

Towards Maturity
Colossians 1:24-2:5
Newton Bible Church
June 16, 2019

The story is told of an old farmer who frequently described his Christian experience by saying, “Well, I’m not making much progress, but I’m established!” One spring, when he was hauling some logs, his wagon wheels sank down to the axles in mud. Try as he might, he couldn’t get the wagon out. Defeated, he sat atop the logs, viewing the dismal situation. A neighbor who had always felt uncomfortable with the farmer’s worn out testimony came along and couldn’t resist saying, “Well brother Jones, I see you’re not making much progress, but you must be content because you are certainly well-established!”

Anyone who has become stuck knows the unsettling feeling of being unable to move forward. As distressing as that may be in the physical realm, it is far more catastrophic in our spiritual lives. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul followed the hymn to the preeminence of Christ that we considered last week with guidance on how to move forward towards maturity in Christ. That guidance is where we turn this morning.

Read: Colossians 1:24-29

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.

Verse 28 indicates that the specific purpose of everything Paul mentioned in the previous verses was to present everyone mature in Christ. It was in describing his own ministry that Paul unveiled the means of moving towards maturity in this last portion of chapter 1. The beginning of chapter 2 then identifies the marks of maturity that help us know we are moving in that direction.

1. The means of maturity: ministry (1:24-29)

- That means of moving towards maturity is involvement in ministry, but not just any kind of ministry. The ministry that matures has some very specific characteristics. Ministry that matures:
 - a. is given by God (25a)
- Last week we saw that Paul closed out the section on Christ’s preeminence by describing the contents of the Colossians faith, the Gospel, of which he had been made a minister. He referenced that assignment again in verse 25.

- We will return to verse 24, but first we must acknowledge that the only sort of ministry that will help us move towards maturity in Christ is ministry that has its source in God!
- Paul never got over the fact that he who had been a blasphemer and persecutor of the church had been arrested by God, redeemed and graciously given a ministry to the Gentile world.
- Because he had been made a minister by God's sovereign call, Paul correctly perceived his ministry as being a stewardship from God.
 - Stewardship translates *oikonomia*, which is a compound word made up of *oikos* (house) and *nemo* (manage). It literally means to manage a household as a steward of someone else's possessions. The steward had oversight of all the other servants in the house and handled the business and financial affairs of the household. Being a steward was a position of great trust and responsibility in the ancient world.
 - Paul knew that he was responsible to be a worthy steward of his ministry. In actuality, all believers have received spiritual gifts and are responsible to use them in the specific ministry involvements Christ has in mind for them.
 - **1 Peter 4:10** (ESV) ¹⁰As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:
- The shape of that involvement will be as varied as the number of people God has called to Himself! One commentator wrote about an elderly widow, who though restricted in her activities, was eager to serve Christ. After praying about this, she realized that she could bring blessing to others by playing the piano. The next day she placed this small ad in the Oakland Tribune: "Pianist will play hymns by phone daily for those who are sick and despondent; the service is free." The notice included the number to dial. When people called, she would ask, "What hymn would you like to hear?"
Within a few months her playing had brought cheer to several hundred people. Many of them freely poured out their hearts to her, and she was able to help and encourage them.
- Believers have long realized that it is those who are involved in ministry who experience the most spiritual growth. Paul's reminder to us is that if we wish to move towards maturity in Christ, we need to be involved in ministry that is given by God. I wish we had time to explore the discernment process of the specific ministry that might be, but we do not. Suffice it to say, if you are experiencing an interest in a particular ministry, get involved!

Next, we see that ministry that matures:

- b. is joyful (24a)
 - Paul opened this section by declaring "Now I rejoice." As challenging and demanding as ministry may be, God never intended ministry to be joyless.
 - Sadly, many believers have lost the joy of serving the Lord. They are more like Jonah than Paul, sullenly carrying out their responsibilities. Such ministry results in more bitterness and discontentment than spiritual growth!
 - We may find ourselves in that condition because we are affected by a culture driven by emotions conditioned by circumstances. If circumstances are pleasant, culture teaches us to be happy. If circumstances are unpleasant, we are taught to be grumpy. Grumpiness is not conducive to growth towards Christlikeness!
 - The issue here is our pride – we think we deserve the circumstances we prefer. Because Paul was convinced that he deserved nothing, no circumstance could shake his joy in knowing that

God was in control of his life. Paul's example is a reminder that humility is necessary to protect the joy that is Christ's gift to every believer.

