

Colossians 1:24-29 - Characteristics of a Faithful Servant

As we look at Colossians, this morning we are coming to a point of transition in Paul's letter. He began with thanks to God and prayer for the church at Colossae. And toward the end of his prayer he began extolling the greatness of Jesus. We spent a few of weeks talking about these 10 statements concerning who Jesus is and what he has accomplished through the cross because these are some of the most amazing statements about the Lord Jesus in all the New Testament.

But the question is: what do we do with that information? Certainly we worship Jesus - that's first and foremost. But how does that information change our lives? What we're going to see here with Paul is that his understanding of who Jesus is impacts every aspect of his life. It's completely changed him and how he views all of life. And it should do the same for us as well. In **Vs. 26** Paul calls himself a minister or a servant. And in this section Paul really details different aspects of what his ministry to the church for Christ is.

I think for those of us who follow the Lord Jesus Christ we want to be faithful servants. We want our lives to matter for the Kingdom and so we want to be willing to do the things that really matter in life.

And so what I want to do this morning is take this section and see how we, like Paul can be faithful servants - faithful ministers. On the one hand I think we all realize that there are areas in our lives where we could be more faithful, more Kingdom minded. But on the other hand, I think some of these things we are probably already doing but we just don't value them as much as the Lord values them.

And to be clear, these things are not ways that we get to heaven. These are not steps to salvation or steps to forgiveness. The only way your sins will ever be forgiven is by trusting in Jesus Christ alone to have suffered on the cross, in your place, for your sins. We're not talking about how to have our sins forgiven. We're talking about what do our lives look like once we've trusted in Jesus? What does it look like to serve him faithfully?

Some of these will surprise us, but all are important. Let's look at the first.

1. Willing to Suffer Joyfully. **Read 24**

I think it's safe to say that no one really likes to suffer. No one likes pain. In fact, we do as much as we can to avoid it and probably misjudge those who are going through suffering.

But the Bible consistently portrays suffering as a good thing. And it consistently portrays suffering as a means to godliness. And get this: it portrays suffering as a means to joy.

James 1:2-4: Count it all joy my brothers, when you face trials of various kinds, for you know that the test of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be complete, lacking in nothing.

James says we should rejoice in suffering because it produces maturity. Very rarely does true maturity come apart from trials or suffering of some kind.

Romans 5:3-5: Rejoice in suffering because it produces endurance then character then hope and ultimately a greater knowledge that God loves us.

We rejoice that suffering actually gives us a greater assurance of the love of God in our lives. How is that possible? Because the more we are faithful through our suffering the more we realize that God really is at work in us and loves us. There's no greater evidence of God's saving work in our lives than when we are joyful during our suffering.

Here Paul rejoices in his sufferings because it's an opportunity to serve Jesus by serving the church.

Read 24

How is it that Paul is filling up what is lacking in Jesus's sufferings? At first glance it could almost sound like what Paul is saying is that there was something missing in Jesus' crucifixion. Almost as though he didn't suffer enough so Paul has to help Jesus out a little bit.

But we know that's not the case. As Jesus died he said: it is what? Finished. When Jesus suffered and died for the sins of his people he completed the entire work. His suffering death secured salvation

So what is Paul talking about? Well, although Jesus's suffering secured salvation, there is still suffering that has to happen in order to proclaim salvation. What is lacking in Christ's afflictions is all the suffering Jesus knew would take place as Christians proclaim the gospel. Unbelievers don't like the message of the gospel. They don't like that Jesus is the only way, that they are sinners, that they'll have to give an account to God for their actions and they need to repent from their sin. That message is often met with a lot of hostility and suffering.

But Paul says he rejoices in that suffering because he's suffering for Jesus. He's taking part in what Jesus took part in. And his suffering is a way in which he serves the church. As Paul travelled through the ancient Roman world telling people about Jesus 2 things happened: 1) he suffered and 2) churches were started. Suffering wasn't something Paul was seeking - and we shouldn't seek it either for its own sake. We shouldn't intentionally go around trying to make life harder for ourselves. But suffering is often the way the church is served.

