describes it this way. "The mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them 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."

The mystery was what is God doing in the world? Now what has been revealed is the reconciliation is just part one. It now means that to claim Christ is that Christ is in you, the hope of glory. It's not just that we're in Christ, but Christ is in us which means that as we live this life, we're putting Christ on display. And what is happening is that we're to learn from the word because He tells us here that He's making known the word that what once was a mystery has now been revealed, he's saying that this is the word which was once a mystery not understood and has now been revealed in the person of Christ who John describes as the word of God.

So this means the way to maturity never departs from having this word as the fuel for our growth. And I say this as a pastor. We can have thousands of books that talk about scripture, but they're not scripture. We can have thousands of sermons, but it's not necessarily the same thing as you having a steady diet of being formed by the fuel of this word. And here's the question. The one sign of maturity is this, that the word is reshaping us as opposed to us reshaping the word. What do I mean?

Sinclair Ferguson in his book on maturity was giving an illustration about a close friend of his whom he'd known for a long time. And so this friend comes to Dr. Ferguson and says, listen, I've been reading over the last month the letter to the Ephesians. Oh, that's great. Dr. Ferguson, always being a pastor, professor, teacher, he asked him, tell me, how are you studying the letter to Ephesians? And the friend kind of stumbled like, what do you mean how am I studying? I'm just reading through it. And Dr. Ferguson says to his friend, "If I had given you a notebook to write down what you were learning each day as you were studying Ephesians, at the end of the month, you would let me read it. What would I discover?" And he says, let me know if one of these options is what I would discover. Option one, that you had written a month's diary of your own spiritual autobiography, how you felt, what you thought of your relationship to Christ, and your own needs and failures. Or two, a basic outline of what God actually says in Ephesians through Paul with some applications for your life.

And Ferguson reflects, "Perhaps you can guess his reply. He immediately said enthusiastically, 'Oh, number one,' and realized that even though he had been reading Ephesians each day for several weeks, he could not tell me what Ephesians was about." In a sense, he was only using scripture as a mirror to see himself and not to see the Lord. But that is what our forefathers called half-learned scripture. It isn't to say we don't do a spiritual journaling as we're reading through scripture, but that doesn't mean we're allowing scripture to actually speak on its own and actually press in on our idolatries as opposed to using scripture as a mirror that what we're experiencing in our life must be what is being talked about in this particular letter.

So it's a reminder that when we seek to go into the deep mysteries of that which has been revealed in the word that we remember we always come with the scriptures not beside us or below us but always above us. Is it shaping us even to the point when we know that it's uncomfortable? Are we able to ask how is this in many ways not just increasing my intellectual knowledge about myself or the word or even increasing my convictions, but is it changing my character? Are we asking the question, Lord, what is Paul saying with regard to the church? And is there something here that the church or even I might need to confess and repent? Is there place where I or your church is failing to rest in the preeminence, the power, the glory, and the purpose of Christ? Lord, teach me.

And I remind this to seminarians every time I have an opportunity to speak to seminarians, that it is one of the hardest places to grow as a Christian because the scriptures become something that we study as opposed to something that forms us. And it's always remembering that behind all that we do is for the sake of the glory of Christ. And so it was for Paul.

Finally, we look to moving from immaturity to maturity. And here, Paul says that this is that which he seeks with all of his energy to promote. In fact, he says this. "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and

teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." His point is that scripture calls us and calls me to warn not only myself but to warn you and to warn us of tendencies, of ways in which we might be shifting away from having Christ at the center or the glory of Christ at the center or forgetting that we are putting Christ on display because if you are a disciple of Christ, you are a little Christ. You are the hands and feet of Him. And you are the tongue of Christ as you make your life known to the world around you. It is a convicting reality and a scary truth. But we are called to move from immaturity to maturity which means we begin to ask, all right, Lord, if this is true, if I am called to move into maturity, are there areas where I need to grow? And how is this on display to others around me?

Here, I would like to briefly move into some application this morning. Taking the inspiration from Paul, I speak to you in the name of Christ, and I am as much preaching to myself as I am to you. We live in the midst of circumstances in our day, in our country, in our culture that is in upheaval. And we're in the midst of a pandemic. And we turn to electronic distractions. And we turn to electronic profession and dialogue. And so we have a unique circumstance, if you will, where we have this perfect intersection where things go sideways very quickly. And it's very easy to forget, if you're a Christian, that we are called to model Christ to those around us.

So I have several questions I would like for us to consider this morning by way of warning and by way of application. First, I would imagine all of you sitting here to some degree or other have one, two, three people, maybe more, who you would consider to be your posse, the people who are your in-group. And I would imagine that if you have a group of people who are your in-group, you probably also understand who's on the outside of that in-group, people who might look different than you, speak different than you, believe, act, speak, and vote different than you, or whatever the case may be. There's the out-group and the in-group.

So here's a question where we can begin to ask are we moving towards maturity or away from it? Question one. Do you charitably speak of those in your in-group with generosity and mercy, and yet you only speak of those who are outside your in-group, speaking of them as a group, without charity? On the inside of your group, you think of people as individuals. They have histories. They have stories. There's nuance there. Well, there's a reason why they believe that. There's a reason why they think that. There's a reason why they speak that way. But everybody who's on the outside of your group you only speak of collectively, and you say, well, they're just socialists. Or they're just white supremacists. Or they're just liberals. Or they're just conservatives. But on the inside of your group, it's a very different lexicon, a very different way of speaking, and a very different and palpable sense of charity because they're in your in-group. How is that going with you?

