

Introduction...Paul's Conversion in Acts 26:12-18

"Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" It's a simple question but the answer will surprise you. This question comes up because Jesus' disciples were having a conversation while they were walking from Galilee to Capernaum. To be honest it was more of an argument and it had to do with which disciple was the best disciple.

I can imagine them comparing notes about who cast out the most demons, or who had memorized more of Jesus' sayings. I imagine Peter reminded everyone that he did in fact walk on water, even if only for a minute. I'm sure John reminded everyone that Jesus did seem to love him more than the rest. Judas probably bragged about how Jesus has asked him to manage all of the finances.

This probably wasn't the first time they had this argument but it must have come to a head on this day because Jesus decides that it is time to set the record straight; not by pointing out who is the greatest but by teaching them what greatness means in His kingdom. Jesus tells them, "he who is least among you is the one who is great. If you want to be first in the Kingdom of God, then you must be the servant of all"

It's not about what you do that makes you great in Christ's Kingdom, it's about how you serve. This is quite different than the pattern of greatness that we are accustomed to in the kingdom of this world, but don't forget that God's Kingdom is different, it's upside down.

Transition...

This morning we are looking again at the character of gospel ministry through the lens of the apostle Paul's suffering. What he has to say to us is not simply an outline of the Apostolic role but is intended to serve as basic instruction for all who participate in the ministry of making disciples, which in one way or another involves every single Christian. If you are a believer in Christ, then you have been given not only the gift of salvation but also *gifts* that the Lord intends for you to use as you take part in the Great Commission which is found in **Matthew 28:18-20**.

The task that Jesus has given to all of us is that as we are going through life as His people we are to be making disciples. We are to be sharing the gospel and making disciples in our homes, in our churches and out in the world. Now it's true that we don't all have the same gifts nor the same responsibilities; but great commission ministry rests on all of us. Because as disciples of Christ we are all *servants* of God.

That's the term Paul uses in our passage this morning. He doesn't introduce himself as an apostle in this text, nor as an elder, nor a pastor; he calls himself **a servant (διακονος)**. In verse 23 Paul refers to himself as **a servant of the gospel**. In verse 25 he calls himself **a servant of the church** and we saw last week that at this point in his life, **Paul is willing to serve even to the point of suffering**.

But, that wasn't always the case. Paul wasn't always so supportive of Jesus, the gospel and the church. So what changed to bring him to the point of being a servant of Christ and a servant of the gospel, who was willing to suffer in order to make disciples and strengthen the church. That's one of the things we are going to talk about today.

This morning we are going to continue to look at the **8 characteristics of gospel ministry** that Paul outlines in verse 24-29. Last week we learned that the **Spirit of Gospel Ministry is one of Joy** and we learned that serving in gospel ministry often brings **Suffering**. Today we are going to learn the **Source, Scope and Subject of Gospel Ministry**.

Colossians 1:24 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, ²⁵ 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, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Sermon Focus...

I. The Source/Stewardship of Gospel Ministry (V. 25)

V. 25 of which I became a minister *according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you...*

It might seem like an odd thing to say but it's true that Paul didn't choose gospel ministry, rather he was chosen for gospel ministry. When we first learn about Paul in Acts 9 he was on track to become the next big leader within the ranks of 1st century Pharisaism. He was **the** rising star of his day.

Paul was born a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin. He had a Jewish mother and a Roman father. From early on he devoted himself to the strictest Jewish religious party of the Pharisees, and he was head of his class. His life was devoted to memorizing the Torah, and applying its truth to every bit of his daily life. He was a great student and undoubtedly looking at a career as a great teacher.

He was an apologist for his cause, like a 1st century blogger ready to argue his position with anyone who disagreed. But he was willing to do more than just argue with his opponents. **When we meet him in Acts 9 we find that he is a zealot and the followers of Jesus are his enemies.** Paul was a persecutor, having placed himself in the legal position to condemn and kill those who claimed Jesus as the Messiah of God. The first time we meet him it's in Jerusalem and he is holding the garments of murderers, like a boxing manager holds the robe of his prize-fighter, and these men are set to stone Stephen to death.

Now, I imagine that while the men picked up stones to throw them at Stephen, they would look over their shoulders at Paul, the law expert, who quoted scripture to justify what they were doing. He was a proud man, a powerful man and a man who saw great gain in his religion and way of life. But God had another plan for Paul and he kicked it off by turning the man's life upside down.

In Acts 26, Paul gives an account of what happened in his own words:

Acts 26:5...according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee... ⁹ "I was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

¹² "In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ At midday, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. ¹⁴ And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' ¹⁵ And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am

Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶ But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷ delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

Paul had his career plan mapped out and it included stoning those who followed Jesus, but after this encounter with the Christ, Paul became a man who was willing to be stoned in order to serve the followers of Jesus. That’s a radical transformation and it came directly from God.