And the hard part is that suffering seems like the very opposite of success. The very opposite of faithfulness. To be honest, we probably hold to something of a reverse health-and-wealth gospel: If we are suffering, we think we should probably evaluate what we're doing because there's a good

chance we're doing something wrong. But that's not how it is in God's Kingdom. Suffering for the sake of Jesus is often the path to glory.

Even in our military we award suffering, don't we? Those who are wounded by enemies in battle get a Purple Heart. Those who go above and beyond the call of duty get a silver star, Navy Cross or a medal of honor or other honors. So even on a human level we see the value of suffering and even rejoice along with those who suffer. And interestingly, usually the criteria for the awards are: 1) how difficult the situation was and 2) how faithful the person was through it. The more difficult the situation and more faithful the person, the higher the award. The same is true in the Kingdom when we suffer for the gospel.

You say: Well, I might be suffering, but it's not a result of persecution. It's a medical condition or some other thing I'm going through. Can I tell you something? I think how we suffer in our medical situations says something to the world as well. Whether you have cancer or a digestive issue or just a common cold - our attitude through that says volumes about what we believe. Says a lot about our trust in him despite difficulty that are completely undermined when we whine and complain about our situation.

So the first characteristic of a faithful servant is that they suffer joyfully.

2. Gladly Accepts His Ministry Assignment. **Read 24-25**

So the sentence in **Vs. 25** is a little bit of a mouthful, but basically what Paul is saying is that he rejoices in serving the church through suffering because that's what God has assigned him to do.

He became a minister - or a servant - according to God's stewardship. God assigned him to this role. This wasn't something that Paul would have chosen for himself.

If you remember when Paul was converted in **Acts 9** as he was traveling north from Jerusalem to Damascus, he was blinded by Jesus. And shortly afterward a man named Ananias was told by God to go visit Paul so that Paul could receive his sight again. Ananias gave a little bit of pushback but God said this about Paul, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name to the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (**Acts 9:15-16**) From before the foundation of the world God had planned that Paul's ministry assignment was as a suffering evangelist. I mean, of all the ministry assignments God could have given Paul, this was it? But Paul knew it was from God.

Something we need to keep in mind is that wherever you're at in life is something of a ministry assignment. This is where God has called you. **Look** back at **1 Cor. 12:14-26** for a minute. Most of us know this section as talking about spiritual gifts, but it's also talking about our place in the church and how God has placed us in different areas for his own purposes. And the analogy is of a body.

Read 14-20

So the members of the church are like a body, we all have different features and functions. And we often look to other people and wish we were them. It's the "grass is always greener" situation where oftentimes other peoples' lives look nicer than our own. But who does Paul say arranged the pieces? God did. **Read 18**

Whether it's the spiritual gifts you have or your place in life, God has personally arranged you where you're at. This isn't a fatalism where we just throw our hands in the air and shrug our shoulders. No, this is where we humbly recognize that God has personally and carefully chosen exactly where we are. And can I be straight with you? When we long for someone else's life it's idolatry. It's a flat rejection of God's gracious placement of where we're at in life. And that idolatry often shows itself in complaining and jealousy.

We also have nothing to be prideful about. **Read 21-26**

Again, this is primarily talking about spiritual gifts. But it's also talking about our areas of ministry. How we serve the Lord. The assignment he's given us. **Read 27-31**

My point here isn't to get into a discussion on spiritual gifts, but only to point out that both your place in life and the gifts you have have been given by God. And not every believer gets all the gifts. But every believer is expected to use their gift and live out their assignment faithfully.

Whatever ministry assignment you have in life is exactly what God has given you. Whether you're a student wondering why in the world you have to study Washington State History. Or you're retired and wondering what the next step in following Jesus is. Or you're single and wondering "how long, O Lord!" The place you have in life, the ministry opportunities you have are given to you by God.

A lot of times how we console ourselves is by saying "Well, it could be worse." And I know I've said that before, but can I tell you something? That's actually an offense to God. Let me ask you wives: imagine taking the time to plan a meal, you go out and get all the ingredients, spending half the day cooking the meal and you serve it up and your husband looks at it and says "Well, it could be worse." How's that make you feel deep down inside?

