

# Gospel Prime – The Preeminence of Christ in Colossians

*Gospel Ministry: Toil and Struggle (Colossians 1:24-2:3)*

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on October 27, 2019

## Introduction

- ❖ If you've been with us over the past month, you know we've been going through the book of Colossians. Today we're finishing chapter one and venturing a little bit into chapter 2. **Our passage is focused on the topic of ministry – Paul's apostolic ministry in particular – but the gospel ministry of every believer in general.**
  - So when we talk about “gospel ministry” this morning, I want to make sure – at the very beginning – that we're all on the same page, talking about the same thing. When I say “gospel ministry”, I'm not just referring to vocational Christian ministry – like the work of a pastor, missionary, or campus worker. It could definitely include those roles, but the way we're using the term “gospel ministry” is much more expansive. **Scripture teaches that every Christian – everyone who has been transformed by the gospel – is equipped for gospel ministry.** Not just pastors. Not just missionaries.
- ❖ Now your ministry might be connected to one of the formal roles of a church. A small group leader. A Sunday School teacher. A youth or children worker. An elder or deacon. A ministry coordinator. Gospel ministry includes all of that. But it's much more than that.
  - **In fact, gospel ministry typically happens in informal settings outside the walls of a church.** It looks like sharing the gospel to a co-worker or classmate; discipling a new or younger believer; reading the Bible or a Christian book with someone; or conversing over spiritual matters, trying to bring encouragement or correction to a fellow brother or sister in Christ. Gospel ministry could be praying *with* others or even *for* others in private, going through a list like our members prayer guide.
    - **Basically, gospel ministry includes any activity that aims at helping people grow up in spiritual maturity – to know Jesus more and to look and act more like him.** So all of you who are Christians should see yourselves as gospel ministers. Just like how Paul saw himself.
- ❖ Look at our passage, in v24. In the verse prior, he says he became a minister – a minister of the gospel of reconciliation (v23). He says it again in v25. Now of course, Paul's particular ministry as an apostle of Christ is unique. **Apostleship is a specific stewardship within the economy of God given to those men in the 1st-century who were eyewitnesses of the Risen Christ and personally commissioned by him as ministers.** So the gospel ministry of an apostle is unique, and we're not expected to imitate all that Paul was called to do.
  - But as we study this passage and consider the characteristics of Paul's ministry, we're going to learn a lot about the nature of gospel ministry that would apply at any time, in any context, for any Christian who has equally been called to be a minister. **And the one primary characteristic that stands out in our passage is the toil and struggle that accompanies ministry (1:29; 2:1).**
- ❖ **Ministering the gospel to others is a toilsome struggle.** Sure, there's a lot of joy and satisfaction to be had when you're pouring yourself out for Jesus, investing in others, trying to do some spiritual good in their lives. But with that joy and satisfaction comes toil and struggle.

- ❖ You have to understand that the Greek word for “minister” that Paul uses in vv23 and 25 is the word “*diakonos*”. It’s where we get the word “deacon”, and it’s also translated in other letters of Paul as “servant” (cf. 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 6:4). **So when Paul says he became a minister for the gospel, he means he became a servant for the gospel.**
  - Now when we're dealing with servitude, then the idea of “toil and struggle” seems totally appropriate. It’s a natural association. Servitude is toilsome. It’s a struggle. We get that. Well, gospel ministry is no different. **The same characteristics we attribute to servitude would apply to ministry.**
- ❖ Then you’re probably thinking, why would anyone want to be a minister? **What's the appeal of gospel ministry if it's going to include a toil and struggle no different than servitude?** That’s a good question I believe our passage addresses. Notice how Paul starts off this section in v24. He says, “*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake.*” **So apparently the toil and struggle of ministry can co-exist with joy, with rejoicing.** How? How is that possible?
  - Let’s talk about that. What’s going to help is for us to see what kind of toil and struggle accompanies gospel ministry. What are we toiling after? Our first three points will try to flesh that out. And our last point addresses how we go about the toil and struggle of ministry so that it’s more of a joy than a burden.