Number two. When our lives, as they have been over the last six to eight months, have been turned upside down, it's very easy to begin to live life surfing the wave of that which makes us most anxious. And when we try to regain control, we grow quickly angry at those who get in the way of our to-do list or the ways we want life to be. Are you more easily angered now than when the year began? Are you allowing yourself to grow easily and frustrated with those who get in the way of your agenda? Because really what you want is what you want, and you're trying to regain the control? If that is the case, be aware that that is a signal that we're not moving towards maturity, but we're moving away. It's forgetting this. We have limitations. But what's interesting is we'll embrace our limitations, but if somebody else's limitations come in on our limitations or cause our limitations to come to the forefront, man, grace is off and judgment is on, right? So we'll embrace ours, but we're unforgiving towards others. If we're willing to embrace the reality of our limitations and others but remember we're redeemed by a Savior who has no limitations, who is all powerful over sin and death, then we can rest in His preeminence which then frees us to have grace and mercy not only to our limitations but to the limitations of others. How are you doing in that area?

And thirdly, how do other people experience you in the public arena? Now, if your public arena is Twitter, how do you think other people experience you on social media or Facebook? How do other

people experience you in conversation? How do other people experience your use of authority and power? It's not what do you think of your use of authority and power, but how do other people experience your use of authority and power? I have to warn you to be careful in how you ask that question because when you ask that question, you might get some answers that are uncomfortable as I have received. Thank you, my love, for reminding me these things. So it's great when you have someone you're married to who's willing to tell you the truth even when you don't want to hear it. Now, imagine if you're not married to that person, and they're not in your in-group. Hearing the criticisms of others is a great barometer of how we're growing in maturity in Christ. How do other people experience your use of social media or authority or power?

And then I want to end here. I want to acknowledge the words of another author dealing with a similar circumstance, and I think the language is great. We have a spirit of this age of this very moment. And here is how it is described. It is "an age which avoids thoughtful argument, an age which encourages malicious soundbites, and an age which applauds preemptively delegitimizing others to avoid deeper listening of what they might actually believe or think." And one of the ways we preemptively delegitimize others is we'll say you're a Marxist. You're a white supremacist. You're a Republican. You get the idea. It's over and over again. And the media and social media is all driven to excite us and to keep our ears, eyes, and hearts hooked.

If you don't believe me, watch the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma*. If we think that our devices and those who created them and those apps and social media platforms are not created to keep us addicted and keep us in echo chambers, we have been deceived. We live in an age that celebrates delegitimizing of whole groups of people, malicious soundbites, and avoidance of thoughtful argument.

But Christ desires those who represent His name to move out into the world even with those who disagree with us to actually learn what it means to hold them in high esteem. And this is hard, right? I've shared with you my own testimony. At the end of March, I was mad as a hornet. God bless my wife because I would wake up, and I was immediately on edge. I would come downstairs, get on my device, and I'd look at the news, I'd look at Twitter, and man, I was off to the races. I'd turn on a podcast, listen to the comedians from the night before. I was angry. And by God's grace, He showed me my immaturity, and I had to turn it all off not because it was wrong but because it wasn't the problem. I'm the problem. I have this stuff in me. And I suspect you're like me, too. And it doesn't take much to get it riled up. And what begins to shape my representation of Christ is not the scriptures but all the noise.

And so I remind you today that in the grace of Christ, we are called no less because we represent His name. If you are a follower of His, and if you trust in the gospel, and if you know and rejoice that you've been brought from alienation to reconciliation, do you know how that changes how we even engage with other human beings? Our *Westminster Larger Catechism* says this about the ninth commandment which is "Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor." It says,

"The duties required in the ninth commandment are as follows: preserving and promoting of truth between people, the good name of our neighbor as well as our own, appearing and standing for the truth from the heart sincerely, clearly, fully, speaking the truth and only the truth in matters of judgment and justice and in all other things whatsoever, a charitable esteem of our neighbors, loving, desiring, rejoicing in their good name, sorrowing for and covering their infirmities, freely acknowledging their gifts and their graces, defending their innocency, a ready receiving of a good report, and an unwillingness to admit an evil report concerning them, discouraging gossips and flatterers and slanderers, love and care of our own good name and defending it when it needs requiring, keeping of all promises, studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report."

When I read that, I found myself completely laid bare because the neighbor, as Jesus would have it, is everybody who's not you whether they're in your in-group or your out-group. We have been called to move towards maturity. Left to ourselves, we are alienated and immature. But in Christ, He draws us to Himself to make us holy and blameless and above reproach, to represent Him in the world for the sake of His glory and His honor, and that the gospel would shape us and how we live and move and how we type and think not just for our intellect and not just for our convictions, but that our character might be shaped through the gospel itself.

I'm a fellow struggler. And I imagine there are more than a few here who struggle with me. Can we pray, really pray, that the church of Jesus Christ would be convicted by the all-powerful work of God's grace? That we would be a people reshaped, and in our tongues, thoughts, and motivations to seek and honor others and to love others as we have been loved, and that through that, there would be a revolution, a renewal of the gospel of Christ and a growth of maturity in His church? Lord, do this. Let's pray.

Father, we ask that you would make us more and more mature reflecting the work of Christ for your glory, the preeminence, the power, and the purpose of Christ. Lord, we are sinners deeply in need of mending. But we need you, O Holy Spirit, by the word of God to reshape us, to reshape how we think and speak and live with others, even those we do not agree with that in so doing, we might remember that the only reason we can claim the work of Christ on our behalf is because we have received it as a gift. So Lord, help us to give the gift of the gospel away in thought, word, and deed. In Jesus's name. Amen.