Can I tell you something? That's exactly what we do when we're discontent with God's provision with where we're at in life: "Well, it could be worse." No, it couldn't be worse and it couldn't be better either. We can rejoice in our station in life because it is exactly what God has designed for us.

But let me show you something else I think is important in all this. **Look back at Col. 1.** A faithful servant is willing to suffer joyfully, gladly accepts their ministry from God.

3. Their Goal is to Make the Word of God Known. **Read 25-27**

When you're setting out to do something in life, anything in life, it's helpful to know what you're objective is. If you're playing football the objective is to win the game. If you're on the offense, you

want to score points. If you're on the defense, you want to prevent the other team from scoring points. But the overall goal is to win.

Paul says at the end of **Vs. 25** he does all these things "to make the Word of God fully known." This is his objective. Because he knows that the Word of God has power to save people and it has power to sanctify people. Other places he calls himself a minister of the Word. Not too long ago pastors were called ministers. A minister is someone who gives something out, who takes care of people with what they have. Pastors are those who minister - they give out - the Word of God. They take the Word of God and apply it to a person's specific situation.

And here's what Paul says: he says there was a mystery in the Bible. And he wants to make that mystery known to people. **Read 26-27**

When I was in high school I used to watch this program occasionally called Mysteries of the Bible. It talked about all these unanswered questions in the Bible. It was only years later I realized that the show was made by people who are trying to undermine the Bible, not support it.

And of course there are countless "Bible Code" books and shows trying to help us understand the deeper secrets of the Bible. Can I tell you something? It's all nonsense. It's all garbage.

There is a mystery that the NT talks about. But there's only one. And when the NT uses the word "mystery" the idea is that it was a mystery in the past - but it's no longer a mystery. That's what Paul says here. You know what the mystery is? It's that through faith in Christ, Gentiles - non Jews - have the same hope of eternal life that believing Jews did. The mystery is that Jesus gives us access to all the promises and blessings and hope of eternal life that the Jews have. **Read 26-27**

If you're a saint, a believer in the Lord Jesus, Paul says it's because God has chosen to make known to you the incredible worth of Jesus Christ. It's through him that we have forgiveness and favor and blessing and eternal life. And good thing we have, any grace, anything that we can praise God for is all because of Jesus. That's why Paul can say: the mystery is Christ. It's not that Christ is mysterious. He's not. It's that we Gentiles - who had no eternal hope with God - now have hope because of Jesus.

How do we know all those things? Through the Word of God being made fully known.

That's why whatever our place is on God's proverbial team, the overall objective of our lives is to make the Word of God fully known. That's not just the goal of suffering evangelists. It's the goal of every believer. **Look at Col. 3:16-17. Read**

We are to be constantly teaching one another, constantly encouraging one another with the Word of God. Even the songs we sing should echo the truths we believe. **Look at 4:2-4. Read**

Paul says pray for him that he could be faithful. But then he says to take care how we walk that we can answer outsiders. You know what the heart of our answers are going to be when we talk to outsiders? Jesus.

So moms, your goal is to make the Word of God fully known to your kids. Men, when you're at work your goal is to make the Word of God fully known. Wherever you are in life, to whatever extent is possible, that should be your goal. How can my life, my conduct, my Words make the Word fully known?

4. A faithful servant Warns and teaches others. **Read 28**

So here Paul tells us that he proclaims Jesus. That's really his goal - we've seen that.

But he helps us understand 2 basic categories of how that happens. He says, "Him we proclaim, warning and teaching everyone." The idea is that we he proclaims Jesus by warning and by teaching. Those are the 2 ways he does it. Some of you have admonishing and teaching. Admonish is just a word that means warn. It's telling someone to stop doing something they shouldn't be doing. So warning and proclaiming are the 2 ways proclamation happens.

And I think it's helpful to think in those categories as we talk to people about Jesus. Sort of what to do and what not to do. Part of telling people about Jesus - whether they are believers or not - is warning them. To be faithful servants of Jesus there are times when we need to tell people what not to do.