- MacArthur notes; "The joy of the early church was a dramatic testimony to the world. The second-century apologist Aristides wrote to the Roman emperor Antonius Pius a description of Christians that said if any righteous person from among them passed from this world the Christians would rejoice and give thanks to God. When a baby was born to Christian parents, they would praise God. If it died in infancy, according to Aristides, the parents thanked God even more because the child would be one who passed through the world without encountering sin."
- Ministry that matures is joyful regardless of circumstances!

Next, we see that ministry that matures:

c. includes suffering (24b)

- Paul told the Colossians; "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake." The specific suffering he was experiencing at that time was imprisonment.
- Like Paul, the early church considered it a privilege to suffer for the name of Christ; **Acts 5:41** (ESV) ⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.
- We may understand that ministry that matures includes suffering and even that such suffering need not rob us of our joy, but the last part of verse 24 has been a source of misunderstanding throughout the ages and incorrectly used to support the unscriptural Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. A casual reading suggests that something is lacking in Christ's suffering for the sake of the church. That misunderstanding is what the doctrine of purgatory is built upon – the idea that Christians must make up for what was lacking in Christ's suffering on their behalf by their own suffering after death. That cannot be Paul's point!
 - Paul had just completed demonstrating that Christ alone is sufficient to reconcile us to God (1:20-23). To do an about face and teach that Christians must do something in addition to what Christ has done would be to agree with the heretics he is arguing against! The entire New Testament is adamant that Christ's sufferings need nothing added to them.
 - Jesus' own testimony on the cross when He cried out "It is finished!" is that this work is completely done.
 - You may have noticed that the specific word Paul used was "afflictions" rather than "suffering." This word is never used in the New Testament to refer to Christ's suffering. Something other than the completed work of Christ has to be in view.
- So, what is Paul talking about? Two possible answers exist:
 - Option #1: Grant Osborne suggests: "Paul's statement here is based on the little-known doctrine of the early church known as 'the messianic woes.' In every segment of Judaism and the early church it was believed that before the Messiah would return at the end of history, there would be a series of birth pangs' – serious afflictions that would befall God's people . . . These afflictions that will help bring about the eschaton (the end) have been labeled 'the messianic woes' . . . Paul's reference then to the afflictions of Christ is not limited to Jesus' messianic sufferings, but includes as well the suffering endured by the messianic community . . ."

- Option #2: MacArthur asks: “In what sense were Paul’s sufferings filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions? In that Paul was receiving the persecution that was intended for Christ. Jesus, having ascended to heaven, was out of their reach. But because His enemies had not filled up all the injuries they wanted to inflict upon Him, they turned their hatred on those who preached the Gospel. It was in that sense that Paul filled up what was lacking in Christ’s afflictions.”
- Regardless of which option is correct, let’s make sure we don’t miss the point Paul is making - ministry that matures includes suffering!

Next, we see that ministry that matures:

- d. is anchored in God’s Word (25b)
- Paul stated that his ministry was “to make the word of God fully known.”
 - Prior to the imprisonment from which Paul wrote this letter, Paul met for one last time with the elders of the nearby church in Ephesus. His testimony to them was: **Acts 20:26** (ESV) ²⁶ . . . I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.
 - Paul was a patient, thorough teacher whose teaching was rooted in God’s Word; always instructing those who had been redeemed how they should live in light of that Word. This is why he could claim to have declared the whole counsel of God.
- It is the testimony of Scripture that God’s Word is essential for every element of spiritual growth and maturity:
 - **Psalms 119:9** (ESV) ⁹ How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.
- Ministry that matures is anchored in God’s Word.