### **A Toil and Struggle to Suffer the Afflictions of Christ**

- ❖ Here’s the first point: **Gospel ministry involves toil and struggle to suffer the afflictions of Christ.** I know that statement needs further explanation, but it reflects Paul’s thinking in v24. Let me read it again, “*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.*”
- ❖ What is Paul referring to here? **To his sufferings on behalf of all the churches he’s either trying to plant or build up.** We know from chapter 4:3 that he’s writing this letter from prison. Paul’s been imprisoned so many times for preaching the gospel, that commentators aren’t sure which imprisonment this is. He could be imprisoned in Ephesus or maybe Rome.
  - If you read the book of Acts, you'll be surprised at the countless beatings and imprisonments that Paul had to endure. Five times he was flogged. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned. Three times he was shipwrecked; a night and a day he was adrift at sea. He was constantly in danger, in toil and hardship (2 Cor 11:24-28).
- ❖ But for Paul, his toils and struggles in ministry were reasons to rejoice, as he puts it in v24. Why? **Because these sufferings were experienced in service of the gospel for the good and growth of the church.**
  - Suffering for suffering’s sake is masochism. Toiling for the sake of toiling is pointless. **But suffering and toiling for the sake of the church is ministry.** Because through it, the church grows into godliness.

- ❖ **Tertullian of Carthage once said, “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.”** He meant that every time enemies of the gospel try to suppress the gospel’s influence by oppressing the church – the persecution itself tends to serve the very growth of the church. The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.
  - Now I agree with that statement, except I’d tweak it a bit. I’d want to emphasize that the seed of the church is still the gospel. The growth of the church comes from the gospel and not the suffering. But the suffering is the fertilizer. **The blood of martyrs fertilizes the soil and helps the church – through gospel ministry – to grow stronger.**
  
- ❖ Church, take this to heart. **If we hope to see fruitfulness in our ministry – in our efforts to minister the gospel to one another – then don’t be surprised at the toil and struggle that accompanies our ministry** (1 Pet 4:12-13). Perhaps in our context, the suffering won’t be physical. There may not be actual bloodshed for us.
  - But in our culture, there will definitely be opposition – perhaps in the form of social pressure, insults, verbal abuse, rejection, the loss of academic or career advancement, or even worse, the loss of relationships. All because you’ve hitched your wagon to Jesus and the gospel. You may not shed any blood, but you might shed some tears.
    - **It’s like our culture has developed an allergic reaction to biblical truth.** If you claim that salvation is found in Christ alone; if you believe that judgment for sin is real and universal; that we are all condemned to hell if not for the righteousness and blood of Christ that covers those who repent and believe – even the faintest hint of that kind of belief is enough to trigger a strong allergic reaction. That's how sensitive our culture has become to biblical truth.
  
- ❖ But the point is that that has always been true of gospel ministry. And Paul accepts that reality. And more than mere acceptance, he rejoices in that reality. Why? Keep reading in v24, because he says, *“in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”*
  - Now I know at first glance, it seems to suggest that something was lacking or inadequate in the atonement of Christ. **It sounds as if Paul saw his suffering in the flesh as filling up what was lacking in the cross of Christ.** But that makes no sense when you take into consideration the entire context of the letter. We’ve already seen that the presenting problem in Colossians was a false teaching that was suggesting that Christ and his cross was lacking and not enough. That's what Paul was up against.
  
