

Introduction...

"It's time to grow up!" This is a phrase I heard many times as a boy and it typically came on the heels of a mistake I had made. It wasn't a phrase I enjoyed hearing because it almost always implied that I wasn't grown up. It was both a rebuke and an exhortation. It made me face the fact that I wasn't mature while spurring me on to pursue maturity, and maturity is one of those things that if you ever begin to seek it out you might just come to realize that you will never fully attain it.

Today, I find myself still seeking to grow and be a mature man. There are so many things I don't know and so many things I have still yet to learn. There are experiences that I haven't had, trials that I've never been tested against, and so the journey toward maturity that began when I realized just how immature I was, that journey continues and I don't think I will ever fully arrive; at least not on my own.

Growth and maturity are natural aspects of human life. In fact, it's when growth is not occurring that we often realize that something is wrong. Some dear friends of ours have a young son who was born as their fourth child and things appeared to be quite normal early on for him. He was a happy, playful, and energetic little boy, but when his age kept increasing and his abilities didn't match his age, there was cause for concern because growth and maturity are a natural part of healthy human life.

Growth and maturity are natural signs of health in of all forms of life. Now that Spring is officially upon us I will be spending quite a bit of time working in my vegetable garden. One of the things I will be looking for as I tend the garden is whether or not my plants are growing the way they should. ***The goal of a garden is the fruit*** and if plants are growing in a healthy way then I will need to address the problems, tend to the specific needs in order to help them grow up to maturity so that they can produce fruit.

Growth and maturity are natural signs of health in every facet of life including the life of God's people. New Testament authors use the common stages of human development to describe how Christians are to grow from infancy, to childhood, and on to mature adulthood. As Christians, we are called to press on to maturity in the faith. We are encouraged to grow up in every way to be more like Jesus. When growth is not seen in the life of a Christian there is cause for concern because growth is a sign of life.

But what are the means to such growth? How can we put ourselves in a position to promote growth in our own Christian life? How can we serve to promote growth in the lives of others? Well, these are questions that Paul is seeking to help us answer here in **Colossians 1:24-29**. This passage is about the character of gospel ministry and today in verses 28-29 we are going to see three aspects of ministry that pertain to maturity in the Christian life.

Transition...

Over the last 2 weeks we have been learning about the character of gospel ministry. We learned that the ***spirit*** of gospel ministry is joy and that ***suffering*** in gospel ministry comes with the territory. Last week we learned that God is the ***source*** of gospel ministry, that making the Word of God fully known is the ***scope***, and Christ is the ***substance*** of gospel ministry. This morning we are going to look at three more characteristics that are found in verses 28-29: ***style, sum*** and ***strength***.

Col 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, 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. ²⁸Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Sermon Focus...

I. The Style/Method of Gospel Ministry (V. 28a)

²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom

There are three verbs in this verse that describe the style of gospel ministry. They outline how we go about our task. We are to **proclaim**, **warn** and **teach**. And the way we should read this verse is that we are to proclaim Christ, and in our proclamation we do two things: we warn and we teach. Our proclamation involves both warning and teaching. So what does all of this mean?

What are we to proclaim? Him! We proclaim Christ. The One described in verses 15-20 is the One that we are to tell others about. We are to **proclaim or announce** the truth about Jesus Christ. The verb carries with it the idea of a public announcement, which would include preaching but would also include sharing or dissemination ideas in a bold, clear and public way. This proclamation happens in normal everyday conversation as well as in the pulpit on Sunday morning.

The gospel of Jesus is **good news** and good news is meant to be shared in formal as well as informal ways. This news doesn't need to be embellished or polished up in any way. It can stand on its own and it will accomplish the purpose of **God (2 Cor 4:1-7)**.

We need to have complete confidence in the simple yet bold proclamation of Christ as the means by which God would save sinners, build His church and accomplish His purpose in the world. Listen to Paul describe the power of God at work through the clear and faithful proclamation of Christ Crucified.

I Corinthians 2:1 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come **proclaiming** to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Paul is saying, "Listen, all I did was come to you and tell you about Jesus. I told you who He is and what He died to accomplish. I told you all about His life and miracles. I told you about how He fulfills the OT prophecies regarding the Messiah. I told you about His resurrection...I just told you the truth of the Gospel and that is enough."

(Illus... This past week I read about an encounter that Tim Challies had with a Worship Leader and Creative Arts Director for a church in Toronto. Here's how he explained the encounter...

Her main task is to put together and then lead her church's worship services. Early in the week, the senior pastor tells her his focus for that Sunday and she gets to work. She thinks of stage props that will complement the message, she considers assembling the dance team, she combs through YouTube and popular movies to look for clips—especially funny clips. Some Sundays she removes the sermon altogether so the church can watch a painter produce a work of art or a

drama team lead a performance. These “visual sermons” are often more effective than preaching, she said.