Next, we see that ministry that matures:

- e. is focused upon Christ (26-27)
- When Paul referred to a “mystery” in his writings he did not use the term in the sense in which we usually use it today – something that is hidden and has to be searched out. Rather, Paul used this term to describe something that had not been clearly spelled out in the Old Testament but had now been revealed in the life and ministry and revelation of Christ. These mysteries include things like:
 - The incarnate God (Colossians 2:9)
 - The unity of Jew and Gentile in the church (Ephesians 3:3-6)
 - The rapture (1 Corinthians 15:51)
- In verses 26 and 27 we see that the greatest of all of these mysteries is God making known among the Gentiles the riches of the glory of the mystery which is Christ in them, the hope of glory.
 - The Old Testament predicted the coming of the Messiah. The idea of Him actually taking up residence in His church, made up mostly of Gentiles, was not revealed.
 - The New Testament teaches that Christ, by the Holy Spirit, takes up residence in all believers. The revelation of this including the Gentiles awaited the New Testament.
- This greatest of all the mysteries is wrapped up in Christ, specifically “Christ in you.” Because Christ is preeminent in both redemption and in His Spirit’s work of sanctification, ministry that matures in Christlikeness must be focused upon Him.

The next characteristic of ministry that matures is that it:

- f. includes warning and teaching (28)

- In verse 28, Paul began with the general and moved to the specific.
 - *Katangello* (proclaim) means to publicly declare a completed truth or happening. It is a general term, not restricted to preaching.
- Paul's proclamation included one negative and one positive element:
 - *Noutheteo* (admonishing or warning) refers to counsel in view of sin and coming punishment. Church leaders are responsible for this aspect of ministry: **Acts 20:31** (ESV) ³¹Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.
 - It is also the responsibility of every believer: **2 Thessalonians 3:14-15** (ESV) ¹⁴If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter . . . warn him as a brother.
 - Teaching refers to imparting positive truth. It also is the responsibility of every believer and is part of the Great Commission. It is especially the responsibility of church leaders: **1 Timothy 3:2** (ESV) ²Therefore an overseer must be . . . able to teach,
- Both warning and teaching are to be done in "all wisdom." Biblical wisdom refers to practical discernment – understanding Biblical principles for holy living. Paul's consistent pattern was doctrinal teaching followed by practical admonitions. Ministry that matures includes both warning and teaching.

The final characteristic of ministry that matures is that it:

- g. is dependent upon God's strength (29)
- Paul used two terms to describe the effort he gave to this God given ministry:
 - *Kopiao* (labor or toil) literally means to work to the point of exhaustion. Paul certainly worked hard – anyone who desires to be part of ministry that matures has no other option.
 - *Agonizomai* (striving or struggling) actually refers to competing in an athletic event. It is the word from which we get our word "agonize." The idea behind this term is maximum effort – giving it one's all.
- Lest anyone presume that Paul thought that it was his own effort that fueled success in ministry, he declared that the energy for that maximum effort did not come from himself – it was God's energy working through him.
- Paul knew that all his toil was useless apart from God's power unleashed in his life:
 - **1 Corinthians 15:10** (ESV) But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

God gave the strength for Paul to work hard in ministry. Only ministry that is done in God's strength will move believers towards maturity. Having described that kind of ministry, Paul turned to how you may identify its products:

Read Colossians 2:1-5

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. ⁵ For 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.

Paul now informed the Colossians that he had been agonizing over them, hoping to see in them three specific marks of maturity.

2. The marks of maturity (2:1-5)

a. strengthened hearts (2a)

- Paul stated his hope was that the Colossians hearts would be encouraged.
 - *Parakaleo* (encouraged) literally is “to call alongside.” Because a person might be called alongside for multiple purposes, this word has a wide range of meanings. Those meanings include to entreat, appeal to, summon, comfort, exhort or encourage.
 - In this case, it could be translated “strengthen” because the Colossians were being influenced by false teachers and needed strengthening rather than comfort.
 - One commentator cited an example of *parakaleo* from classical Greek that parallels Paul’s usage here: “There was a Greek regiment which had lost heart and was utterly dejected. The general sent a leader to talk to it to such purpose that courage was reborn and a body of dispirited men became fit again for heroic action. That is what *parakaleo* means here. It is Paul’s prayer that the church may be filled with courage which can cope with any situation.”
- When Paul expressed his desire that their hearts be strengthened, he was referring to more than their emotions.
 - Biblical writers typically assigned emotions to what the King James version picturesquely calls the “bowels.” They probably did this because strong emotions produce physical reactions in the lower abdomen.
 - When used figuratively in the Bible, the word “heart” usually refers to the inner person, the center of life. Consequently, the Bible often uses the word “heart” as a synonym for the mind.
 - **Revelation 2:23** (ESV) ²³ . . . I am he who searches mind and heart . . .
 - **Psalms 53:1** (ESV) The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”
- The emotions respond to what goes on in the heart, to what the mind perceives. When the mind is filled with Biblical truth, emotions begin to respond appropriately.
 - **Matthew 12:34-35** (ESV) . . . For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.
- The means to being strengthened is defined for us elsewhere:
 - **Ephesians 3:16** (ESV) ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,
 - One of the names of the Holy Spirit is “Helper.” “Helper” in the Greek is the noun form of *parakaleo* and could be translated “Strengthener.” Strengthened hearts come from being filled with the Holy Spirit and are clear evidence of moving towards maturity!