Notice that Paul says that he ***became a minister/servant according to the stewardship from God that was given to him.*** It wasn’t that he chose this role, he was chosen for it. And make no mistake, it was a shock to those who found out about it.

Near Damascus, there lived a man named Ananias who was a disciple of Christ. One day Ananias had a vision from God and God said to him, “I want you to get up and go into town and take a right on straight street and stop at the house of a man named Judas. Inside you will find another man praying, his name is Saul of Tarsus.” Ananias answered back to God and said, “Are you talking about the Saul that has been killing Christians in Jerusalem?” And God answered, “Yep, that’s the one...he is a ***chosen instrument of mine*** who will carry my name to the Gentiles...I will also show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

The source of Paul’s ministry wasn’t a decided career move. He didn’t sit down to weigh out his options and chose Christian ministry. He was chosen for it. God changed his life, called him into service, and gave him a specific stewardship/responsibility to take the gospel to the Gentiles

Now, what does this mean for you and me and the ministry that we serve in today? Do we all have to have a radical conversion story and see a vision of Christ to know we are called to ministry? Not exactly.

All those who serve in gospel ministry must be born again and embrace to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And all who serve in gospel ministry should seek to use the gifts that God has given them to meet the needs of others and the needs of their local church. **And let me be clear, that all Christians have been called to serve God in one capacity or another. When God calls us to salvation He calls us into service to Christ, the gospel and the church.**

Each of us has been called into service within the household of God and to shine as lights in the world. But how do we know where to serve? I’m going to try to make this really simple because I think this has often been one of the more complicated issues in the church.

It starts with an understanding of ***calling*** and I’m not talking about a Damascus road experience or some mystical prophetic word. I’m referring to the Biblical understanding that all of us are called to serve the Lord in the ministry of the Word and the making of disciples. Nowhere in the NT does God say to Christians that we are saved for nothing more than to sit and learn from others for the rest of our lives. We are all called to serve. We are all called to engage in disciple making whether it is in the home, in the church, in our neighborhoods or in the world.

Once we have embraced the fact that we are all **called** into service the next step is to identify what you are ***burdened*** about. What area of ministry are you most drawn to? What do you desire to do for the Lord and for the church? Is it consistent with the Scriptures?

Then I would encourage you to **explore your gifts**. What are you able to do? What skills and abilities do you have that could be useful to the body? In what way have you been gifted by God to serve His people? Are you a musician, an artist? Do you like to study and share what you are learning with others? Do you have organizational skills?

Then seek the wisdom, direction and **affirmation of church leaders**. Spend time with men and women and get their feedback on how you can grow, on where you can serve, on how you can improve or be more consistent, more clear, more helpful, more faithful.

Then **serve**. Go on mission trips, assist in Sunday school, take up the offering, volunteer to serve with the deacons, as a deacon, talk to Cody about music ministry, talk to Kim about helping out with hospitality, talk to the elders about hosting a community group, leading a community group, etc.

Let's not make this mysterious or more complicated than it should be. Here are those 5 steps: calling, burden, gifting, affirmation and service. I believe that all of these steps are initiated by the Holy Spirit in our hearts. He opens our eyes to see that our calling to salvation involves a calling to serve. He burdens our hearts to serve in specific ways. He gives us gifts to use in our service. He guides our leaders to be Biblically discerning and wise, then He empowers our service by His own strength.

Now that we have seen the **source of Gospel ministry** let's turn our attention now to **the Scope of Gospel Ministry**.

II. The Scope/Task of Gospel Ministry (v. 25)

to make the word of God fully known...

Our role is not to present ourselves and our ideas but to present God's Word faithfully. Paul says here that his task is to *present the Word of God in its fullness* or *to fulfill the Word of God*. Now what does he mean by this?

The task of making disciples starts with a presentation of the truth. Gospel ministry is a revelatory role in that we are making the truth of God known in the world through preaching, teaching, and sharing God's Word.

Romans 10: 13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." ¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" ¹⁶ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" ¹⁷ *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*

But what does Paul mean by making the Word of God **fully** known? There are two ways we should understand this:

1. Making the Word of God **fully** known must be understood to refer to Jesus Christ and the gospel as the pinnacle of revelation. The Bible is incomplete without Jesus. The OT history, law and prophecies are unfinished without the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. The OT characters we love, the OT stories we learned as children, the Psalms we love to quote...these all point beyond themselves and find their ultimate fulfillment in the person and work of Christ.

2. Making the Word of God **fully** known also refers to the effects of preaching the gospel. The Word moves in power and it is not only heard, but it plows up the rocky soil of men's hearts, it brings dead women to life, it produces fruit of the Spirit, and changes the world.

