

Introduction...

How hard are we willing to work in order to help one another grow in the faith? How much time and energy are you willing to give to see your brothers and sisters bear fruit for Christ? How far are we willing to go to safeguard the gospel in our generation? How far will you go to ensure that you and your family aren't led away by false teaching? How hard will we work to ensure that sound doctrine is established and upheld in the church? These aren't questions that we often ask ourselves, but we should.

The church exists to glorify God by making disciples of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's why we are here, to see people come to faith and to teach them to be faithful and mature Christians. The goal of the Christian life is not a lifetime of church attendance; it is to be faithful to Jesus, to grow to be more like Him and to engage in the mission He called us to.

In a parable, Jesus taught that the church is like a field where good seed was sown. That seed has sprouted, taken root, and is now growing up and one day it will be mature, ready for harvest. But in the night an enemy came and sowed weeds in among the wheat.

The church and her message is always under attack by what appear to be well-meaning and sensible people. Their stated goal is to help a new generation of seekers find peace with God. They don't really want to redefine the faith so much as they want to restate it in terms their generation can understand. They adopt new language, they might ask new questions, they want to help us see things in new ways and this approach isn't always a bad thing.

Every generation needs to wrestle with the deep questions of faith. We need to study hard, pray faithfully and think deeply about the nature of the gospel and its implications for our lives today. But at the same time we need to put just as much energy into guarding our hearts against false teaching.

We need to adopt two postures when it comes to gospel ministry: we want to help nurture genuine faith in others while also guarding against false doctrine in those same people. We are like gardeners in one sense and guardians in another. We sow the seed of the gospel, we water the seed, seek to nourish it with good food and we trust God for growth and fruit. But we must also weed the garden, pull rocks out of the soil, fence out the animals that want to devour those fresh new shoots and we protect the garden from outside threats.

Transition...

This dual posture of gardener and guardian is what Paul is after in **Colossians 2**. The bulk of this chapter is about Paul addressing the false teaching that is affecting the church. He wants to make sure these believers aren't led in the wrong direction but he also wants to see the church grow in the right ways. He is striking a balance between nurturing them and protecting them.

Col 2:1 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, ²that 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, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. ⁵For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

Sermon Focus...

Here in this passage we see Five Specific Fruits of Gospel Ministry.

I. Gospel Ministers set an example for others to follow (V. 1)

Col 2:1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you...

The word Paul uses here is one of his favorite metaphors for Christian ministry and he takes it from the Roman athletic arena. It is often translated as ***striving*** or ***contending*** but it is the Greek word *ἀγών* and from it we get our terms ***agony*** or ***agonize***. The Greeks would use this term to refer to athletes who were entering into a contest and it draws our attention to the hard work, the intense struggle that is necessary for an athlete to be able to compete in the games.

An athlete strives, agonizes and competes with all of his might and he does this in front of a watching crowd. The Greeks and Romans loved their athletes. They showered them with praise, erected statues to them; much like today those athletes and their accomplishments spurred on a whole generation of young people with dreams of athletic glory. When Roman athletes would enter the arena they were willing to put it all on the line to win and the watching crowd was focused on every move they made.

And notice here that Paul wants his readers, he wants us, to be aware of his struggle. He wants to draw the church's attention to his ***agony***. He wants them to see his labor and to understand what he is going through. ***But why?*** For two reasons: he wants them to see the seriousness of his instruction and he wants them to follow his example.

This is a church wrestling with what to believe about how the gospel compares with other religious teaching. Some hybrid ideas from Roman paganism and Jewish mysticism have crept in to this church and it has begun to challenge the teaching of Christ. So, this church is struggling to know what to believe. They are not sure if the Christian message is true, they are not sure if Christ is enough and here is Paul saying, "Let my confidence in Christ encourage you."

Paul is saying, "I've stepped into the arena, not as an athlete struggling for a prize, but as a minister struggling to make the gospel known and I am willing to lay my life on the line for this gospel and for you" As Paul writes this letter he is sitting in a Roman prison for preaching the gospel and he wants **this** knowledge to help strengthen their faith in Christ.

How does his suffering strengthen their faith in Christ? Let's ask a few questions...

Why would a man put his life on the line day in and day out for something unless he was convinced it was true? Why would Paul, a genius of a man, allow himself to suffer imprisonment on account of his obedience to Jesus unless he was convinced that obedience to Jesus was worth dying for? Why, would he write a letter from prison to the people of Colossae and Laodicea encouraging them to trust in the sufficiency of Christ unless he himself trusted his own life to the sufficiency of Christ?

Paul wanted the people of Colossae to know about his suffering because he wants his example to strengthen their trust in Jesus and the gospel. Brothers and sisters, one of the fruits of the gospel in our lives, one of the fruits of our gospel ministry, is the impact that our example of faithfulness will have on other believers.