At one point she began to tell about her pastor. He is a good communicator and loves to preach, but there is a problem: while the church is getting younger, he is getting older. She isn’t sure he can be effective at his age and is kind of hoping he will move on. I took the opportunity to ask what qualifications the church might value in a new pastor. She thought for a few moments and replied, “He’d need to have good rapport with young people and a great sense of humor.”

This is a sad state of affairs but it is more common than we care to admit. For many “churches” there is no confidence in the simple proclamation of the gospel. For pragmatic churches like this the goal is to inspire people. The worship service has to be engaging, inspirational, uplifting and dramatic; if it doesn’t meet this criterion then it has no place in their service. This is a far cry from the scope of gospel ministry outlined in Scripture.

Again, listen to Paul address the style of gospel ministry in 2 Cor 4:

2 Cor 4:1 Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ² But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. ⁶ For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

For Paul, the gospel of Jesus has a power and wisdom all its own, it is the power and wisdom of the upside down kingdom of Christ. It is a wisdom, which shows us that sacrificial love is the most powerful thing in the universe. It is a wisdom that discourages pride and exalts humility. It is a wisdom that says the only way to God is through faith in Christ, not obedience to a religious system, not painstaking adherence to a system of laws, but by abandoning the self-salvation mission that every religion in this world proclaims and trusting in the work of another to save you.

We preach Christ crucified as the only hope of salvation for a sinful humanity that is separated from God and headed for destruction. Notice also that Paul says the style of our ministry involves a warning. We **warn** everyone and this word warn can be translated as **admonish** if you prefer old churchy terms. It means that part of our proclamation includes a warning about sin and the judgment that is sure to follow.

Good news is only **good** if it addresses what we already understand to be bad. The bad news is that we are sinners and God is angry about our sin. The flood in **Genesis 6** gives us a picture of God’s wrath toward sin. At the beginning of chapter **6:5** we read, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of mankind had become great upon the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually...”

Ephesians 2:1-3 makes it clear that in our natural sinful state we are dead in our sin, following the rebellious course of Satan himself and are by nature children of wrath. Brother/sister, I know this is uncomfortable to hear but part of our responsibility as gospel ministers is to **proclaim the gospel**

and warn every one of the consequences that they will face if they do not turn from their sin and trust in Christ. **“All have sinned and fallen short of God’s glorious standard. The wages of sin is death and after death comes judgment.”** This will not make us popular within the growing secularism of our culture, but popularity is not our goal.

There is also a place for warning/admonishing ***within the church***. **Colossians 3:16** “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and ***admonishing*** one another in all wisdom.” This happens when we see our Christian friends acting in a way that is inconsistent with God’s Word and we warn them of their sin. This happens when we teach our kids not to be selfish or hateful but instead we teach them to share and be kind. This happens when we point each other to the Word of Christ and help one another obey the Lord.

But don’t miss the fact that there should be balance in our proclamation. We proclaim, we warn and we also instruct. It is not enough to warn people of what not to do, we are also to give clear instruction on what we are to do. These two terms serve as two sides of the same coin. We teach what to avoid and we teach what to embrace.

Let me give you an example of this in action...In **Ephesians 4** we read that as Christians we are to put off the old and put on the new. If we were once prone to lie all the time we should stop doing that and work hard to tell the truth. If we were once a thief who liked to take things that didn’t belong to us, we should stop doing that and get a job so that we can learn to give away what does belong to us in order to help others.

The style of gospel ministry is such that we proclaim the gospel, we warn people about their sin and its consequences, and we also teach them how to know, love, and serve Christ.

II. The Sum of Gospel Ministry (V. 28)

that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Why do we labor in preaching, warning and teaching? So that the people we are ministering to can grow up to Christian maturity. The goal of our ministry is not to gain notoriety and book deals. The goal of ministry is not to climb the church ladder and have a cushy job on the stage of a megachurch someday. The goal of gospel ministry is not to grow a big church that is a mile wide and inch deep. The goal of gospel ministry is to help Christians grow to be more like Jesus.

That’s what God promises to do in us, He promises to grow us to be more and more like Jesus. He will work in our hearts to make us wise. He will teach us truth so that we won’t be so confused and susceptible to false doctrine and teaching. He will give us opportunities to serve others and will give us the strength to carry out that service. He will grow our patience, our understanding, our sensitivity to the needs of others, our sensitivity to His Word; God is going to grow us up into maturity and one of the most significant ways that He will accomplish this in our lives is through the ministry of others. The normal means of gospel ministry.