- ❖ Read in context –whatever he meant by *“filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions”* – at least we know it doesn’t mean there’s something deficient in the death of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. So what does it mean?
  - **To understand what he means, I think it helps to recall Paul's conversion experience and how it completely transformed his outlook.** In Acts 9:3, we’re told that on the road to Damascus – on the way to persecute Christians living there – Paul (also known as Saul) was radically converted. He met the Risen Christ, who said to him, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”*

- Now Paul could've retorted, "What do you mean, Jesus? I'm not persecuting you. I'm persecuting Christians. I'm persecuting the church." And Jesus would've said, "Exactly. Why are you persecuting me?"
- ❖ From that encounter, Paul came away convinced of the deep and intimate union between Christ and his Church. **Jesus identifies with us in such a way that to persecute the church is to persecute Jesus himself.**
    - So the afflictions that Christians (like Paul) experience for the sake of the church can be rightly described as the afflictions of Christ. It's all because of that close identification, that union between Christ and his Church. **So what all this means is that Paul wasn't talking about the afflictions of Christ in his physical body – but rather the afflictions of Christ through his spiritual Body the Church.**
  - ❖ Okay, but how are the Church's afflictions lacking? What exactly is lacking in Christ's afflictions in this sense? As we've already stressed, there was nothing lacking in the efficacy of Christ's atonement. Paul's afflictions added nothing to Christ's finished work of reconciliation.
    - **But what was lacking – what was incomplete – was the toil and suffering that was going to be necessary to bring that message of reconciliation to the nations, to the Gentiles, to the ends of the earth.**
      - Christ's afflictions led to reconciliation with God. **Paul's afflictions led to that message of reconciliation being proclaimed to everyone including the Gentiles.** Which didn't happen during the earthly ministry of Christ. That's what was lacking. And that's why Paul could rejoice in his sufferings. Because he saw his afflictions in the flesh as means of filling up or completing the task of reconciliation that Christ had begun with his afflictions in his flesh.
  - ❖ The point is this: Gospel ministry involves toil and struggle because if you hope to bring the gospel to your neighbor – across the street or across the globe – you will inevitably suffer the afflictions of Christ. And the real toil and struggle is to experience all of this with joy. **Now for Paul, what we see is that his joy came from knowing that the seed of the gospel is most fruitful in the soil of suffering.** Brothers and sisters, you can rejoice knowing that your toils and struggles are the appointed means by which the Lord intends to grow his church.

### **A Toil and Struggle to Make the Word of God Fully Known**

- ❖ So let's go back to our question: What does gospel ministry involve? Here's the second answer from our text: **Gospel ministry involves toil and struggle to make the word of God fully known.** We see this in v25. Paul ends v24 mentioning the church, and then he goes on to say, "*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.*"
  - So Paul sees himself as a minister of the church – a servant of the church. He's been given a stewardship from God. And one of the primary responsibilities of his stewardship is to make the word of God fully known.

- ❖ **He’s stressing this point because the false teacher in Colossians was saying that Paul (and Epaphras before him) didn’t proclaim the full truth.** "Sure, they told you about Christ and being united to him by faith. But you also need to follow this particular system of spirituality. You need to do this or that to complete that partial gospel you received earlier."
  - That’s why Paul makes a point of saying that his stewardship (responsibility) was to make the word of God fully known. That means the gospel he preaches is full – it’s not missing anything nor is he holding anything back.
  
- ❖ **So what is the gospel that Paul preaches – the one that false teachers were calling partial and incomplete?** Keep reading in v26, “*26the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 27To 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.*”
  - Now when Paul describes the gospel he preaches as a “mystery”, that could be easily misunderstood if we don’t define it biblically. It might not be the kind of mystery you have in mind. When we hear that word, we tend to think of mystery novels that have some sort of hidden puzzle for readers to solve if you just apply your wit or intuition.
    - **Well the way the word *mystery* is used the NT is similar in that it’s something hidden, but the key difference is that it’s a hidden truth you would never piece together – you’d never solve on your own.** It’s so surprising that you’d never get it – unless the mystery was divinely and graciously revealed to you.
  