The primary example that we are to follow is the example of Jesus:

John 13:15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.

I Peter 2:21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

Christ is the prime example for us to follow. But also, within the church God has also left us faithful examples in the men and women who have gone before us. This is the nature of discipleship, that those who follow Christ leave an example for the next generation to follow.

Phil 3:17 Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

There is great benefit to our struggle in the faith. Our labor for the sake of the gospel bears a unique kind of fruit in the lives of others. Our labor is a testimony of the truth of the gospel fleshed out in our lives. Paul wants the church to see his struggle and to be encouraged by it to trust in Christ all the more.

But how does he want them to be encouraged?

II. Gospel Ministry Encourages the Hearts of Believers (v. 2)

2 that their hearts may be encouraged...

Paul wants the knowledge of his struggling to have an effect upon our **hearts or more accurately upon the core of our being**. We have to be careful not to assume that when the bible mentions the **heart** that it is simply referring to our **emotions**. When the Bible uses the term **Heart** it means to refer to our emotions but not exclusively and certainly not on a superficial level.

The heart refers to the core of our being, the seat of our emotions, and at our core there is emotion as well as conviction. Our core/heart is the foundation of what we believe to be true, what we believe to be right; and this is what Paul wants to encourage in us.

Paul is not saying, "I really want you guys to feel good about everything." But rather he is saying, "I want you to be strengthened and encouraged in your faith in God, your trust in Jesus alone, your confidence in the Apostles teaching."

He wants us to have resolve in our hearts about what is right, and good and true. This is what Paul is aiming to encourage. He wants the core of our faith in Christ to be established and fortified.

But how is this going to work?

III. Gospel Ministry Promotes Unity (v. 2)

being knit together in love...

Our faith in Christ will be encouraged to grow by the example of Paul's struggle and by the unity that we have with other believers. Solo Christianity is not just a lonely walk but it is also not the way God intended us to live and grow. The gospel draws us into community with other believers where we can learn, grow, and be discipled by other more mature believers.

Notice that Paul uses the phrase ***being knit together*** and what he means is that the church is to be so united that we are like one big quilt or scarf. Our lives, our faith, our hearts are to be so intertwined with one another that you can't pull us apart.

(**Illus...**Have you ever seen a Giant Sequoia? Giant Sequoia trees are the largest in the world and are among the most massive living things on our planet. **The Giant Sequoia named The General Sherman Tree reigns supreme as the largest of the living things on earth.** This tree is so large that it's growth in a single year yields enough new wood to equal that of all the wood found in a 50 foot tree.

But these massive trees don't grow on their own, they are interdependent. Giant Sequoias can survive in less than 3 feet (1 meter) of soil and they do this by spreading their roots out instead of down. They send their roots away from the tree, up to 300 feet (100 meters). That such mammoth trees have such shallow root depth is astonishing.

How do such trees remain upright without a deep anchoring system? Sequoias don't grow alone, they grow together and help each other. Giant Sequoias do not compete with each other for resources, rather their huge root systems fuse together and they share resources. The complex intertwining of roots helps support these huge trees.¹

Paul wants us as a church to benefit from one another in a similar way. He wants our unity in the faith to help us grow and mature. He wants us to be so knit together that we support one another, encourage one another, and enable one another to grow.

Now, don't forget the context here. This young church is under attack, not from Roman officials, but from false teachers who are attacking their faith in the gospel. And the result is that this church has grown unsure about the what they believe. They want security but this new teaching has shaken the foundation of their hope. In terms of sheer emotion this is a terrible state to be in.

But Paul wants them to abandon every hope but their hope in Christ and he wants them to do this ***together***. Their good works can't save their soul. Their devotion to religious rituals, whether they be pagan or Jewish, can't save their soul. Their only hope is to trust in the work of Christ to save them. Their only hope is to accept God's grace by faith in Christ.

False teaching effects the church by small divisions that grow into church splits. One person shifts from a position of orthodoxy and they start talking to the guys in their small group. Or a person reads an article on Facebook and they start sharing it with their friends before Sunday school. Then before long there is a small group of people who have gotten off track and they start to feel themselves separated from the rest of the church or they seek to actively separate themselves from the rest of the church.

False doctrine is a ploy of Satan that seeks to tear apart the people of God. But the gospel, the pure unadulterated truth of Christ, as our only hope of salvation brings unity. Christ is the substance of our unity. If we begin to shift from our trust in Christ as the foundation of our faith, then our unity will be no more.

¹ <http://www.sequoiaministriesinternational.org/about-us/learn-more-about-giant-sequoias>

Christ is our tuning fork and when our hearts and lives are tuned to Him we will all be in harmony with one another.

