

Colossians 1:24-29: Suffering, the Gospel and Holiness – How to Identify a Faithful Christian Minister

Many of you all will have heard this verse and felt very warm and smug and contented inside. James 3:1 says 'Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, as you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness'. You may be breathing a big sigh of relief in your hearts as I often have, comforted by the thought that the church elders, those who preach here up the front, will be judged with a higher standard, and you may have thought that perhaps God will let those of us sitting in the pews off a little bit, He will be a bit more lenient, He will give us common lay Christians a little bit more slack. And there is no doubt truth to this, as one error of a shepherd can lead to great harm to many of his sheep – but God has designed his church so not to place the full weight of responsibility upon the elders alone. So have this thought in the forefront of your mind when you listen to this sermon this afternoon – you will be held accountable for the teaching and teachers you listen to and surround yourself with.

Many of you will know in 2 Timothy, 4:3 'For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions'. That's right, they -the people – will accumulate teachers who they want to hear. In this verse, it is not so much as the teacher is in the cross-hairs of judgment, but the people who willingly and eagerly submit themselves to the false teaching. Now, this is something we especially must keep in mind in our modern times, as we can get instant access to huge amount of different sources of spiritual input. Of course, the weekly preaching of the word in the church which you are a covenanted member of is the primary source of a Christian's spiritual food, but you can access additional teaching through many different means, like podcasts, YouTube, radio, TV, internet sermons, on CDs, and of course by reading books. When it is said that one of the most dangerous, theologically anyway, places a Christian can go in the Western world is a Christian bookshop, the need for the average Christian to be able to identify a true minister of the gospel is an important task.

And the passage what we will be looking at this afternoon is talking about just that: how to identify a true minister of the gospel. And, as you heard read before, I will be narrowing down on the last five verses of Colossians 1, verses 24-29. Paul is writing this letter from in prison and has never been to Colossae. He has never met who he is writing to, and this portion of the letter is the first century way of Paul trying to give a reason why the Colossians should believe and trust what he has to say. Paul wants to make sure the new Christians in Colossae investigate and are satisfied to know what a genuine minister of the gospel looks like, and he wants to make sure that he is one them. With the warning that we heard earlier, there is a lot at stake here for the young Colossian church. They are probably asking these very questions as the letter arrives - Is Paul a true minister? He doesn't look like one! He is in prison! Hes not one of the original 12 who walked with Jesus! Other groups say Paul is a false apostle. So here Paul will answer some of these anticipated objections, and from this we will make application to our lives today, and how you can

identify what is true and false in the thousands of different avenues of ministry that vie for our attention today.

But before we get started, because this is a one off sermon on a rather obscure text, I will give you a quick overview to give you a better context of Colossians 1:24-29. Many of Paul's letters have the first half doctrine and the second half practical matters. If you think of the book of Romans, it is not until the 12th chapter before he says 'Therefore, I urge you to present your bodies as living sacrifices!' after spending the first 12 chapters explaining theological truth.

So here in Colossians, it is not as clear a distinction, but there is a change in tone at 2:6. Have a look with me. "Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him."

Prior to this verse, he describes the Jesus whom the Colossians received. It is one of the most famous portions of Scripture on the deity of Jesus Christ, and this passage is so clear on the identity of our Savior that cult groups like the the Jehovah's witness literally have to add words in their translations to make it say something different. From chapter 1:9-23 he introduces the glorious incarnate Christ, the second person of the triune God. He explains that Jesus has the appearance of the invisible God, He is the most preeminent, the most important in all creation (verse 15), He is the one who created all things, who is before all things, and in him is the reason all things hold together (verse 16), that this Jesus has condescended to a body of a man (verse 20) and that you Colossians, although you were hostile pagans to him doing wicked and evil things (verse 21)– this Jesus has forgiven you and redeemed you by making peace with God the Father through his sacrifice on the cross. By Jesus' sacrifice, you too can have your share of the inheritance of the saints (verse 11) and are given his perfect righteousness so that you may be presented holy and blameless before Him (verse 22). And all these magnificent blessings and hope and full assurance is available through faith, not through law keeping or good works, but through faith. This discussion on Christ is one side of the see-saw. On the other side, of that pivot verse of 2:6, Paul goes into instructing the church about being weary of false teaching, of the philosophy of men, on false piety, giving lists in chapter 3 on vices and virtues, and even instructing how husbands and wives, parents and children and slaves and masters are to interact with one another once they become Christians. So his doctrine is balanced on one side of the see saw, with moral application throughout the Christian life on the other.

And our passage today is sandwiched between these two sides of the see saw. It appears to be like a little aside in the flow of argument of the book of Colossians. It is as though Paul is saying 'This is the Jesus Christ I preach, and its the same one you received, so listen to my instruction! And if you're still not quite convinced, here is a little more evidence about my ministry to bury any doubt of my validity as an apostle!' And from this little snippet of 1:24-29 is where we learn to look out for what makes up a true minister of the gospel.