- ❖ In Paul’s day, there were plenty of mystery religions that claimed to have esoteric knowledge available to a very few. To an elite group of intellectuals who were privy to the secret of salvation. That’s what they meant by mystery.
  - But that’s not how Paul viewed the gospel. Yes, it was hidden knowledge. It was a mystery hidden for ages and generations. *But now revealed* to his saints. **This mystery, this gospel, is now an open secret to be shared with all who are willing to hear.**
  
- ❖ And what is this mystery revealed? This open secret? **It’s Christ in you, the hope of glory. And remember, the plural *you* is referring to the Colossian church comprised of Gentile believers.** The mystery is about Gentiles being included in the people of God.
  - The plan of God, from the very beginning, was to choose one people group (the people of Israel) and to reveal his glory to them. To let his glory dwell among them. But the plan was always for the people of Israel to be a light for the nations (Isa 49:6) – to shine God’s glory, to extend his blessing, to all the peoples of the earth, to the Gentiles. So when Christ Jesus came, he fulfilled that plan. **He revealed the mystery of how Gentiles can share in God’s glory along with Israel, without becoming Israelites.**
    - It’s because the glory of God no longer resides in one temple, in one city, in one nation, in one culture, in one time period. Now the glory of God resides in one person – the person of Christ. **And all who trust in him, all who hide themselves in Christ, will experience God – not just among you – but in you.** Christ in you, the hope of glory.

- ❖ The glory of this mystery lies not in its exclusiveness but its inclusiveness. It's for all nations, all tribes and tongues. As well, the glory of this mystery lies not in its complexity but its simplicity. It's not about a complex system of spirituality. It's about Christ in you and you in Christ.
  - **In contrast to the false teacher, Paul says that his own message is fuller because it's simpler.** He has made the word of God fully known. And that fuller message can be summed up simply as "Christ in you". It's about being united to Christ by faith.
  
- ❖ Think about what this means for us. **I know many of us feel inadequate and intimidated to share the gospel with others.** We feel like we just don't know enough. We haven't studied enough. We're not articulate enough. But do you know Christ? Do you know Christ is in you – not because of what you do but because of what Christ has done for you?
  - If you believe that, then you're ready for gospel ministry. You're fully prepared to share that gospel – with confidence that you are making the word of God fully known. You're not lacking anything.
    - George Whitefield once said, "***Other men may preach the gospel better than I, but no man can preach a better gospel.***" So don't worry if someone can share the gospel better than you. No one can share a better gospel – if you're sharing the gospel of Christ in you, the hope of glory.

### **A Toil and Struggle to Present the People of God Fully Mature**

- ❖ So let's keep looking at our text and asking what does gospel ministry involve? The third answer: **Gospel ministry involves toil and struggle to present the people of God fully mature.** Paul makes this plain in v28, "*Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*"
  - What this means is that gospel ministry doesn't just involve evangelizing and seeing people saved. Gospel ministry involves discipling and seeing believers grow up into maturity in Christ. That's the goal of Paul's gospel proclamation.
    - It's about preaching Christ and then presenting believers mature in Christ. It's not easy. **Anyone who has tried to minister to others – who has tried to do gospel good in someone else's life – can testify that helping people mature in Christ involves toil and struggle.** Sin and error will try to stymie your efforts and hamper your ministry. Lies of the flesh and lies of the enemy will work to hinder a believer's maturity.
  
- ❖ **If we want to present people mature in Christ, it's going to take a balance of warning and teaching – a balance of correction and instruction.** Teaching and instructing is already a struggle, but it's even more toilsome to warn, especially if you're the kind of person who shies away from giving correction.
  - We want to do gospel good in the lives of others. **But some of us are ineffective – not because our gospel is incomplete – but because we're not comfortable when it comes to rebuking error or warning of false teaching.** We don't like confrontation. We don't want to come across as judgmental.