Paul identified a second mark of maturity. That mark is:

b. united love (2b)

- Paul’s stated his hope that the Colossians be “knit together in love.”

- *Sumbibazo* (knit together) means to unite or bring together. MacArthur points out that “This aorist participle explains the main verb (may be encouraged) by further defining the strengthened heart as one filled with love.”
- Believers share a common life with love as its basis – the love of Christ that gives all believers eternal life, brings them to Himself, and places them in His body by the same Spirit.
- This unity is not organizational; it is organic.
- The late Francis Schaeffer called the unity of the church “the final apologetic” to the watching world. He wrote:
 - “In John 13 the point was that, if an individual Christian does not show love toward other true Christians, the world has a right to judge that he is not a Christian. Here (in John 17:21) Jesus is stating something else which is more cutting, much more profound: We cannot expect the world to believe that the Father sent the Son, that Jesus’ claims are true, and that Christianity is true, unless the world sees some reality of the oneness of true Christians. Now that is frightening. Should we not feel some emotion at this point?”
- This unity that proves to the world that what Christ claimed is true is not some grit-your-teeth and bear it resignation to duty. That kind of legalism only gives the world reason to cry “hypocrite”! Rather, this unity is the flow of Christ’s love in us to one another. It is a clear mark that we are moving towards maturity.

Paul concluded this section by identifying a third mark of maturity. That mark is a:

c. settled understanding (2c-5)

- *Sunesis* (understanding) refers to applying Biblical principles to everyday life.
 - When the believer knows the truth and acts upon it, they receive the “full assurance of understanding.”
 - MacArthur points out: “Truth that finds solid footing in a strong heart and works itself out in love of fellow believers results in deep conviction. That is the basis for assurance.”
- This settled understanding includes and is focused upon the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ.
 - The heart of this understanding is a settled conviction of Christ’s deity and sufficiency. This is why Paul prefaced this section with that beautiful hymn of the preeminent Christ!
- Jesus is the One in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
 - Hidden is from *apokruphos*, from which we get our English word apocrypha. It was used by the heretics to refer to the writings that contained their “secret knowledge.”
 - There is no hidden spiritual knowledge necessary to salvation and sanctification outside of Christ! He is totally sufficient!
- Paul identified why this is so significant – so that no one could delude them with seemingly plausible arguments.
 - The assault of all false systems throughout history has been to deny either Christ’s deity, His sufficiency to save and sanctify, or both.
 - Paul elsewhere identified anyone doing so as guilty of teaching “doctrines of demons.”
 - Believers must have a settled conviction about Christ’s deity and sufficiency to withstand the onslaughts of such false teaching.

- Having warned the Colossians to continue to stand firm, Paul completed this section by rejoicing that they were doing so.
 - Their good order and firmness of faith in Christ was evidence that they were settled in their understanding.
 - This proved that they were moving in the right direction – that they were maturing in Christ. That was cause for joy!

We have seen this morning that the means to maturity is involvement in ministry that is given by God, anchored in His Word, and dependent upon His strength. Evidences that this ministry is operative are strengthened hearts, united love, and a settled understanding of the deity and sufficiency of Christ.

In order to apply these truths to our lives, please allow me to suggest several questions to consider:

1. Am I joyfully involved in ministry?
2. Is my heart teachable?
3. Is Christ the center of my life?

The testimony of all of Scripture is that moving towards maturity is a process we will never complete this side of heaven. But that does not mean we should stop trying!

When Pablo Casals reached 95, a young reporter asked him this question: “Mr. Casals, you are 95 and the greatest cellist that ever lived. Why do you still practice six hours a day?” Mr. Casals answered, “Because I think I’m making progress.”

The stakes in our lives are far greater than whether we play a musical instrument to the best of our ability. May God help us keep moving towards maturity!