So after that introduction, lets get into it. The first point of what you should be looking for in a true minister is suffering. The first statement he opens with is almost shocking. He says in 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'. Hopefully that came across clear. Imagine if you were in the Colossians shoes, hearing this for the first time. You have never met the guy! And yet he is suffering...for our sake? What type of man is this? If you have any understanding of early church history, you cannot doubt that Paul suffered for his faith, and he knew suffering well. Think of the 2nd Corinthian's passage, he says 'I have had I far more labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, often near death. Five times I received forty lashes, three times beaten with rods, once stoned. Three times shipwrecked...' and on and on he goes. Being an apostle was not a life of ease, but of suffering, as he says to Timothy 'that all who desires to live a godly life will be persecuted'.

Did you notice something that came across as puzzling when you read the verse? Paul is saying that he is filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions? How can Paul ever add to the suffering which Christ endured on the cross? And how is Christ's sufferings ever lacking in anyway? There is a bit of debate about this strange wording, but Paul of course, is not preaching heresy, as he has made it clear earlier in chapter 1 that only Jesus' blood on the cross has reconciled us to God, not our own works or our own suffering. Some commentators suggest he is referring to the prevailing Jewish belief that suffering must come before the Messiah appears, and Paul is anticipating Jesus' soon return. Others suggest that the suffering being described here is suffering for the church who is in union with Christ. Thus, Paul in his love and humility is in some way suffering instead of his brothers and sisters in the church.

So do we see the scars of suffering on those who minister to us? Or do you see someone who is using their ministry to improve their own position. Consider this short description by Costi Hinn of the lifestyle that he experienced while traveling with his uncle, the prosperity preacher Benny Hinn:

- Air travel on a Gulfstream IV (\$36,000,000)
- Royal Suite at the Burj Al Arab in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (\$25,000 per night)
- The Ritz-Carlton, Paris
- Gambling at the Casino de Monte-Carlo, Monaco
- Vehicle chauffeurs in Bentley, Rolls-Royce, Mercedes Benz

This is a far cry from the words of the apostle. Contrast this to diary entry of George Whitefield, the great open air preacher in 18th century America. '[Today] I was honored with having a few stones, dirt, rotten eggs and pieces of dead cat thrown at me'. I am not going to give examples of types of suffering that ministers should experience, for this would go well beyond what Scripture has revealed to us. But consider this thought that I have been pondering for the last several months; is the character of the men who minister to you one like those of the faithful brothers in China, who will still be in the pulpit preaching as the government officials break into the service come to drag him away? Or is he more like Benny Hinn, living the best life now in ease and lavish abundance, staying in the finest hotels and driving the newest cars? I know what minister the Colossians would be looking for.

The second point of what you should be looking for in a minister is the centrality of the gospel. This can be seen in verses 25-27, where Paul claims a special job has been given to him by God to announce to the Gentiles that there is now a way for them to be right before the God of the Jewish people. Verse 25 says that this was given to Paul – for them – the gentile Colossians. Before Christ came salvation only appeared to be for the Jews, this tiny embittered little nation in the just as insignificant piece of land. But now, verse 26, after many generations had passed, God's plan of making a way to Him through Jesus is finally revealed to the Gentiles. Paul calls the gospel here a 'mystery'. It is not a mystery like what we understand, like a difficult crime to solve. No, rather, Paul is using it in the sense that there is something that was previously hidden, but now it is no longer to be kept secret, but open and to be known for all to understand. This centrality of the gospel to Paul's ministry can give us another indication of what to look for in those in ministry around us. Do the ministers you submit to, or listen to or read – are they making the revealed mystery of Christ known through the gospel? Are they calling gentile and Jew to find their ultimate hope in Christ? Or is their focus something else?

Perhaps the focus is on healing and doing signs and wonders? Or maybe on music or dramas? Or maybe a certain type of interpretation of the book of Revelation? Or maybe the focus is upon getting the most out of this life, seeking material prosperity, fame, influence or power? Perhaps the central message is a specific way of living life, of communal living or homeschooling or home churches or even no churches? Or is it their foundational focus, their central message, the air they breathe like that of the Apostle Paul, that the mystery which has been revealed, the gospel that is open to any and all who take hold of Christ by faith?

Before getting married, Hannah and I were given a book. The author of this book gave recommendations of how a wife was to live and act. However, the assertions and advice given in the book were more similar to a rule book governing a common household slave than biblical advice for a Christian wife. The true gospel, with its hope of eternal life of trusting in Christ alone, was nowhere to be found. Instead the foundation for the book was a gospel law-keeping, and this resulted in poor and unbiblical advice.