A lot of us don't like to do this because it feels like we're judging people. And I also think there's an added difficulty as Christians warning unbelievers to stop doing things because we think "Well, they're not believers so we can't hold them to our standards." Well, they might not live by our standards, but do our standards only apply to us? No. Aren't the things that the Bible wants us against dangerous for unbelievers, too? I don't think there's anywhere in the Bible that teaches that we have to wait for someone to come to faith in Christ before we tell them what they're doing is foolish.

Can I tell you something that sounds super obvious but struck me a few years back? Even unbelievers give advice to unbelievers. People who don't even profess faith in Christ spend their whole lives giving advice for how to treat people, how they spend money, how their relationships, marriages, work ethics. In fact, that probably accounts for about half of all television programming: people telling other what to do. If they can warn others, why can't we?

And the same thing is true within the family of God. If we see a brother in Christ doing something that they ought not be doing, we should warn them. If it's sin, point out the sin. If it's just foolishness, point out the foolishness. If it's wrong understanding, point out the wrong understanding.

On the other side we need to be willing to teach others. That's the second half. It's not enough to tell people what not to do. A lot of us are experts at that. The bigger issue to tell them what to do. And walk them through the truth of the Bible.

And, by the way, this has to be balanced. We have to both warn negatively and teach positively. Some of us tend toward more warnings and every once in a while we'll teach someone something. Others don't like to warn at all because we don't feel qualified to tell other people what they are doing is wrong. But the reality is that both are needed.

When you're learning to drive - taking Driver's Ed - you need to not only learn how to do things you need to learn how not to do things. When you get to a Round-About, there are some things you need to know how to do. But, as our fair city can testify, there are many things a person should not do at a round about. Both are necessary.

And both are necessary as we tell people about Jesus, whether for the first time or the thousandth.

5. A faithful servant Seeks Maturity in Others. **Read 28**

This is important. The reason we labor for the body of Christ, the reason we faithfully serve in the position God has given us, and make the Word of God fully known through warning and teaching people is because we sincerely desire them to be transformed, to become the godly person.

But can I be honest? I think many times we really just want people to be godly - to be mature in Christ - simply because we don't want them to annoy us anymore.

We want our spouse to be godly because we're tired of arguing with them or dealing with them. We want our children to be godly because we're worn out because they're...children. We want our fellow students to be godly or our co-workers and neighbors to be godly so our lives are more peaceful and pleasant.

Really, when we are talking to people about the Word of God - and here Paul is talking about tother believers - we should be seeking their maturity. We should be prayerfully and patiently considering what will truly bring them closer to Jesus.

Usually that means ruling out quick easy answers. It means ruling out manipulation and coercion. Usually it means taking the long road of gently and patiently explaining to them the Word of God. Over and over.

For those of you who have been in the faith a while you know that there were things in your life that took a long time to accept. Maybe you had heard them, maybe you had read about it but you weren't ready to be obedient in a particular area no matter how much others might have tried to get you there. Sometimes it just takes time and patience for God to work.

6. A good servant Balances God's strength with Our Effort. **Read 29**

The Bible nowhere teaches a let go and let God theology where we just sit back and do nothing and God does everything. And it nowhere teaches that we just have to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, put our head down and keep going.

No, it's really a balance. The servants of God are to toil, we are to struggle. But we have to understand that the toiling we do is based on the power of God. What does that mean? How do we know we're doing it in God's strength, not our own?

1. We won't be sinning as we're working for God. If we're working in God's strength we'll be fully obedient.
2. We will be able to prioritize things correctly. Most people have pretty busy lives, there's a lot going on. The reality is that we can't usually get everything done we want to get done. You know what will show God's strength through us? When we rightly prioritize what is needed most.
3. We don't need to manipulate people or guilt them or shame them into change. We simply present them the Word of God.

Can I give you a little encouragement here? Paul actually believes that his ministry has an effect. He actually believes that through faithful effort he can present people mature in Christ. In **Vs. 28** he says he wants to present everyone fully mature and then in **Vs. 29** he says that's why he works so hard. Maybe this is obvious: but he wouldn't work so hard if he didn't think it were possible. The reason he strives to build people up with the Word of God is because he believes they will actually change!

And we should too. Don't give up on people. Don't become cynical. Faithfully strive to make the Word of God fully known and God will do the rest.

Pray