The Word of God is made **fully** known when the gospel is proclaimed and that proclamation accomplishes the purpose God has for it.

Now, there are countless ways that we can serve our community. There are ways that we can help the homeless, provide counsel to needy people, and feed those who are hungry. There are ways that we can show love to our neighbors, be good friends, and serve those around us at home, at work, or in the city. We can and should volunteer our time, we can and should be salt and light wherever we go. **But these things are not the focal point/scope of gospel ministry.**

The focal point of gospel ministry is to make the Word of God fully known. To preach the truth once for all delivered to the saints. To preach Christ and Him crucified, **this is the task of gospel ministry.**

Let's turn our attention now to our last point this morning...

III. The Subject of Gospel Ministry (V. 26-27)

v. 26 *the 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*

We have already hit on this a little bit in the previous point but here I want to take the time to be crystal clear that all of Scripture finds its pinnacle and purpose in the gospel. All the Scriptures, the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Writings, they all concern Christ. The whole of the Old Testament is drawing our attention to the main stage where God is showcasing the main event which is Jesus Christ.

The entire Bible has been pointing to Him; He is the mystery of God revealed. He is the one who fulfills all the promises of God. He is the climax of the story and the climax of world history as well.

God the Son, the second person of the eternal triune God, became a man clothed in flesh to die in the place of sinners as the crescendo of God's plan of redemption. This truth which baffles the mind is the means through which God has determined to undo and destroy the effects of sin upon creation.

Every story the Bible tells is pointing us to Jesus. Every promise finds its fulfillment in this; that God became a man and humbled himself to the point of death even death on a cross in order to settle our debts with God and grant us eternal life. Where imperfect men have failed to rise to the standard of Holiness that God demands, Christ came to succeed.

Jesus is the true and better Adam who passed the test in the garden and whose obedience is imputed to us.

Jesus is the true and better Abel who, though innocently slain, has blood now that cries out, not for our condemnation, but for acquittal.

Jesus is the true and better Abraham who answered the call of God to leave all the comfortable and familiar and go out into the void not knowing where he went to create a new people of God.

Jesus is the true and better Isaac who was not just offered up by his father on the mount but was truly sacrificed for us. And when God said to Abraham, “Now I know you love me because you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love from me,” now we can look at God taking his son up the mountain and sacrificing him and say, “Now we know that you love us because you did not withhold your son, your only son, whom you love from us.”

Jesus is the true and better Jacob who wrestled and took the blow of justice we deserved, so we, like Jacob, only receive the wounds of grace to wake us up and discipline us.

Jesus is the true and better Joseph who, at the right hand of the king, forgives those who betrayed and sold him and uses his new power to save them.

Jesus is the true and better Moses who stands in the gap between the people and the Lord and who mediates a new covenant.

Jesus is the true and better Rock of Moses who, struck with the rod of God’s justice, now gives us water in the desert.

Jesus is the true and better Job, the truly innocent sufferer, who then intercedes for and saves his stupid friends.

Jesus is the true and better David whose victory becomes his people’s victory, though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it themselves.

Jesus is the true and better Esther who didn’t just risk leaving an earthly palace but lost the ultimate and heavenly one, who didn’t just risk his life, but gave his life to save his people.

Jesus is the true and better Jonah who was cast out into the storm so that we could be brought in.

Jesus is the real Rock of Moses, the real Passover Lamb, innocent, perfect, helpless, slain so the angel of death will pass over us. He’s the true temple, the true prophet, the true priest, the true king, the true sacrifice, the true lamb, the true light, the true bread.

All of the Bible is ultimately about him.¹

The overwhelming trajectory of the Biblical witness concerns a movement by God towards man. The Father sends the Son. The Word became flesh. To save us, God did not come in the fullness of His glory, but rather he came in the humility of a man; as a baby crying in the arms of a teenage mother, who required feeding and changing and who would be condemned to die as a criminal upon a cross. Jesus hid his glory, limited himself and walked to the cross in our place.

And all the while, He remained equal, one with God, even though He had taken the form of a slave. He became one with us, sharing in our limitations, our sorrows and bearing our burdens. He experienced the temptations that we know too well, only he remained sinless to the day of his death. And in his death he atoned for our sins and by faith He unites us to God.

Conclusion...

In the OT, God dwelled in the midst of His people when His glory came down and rested within the Tabernacle. In the NT, Christ walked in the midst of His people when He humbled Himself and took

¹ Tim Keller, from class lectures on *Preaching Christ in a Post-Modern World*.

on flesh to tabernacle among us. Now since Jesus' ascension, the Holy Spirit of Christ dwells in the hearts of God's people, leading us, guiding us, gifting us, empowering us for gospel ministry, and He will never leave us nor turn away from us.