So consider again, do the people you listen to on your podcasts and sermons when driving home from work, or when you are driving the tractor on the farm, or going for a jog, is their central theme, the reason for ministry - the mystery of Christ, the gospel of God, the riches of the Gentiles. In 1 Corinthians 2:2, Paul proclaims, 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified'. Those who minister among you must be able to say what Paul says next at the beginning of verse 28, Him, (that is Christ) we proclaim.

The third point that we can look for in ministers today is whether they are striving for growing holiness in those whom they serve. Firstly, you should consider suffering, secondly, we should consider the centrality of the gospel, and the third point you should consider is if they strive for holiness. This is found in verses 28 and 29. Here Paul agonizes, he strives for, he struggles that the Colossians will grow in maturity reach greater and greater

holiness. The Greek word he uses for strive there in 1:29 is αγωνιζομαι, and its a word used in the Roman world to describe an athlete in a race who is agonizing, striving for the finish line. These last verses help sum up the goal of Paul's ministry. Look at verse 1:28 with me, 'Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, that we might present everyone complete in Christ'. Maturity, holiness, sanctification, perfection – that is our goal as a Christian, and that should also be the goal of our ministers. See also the scope of the audience. Who is to seek greater holiness? Everyone! Every christian! No Christian is excluded from this high calling to be conformed to the image of Christ.

There is no hint of Paul lowering the bar here either. There is no distinction between some class of super spiritual apostles and the lower common folk. Nor does Paul does not give an imaginary distinction here of those who have made Jesus their Savior only, and can completely ignore holiness once their ticket is punched to heaven.

Do you consider this when looking for evidences of true Christian ministry? Do they encourage holiness and maturity, or do they for their own benefit keep you dependent on them? Feeding you little nibbles and bites, withholding true spiritual food for you to grow in the knowledge of grace and truth. Think of the the Catholic priests during the time of reformation, 500 years ago. The Mass was in Latin, and most folks turned up to church and had no idea what was going on. The priests said 'Trust us, we know whats going on, trust in us and we will do the believing for you. You don't need to know doctrine, you don't need to know truth, you don't need to grow in holiness, just believe that we have got it right and trust us'. That does not align with Paul striving to admonish and teaching in all wisdom does it. He says in 2 Corinthians 11:1, imitate me as I imitate Christ! By God's grace, we are to strive for maturity, and seek to submit and listen to elders and ministers who hold this expectation. We are not expected to remain as infants in the faith, nor be content with ministers who keep those whom they serve in the dark so as to control and manipulate them. What also are you to look for in ministers in light of these two verses? Are we to follow and read those who say 'I do miracles? I heal and prophesy and do signs and wonders? No. Should we listen to the podcasts of one who says 'God told me to be a minister?' Nope, even worse. Or should we join a massive church because it's pastor claims 'I am a true minister because God has blessed my ministry already?'. No, Jesus was the perfect teacher and died with only 120 followers. No, instead you are to look for the one who strives in the laborious task of admonishing and teaching in all wisdom, preaching the gospel, suffering for it, encouraging holiness and godliness as the fruits and evidences of true conversion. Paul's goal for the Colossians is higher than any earthly ambition or plan: conformity in holiness to the image of Christ. We must seek out ministers who demand the high calling of holiness.

One last little sub point here, notice where Paul finds his strength to strive in service of the Colossians in 1:29. Its not in himself or his own strength, but through the power of God. Although its rather subtle, in these five verses God made Paul a minister of the gospel, God revealed the mystery of Christ to the Gentiles through Paul, and now God gives the power for Paul to proclaim that message. Even though Paul is discussing his personal ministry, he cannot stop giving God the glory in everything.

And this last point gives us the hope of this passage, doesn't it. I have placed the sobering warning on you at the beginning – that we all will be held accountable for the teachers and ministers that we willingly follow. Then, we learned Paul's discussion of his own ministry and how it gave us some tools for discernment, some tests to apply to those who profess to hold spiritual authority. But, as you have been considering these things - are you feeling concerned that perhaps many ministers around us have chosen ease over suffering, placed other things in priority over the centrality of the gospel, and have seemed to replace the demand for holiness below the desire not to offend? Don't be. God is building his church, and like Paul, God is raising Godly men for the ministry. As we see in at the end of 1:29, it is the power of God working through Paul in everything to bring about his plan for the Colossian church. Just as he has given the foundation of the apostles, prophets and evangelists, God will provide for the church pastors and teachers for the equipping of the people of His church for His ultimate purpose. Churches will be planted, elders will be ordained, and ministries will start and end, and that requires all of us, like those in the city of Colossae, to be discerning, accepting the true gospel minister, and rejecting the false.