- ❖ **But gospel ministry will involve warning people – warning of the dangers of sin and unrepentance or the dangers of error and false teaching.** Of course, we shouldn't warn from a posture of moral or theological superiority. Our motives have to be pure. But ask the parent of a child running with scissors or the doctor of a patient with high blood pressure – **a clear and firm warning can come out of place of genuine care and concern for someone's wellbeing.**
- ❖ But there has to be that balance in our ministry – of warning and instruction. Also a balance of warning and encouragement. We see Paul stressing that in chapter 2:1-3, *"<sup>1</sup>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, <sup>2</sup>that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, <sup>3</sup>in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."*
  - **Notice how Paul is mentioning all his toil and struggle on their behalf – not to win their approval or to guilt trip them into loyalty – but to encourage their hearts.** What he wants for the Christians at Colossae and those at Laodicia and believers he's never even met before – is for them to mature in Christ to the point that they reach full assurance of understanding into the mystery of God, the gospel.
- ❖ **And the most encouraging thing he can say is to remind them that the mystery of God, the gospel, is Christ.** Look at v3, *"[Christ] in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."* That's a comfort – to be told that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Christ. That there are no essential truths outside of Christ.
  - **Do you realize what a comfort it is to be told that Christ is enough? It means you don't need to search anywhere else for wisdom and knowledge about God.** If you're like me, you've got way too many books on your to-read list. And way too many articles bookmarked on your browser. And way too many podcasts you haven't listen to. Don't be overwhelmed. Turn instead to one of the four Gospels and look to Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
- ❖ Friends, this makes gospel ministry so much simpler. It may be toilsome, but ministry doesn't have to be complex. **One of the best ways to do spiritual good for someone is to read through a Gospel with them.** If you have a friend who's seeking the faith or someone coming back to the faith or just a newer Christian – invite them to read the Gospel of Mark with you. For one thing, it's shorter than the rest. But what's more, Mark is all about showing you how Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. I'd recommend using a resource called *Christianity Explained*, that teaches you how to read through Mark with someone while also explaining the gospel of grace.

### **Toil and Struggle with God's Energy Working in You**

- ❖ So we've seen what's involved in gospel ministry. It's a toil and struggle to (1) suffer the afflictions of Christ with joy, (2) to make the word of God fully known, and (3) to present the people of God fully mature. Our last point is about how we go about ministering to others so that it's more of a joy than a burden. **Since Gospel ministry involves toil and struggle, then toil and struggle with God's energy working in you.**

- ❖ Look back at v29. When Paul says, “*For this,*” the *this* is referring to his ministry to present everyone mature in Christ. Ministry is a toil and struggle. But Paul toils and struggles, “*with all [of God’s] energy that he powerfully works within me.*”
  - That’s the open secret, my friends. When it comes to gospel ministry, Paul is a hard worker. He toils. He struggles. But it’s all on the basis of God’s working, which he powerfully works within Paul. **The reason why Paul could suffer so much affliction and endure so much toil and struggle is because of grace. Because of the grace of God working in him.**
  
- ❖ He was one of the apostles of Christ. But unlike the rest of them, he was “*untimely born*” as Paul put it in **1 Corinthians 15:8**. He saw himself as the runt of the litter. Because he’s the only apostle who was once an enemy and persecutor of the church.
  - Listen to what he says next, “*9For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*” (1 Cor 15:9-10)
  
- ❖ That’s a man who understands how to apply God’s grace. **When it comes to gospel ministry, grace is not given to excuse you from toil and struggle. Grace is given to empower you to toil and struggle to do gospel good for others.**
  - I think when it comes to ministry – **when it comes to serving the church, we have a tendency to give less effort than we give to our job or to our school work.** And we expect ministry to be far less laborious and toilsome.
    - And it's probably because – unlike at work or at school – in ministry we're serving in a context of grace. And it's because of that grace that we don't feel that bad to show up to d-group or small group unprepared in our lesson. We don't give the same effort to prepping a Sunday School lecture as we would to a client presentation – because we're serving a God of grace.
  
- ❖ We think grace excuses you from toiling and struggling in ministry. But it's quite the opposite. Grace is what empowers you. You toil. You struggle. You work hard to minister the gospel to others. **Yet not you but the grace of God that is within you.** It's the energy of God that he powerfully works in you.