IV. Gospel Ministry Helps Us Grow in Assurance (V. 2-3)

to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge...

Humility is a virtue of the Christian life but humility and assurance are not the same thing. Humility is a posture of the heart that says, "It's not all about me." Assurance is the settled trust that when it comes to salvation, "It's all about Jesus."

We need to be people who exercise humility in our interactions with others. We need to be patient with others, able to listen to people and eager to learn from others. But at the same time we need to be resolved on the foundations of the faith. There is no greater mystery in this world than the mystery of Christ. There is no higher knowledge to ponder than the truths of the gospel. There is no greater purpose in the universe than that, "Every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Our assurance is rooted in Christ. Not our performance, not our worldly wisdom, not even our worldly success; but our settled faith in Christ. Our unity as a church doesn't center around a method, a model, or even a tradition, it centers around Jesus.

Now why is all of this important? Because someone is trying to deceive this church with false doctrine and Paul wants the church to be able to **defend itself**. He trusts that if the church is healthy in the ways that he has described then it will be able to defend itself against the deception.

So let's summarize what we have seen thus far...Paul wants the church to be made bold by his example **(first)**. He wants their hearts, the deepest part of our soul, to be settled on the gospel **(second)**. He wants them to be knit together in Christian love **(third)** and he wants them to have assurance that Jesus is Lord **(fourth)**. He wants the church to be strong in all of these ways *so that* it can withstand the efforts of false teachers.

V. Gospel Ministry Strengthens us Against False Teaching (V. 4-5)

⁴I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. ⁵For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

False teaching doesn't come in the front door and present itself as false, it comes in a window and presents itself as plausible (reasonable). If someone came into the church and sat down in your Sunday school class or your community group and claimed that Jesus was really a transgendered man who learned how to do miracles through inner eye power he picked up as a teenager in Egypt; you wouldn't entertain them at all. You would simply say, "That's ridiculous..." and you would move on.

But plausible arguments come across as reasonable. When you hear a plausible argument you come away saying, "I'm not sure if that's true but it sounds reasonable." Let me give you an example of how this is happening right now in our backyard.

(**Illus...** This past week I heard an example of how false teaching is finding its way into the church here in Dallas. It came in the form of a prayer request where a woman who found out that she

was pregnant with triplets, via in-vitro fertilization, was asking her ladies group to pray for her to know God's will. She and her husband were prayerfully considering whether to do selective elimination of one of the babies. They were considering whether or not it was God's will for them to abort one of their babies because they didn't feel that God was calling them to raise triplets, so she was calling for prayer and seeking God's will about what to do. (15:33)

This mom was using the language of Christianity, she was asking people to pray for her, she didn't feel God was calling her to something; but all of this was divorced from the teaching of Scripture. In other words, she wasn't leaning on her understanding of Christian ethics or even sound Biblical logic; instead she was leaning on feelings alone. She used the language of *sentimental piety* to try and get the others to sympathize with her situation even though what she was considering amounts to moral horror.

This is how false teaching is creeping into the church today. It doesn't focus on doctrine it focuses on feeling and experience. Doctrine doesn't matter or at the very least it shouldn't matter that much. What matters is how people feel. What matters is how tolerant we are. What matters is how sensitive we are to other people's experience.

What we are facing in the culture around us is a complete rejection of objective truth and moral absolutes and what matters is how things make us feel. This means that we not only need to know sound doctrine but we also need to be on guard against the spirit of our age. And Paul wants us to do this together.

False teaching seeks to redefine the foundation of our Biblical worldview. It wants us to trust in Jesus + _____. It wants us to redefine the nature of God's love and grace? It doesn't want us to think about who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do, it wants us to feel who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do.

It wants to say that sin against God is not the problem we need to solve, what we really need to do is to discover our true self and that happens when we embrace people for who they are.

But notice what Paul says about this kind of plausible argument in Colossians 2:8:

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ...¹⁰ who is the head of all rule and authority.

Paul is saying that doctrine matters. The teaching of Christ matters because he is God and is the source of all that is true and right and good. False teachers want to take us captive with philosophy, empty deceit and human tradition but we need to have our hearts filled with the truth.

Conclusion...

Our task in gospel ministry is to *nurture* and *protect*. We want genuine faith to grow and to produce fruit, so like Paul we labor to set an example for others to follow. We stand firm in the truth. We stand up and teach what accords with sound doctrine and when opposition comes we endure. We want encourage the hearts of believers and labor to see them resolved to trust in Christ no matter what.

But our task also involves protecting the church against the plausible arguments of false teachers. We pull weeds. We confront wolves, we expose lies and liars. We do this so that faith can grow. We labor on two fronts so that the church can be strong, and healthy and protected.