Eph 4:11 Jesus gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹²to ***equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ***, ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood...

God promises to use the normal means of faithful and spiritually gifted men and women in the church to help us mature in the faith.

14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, ***we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,*** ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, ***makes the body grow*** so that it builds itself up in love.

The church will grow up to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ when we are faithful to invest our lives in gospel ministry. That's right! God desires to bring Christians to maturity and He has called us to be one of the primary means that He uses to grow young Christian's into that maturity.

As a church this responsibility starts with the elders, then it impacts the deacons, it leans heavily on the pastor, but also every other member who teaches. It falls on parents to be raising our children to know and love God and His Word. It is accomplished in community groups, in Sunday School, in youth ministry, in ladies Bible studies, in Calvin reading groups and countless other relationships where we take seriously the responsibility of gospel ministry.

This is discipleship and it happens when we invest our lives in the ministry of the church. It happens when we get to know one another on a deeper level than a greeting in the hallway on your way to Sunday School. It happens when we say yes to the needs around us. It happens when you make time to really study the Word, to read a good book, to get plugged into a ministry of the church so that you can grow and then help someone else to grow as well.

So here's an important question, "How are ***we*** going to help others to grow?" The truth is most of us feel as though we are the ones in need of growth so how are we going to be helpful to others? How are we going to help others to grow?

Our confidence for gospel ministry is not in our expertise or qualifications but in the Word of God.

2 Tim 3:16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work...(therefore) ² preach the word.

Christians will move toward maturity by feeding on God's Word. You don't have to have a seminary degree to help others grow in Christ. Read the Scriptures, think and pray. Read, write down your thoughts, and pray. Read a good book, think about it, discuss it with others, and pray. Be faithful in worship and let the Word of God seep down into your heart and life, then be willing to share it with others.

And there is one more thing that Paul wants us to understand about the character of gospel ministry and it is that our strength comes from God.

III. The Strength of Gospel Ministry (V. 29)

²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

First, I want you to notice that gospel ministry involves ***toil***. These word that Paul is using here mean ***laboring to the point of exhaustion***. Gospel ministry is hard work. It requires sacrifice. It means late nights studying to get ready for Sunday morning. It means losing sleep because the

person you are discipling is struggling with sin. It means sacrificing leisure time to read and pray. Ministry is often toil.

Most of the leaders and teachers in this church work full time jobs, they are actively raising children, they are taking care of needs within their own families, but they are also carving out time to get a Sunday school lesson together. Once each quarter I ask one of the elders or another capable man in the church to preach for me. I do this because I need to put myself under the ministry of the Word, **but I know that this is asking a lot of these men**. It's work to prepare a sermon for this congregation.

Our Sunday school teachers do a wonderful job, our community group leaders work hard to host and make those meetings profitable, our bible study leaders make significant sacrifices to help others grow and all of this is hard work. Ministry in a small local church depends on the hard work and sacrifice of volunteer teachers and leaders.

But for all of our labor we need to understand that we are not working alone. Our **struggling** in ministry is being propped up by the power which God supplies. In other words, our efforts in ministry are not merely human efforts. It's hard work yes, but we are not the only one's working. God supplies us with strength.

(**Illus...**The fire of faithfulness that burns in us is supplied by the kindling that we put around us (prayer, Bible study, service, etc.) but the flame is kept ablaze by the Holy Spirit who pours oil on the fire even when we can't see it.

God's power is at work in us as we labor and His power is at work in those to whom we labor. Our labor is not in vain on either front. The Kingdom of God rests upon the mysterious power that God provides underneath the hard work of His people. It is mysterious in the sense that Paul can say in **1 Cor 15:10**, "I worked harder than all of them", but at the same time he says, "through Him who gives me strength" (Phil 4:13).

Conclusion...

So what does this mean? It means we have a lot of work to do and the burden of that work falls on our shoulders. But God will not abandon us to fruitless toil. He will strengthen us. He will supply what we need and He will work in the hearts of His people through our efforts.

Colossians 1:24-29 has taught us 8 characteristics of gospel ministry (the **spirit** of gospel ministry is joy, **suffering** in gospel ministry is common, the **source** of gospel ministry is God, the **scope** of our ministry is to make the Word of God fully known, the **substance** of gospel ministry is our glorious Christ, the **style** of our ministry is to proclaim Christ (warning and teaching), the **sum** of our ministry is Christian maturity and the **strength** of our labor is supplied by God Himself.

This is the character of gospel ministry within the upside-down kingdom of Christ and it is not just a task for the professionals. Every believer is called to serve in this.

So let's pray and ask the Lord to ready our hearts and to strengthen our faithfulness to the task of gospel ministry.