



+ This week at Magdalen Road church we continued our studies in Colossians. We began by thinking about common three temptations in gospel ministry. The first was that we do things in our own strength. The second is that we can have little agendas or hobbyhorses which means we might talk too much about the wrong things, rather than about Christ. The third is that we can be working from a faulty definition of Christian maturity.

Following on from last week, this is a passage showing us how Paul's ministry is thoroughly infected by Christ. What Paul says, how he says it, and why he says what he says, are all shaped by the Lord Jesus. Paul's example of ministry challenges the three unhelpful temptations that we began with...

Whilst this is primarily a passage for those in Christian ministry, it is also a passage for all of us - both as we minister to one another, but also as we support and pray for those whom we know who are engaging in paid gospel ministry.

...Contending in the strength of Christ

Notice that this is a section about hard work and suffering (eg v24 and 25). Verse 24 is a tricky verse about which many gallons of ink have been spilled. In what way is Paul 'filling up in his flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ afflictions?' From the contexts we can safely say that Paul's suffering is not redemptive (For example last week we saw that Jesus's death on the cross and his blood shed have made peace v20). Rather what he seems to be getting at is that there is still suffering to be endured by the church (Christ's body) for the mission of Jesus to be accomplished. By his blood of Jesus has brought redemption, but that message of redemption needs to be taken to those who need to hear it. Just as Jesus suffered for his mission, so will Paul and so will we. This is why Paul is able to rejoice because he sees the immense privilege and the need for this message to be spread.

Structurally speaking, at the very heart of the passage right in the middle (1v29 and 2v1) Paul uses the language of contending. It's a word that speaks of fighting, struggling and labouring - revealing how important Paul sees his message to the Colossian church to be. We also noted vv29 is vital to remember as God equips his people for the task he calls them to.

How would you know where the Gods power is at work in your life? Maybe we think it's when things are going well - when stuff drops into place and we found a kind of sweet spot? But rather Paul says is when he is struggling and persevering - that is when Christ's energy is powerfully working in him. Being able to persevere through hardships is evidence of God at work.

...With the message of Christ

Paul uses an interesting word to describe the content of his message. It's the word mystery. In the bible the mystery word is used of something that was a secret but has now been unveiled - something that was

unknown, but is now known by everyone. Paul uses this word to describe the gospel. The mystery is God taking on flesh coming to live among his people (including Gentiles such as the Colossians) and then to take us to be with him forever. He also describes this message as riches (cf 1v27 and 2v2). The message of Jesus is a precious message bringing with it precious riches - that is the riches of having him and being full and complete in Christ.

It's also striking that this message is a message about a person Jesus must be the one whom we speak about. It's very easy to talk about other things become excited by other things -valuing other things above him. Whether they be buildings, church planting, particular individuals or personalities or ministries - it's vital though that Christ is the foundation for us and our prime message. Its also easy at times to think about the Christian faith as a philosophy or set of ideas, rather than based around a person.

... For their maturity in Christ

This is a book about growth there's nothing wrong with wanting to grow up as Christians. But our definition of maturity matters. In this passage the goal of Paul's ministry becomes evident. See for example 1v28 or 2v2-3.

Paul's goal for them is that they may have the full riches of complete understanding - knowing the mystery of God and so being encouraged in heart and united in love. Maturity for Paul is theology worked out in practice. 'Encouraged in heart' means being strengthened and comforted from the very core. 'United in love' is a church that is increasingly thankful for all they have in Christ and that is seen in their love for each other. Our problem is often people think of maturity as having an understanding of lots of theological truth rather than a godly life shaped by theological truth.

Perhaps also maturity is most clearly seen when life is hard. Maybe in the midst of the stress and difficulty you see the reality of whether they are encouraged and heart? Maybe in the midst of difficult relationships you see whether they are united in love?

Wouldn't it be amazing to be the kind of church shaped and formed by Jesus? Known by those around us because of our love for him. A people who minister in his strength, with a message foundationally about him, and growing in real Christlike godliness and maturity.

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+ As always feel free to adapt to these questions as appropriate for your home group.

What do you remember from last week in Paul's description of Jesus? How does our understanding of Jesus link forward to our passage for today? Note this is a passage primarily those involved in speaking ministry, however the principles and foundations apply to all of us as we speak to one another compare 1v28 and 3v16).

Take some time just to look over the passage - do you spot any recurring words? Any themes and ideas? Any surprises?

What do you see about the nature of suffering at the heart of Christian ministry? What words does Paul use & how do they apply to us? How does that make you feel? What do you think it means that Christ equips his people for the tasks that he gives them? What does that look like? Have you ever experienced that?

From your experience what are some things that churches talk about too much? What is the message here the Paul proclaims? Why is it so important that Jesus is the foundation of the message? How do we stop ourselves from drifting into other things?

Where do we see Paul outlining the goal of his ministry among them? What facets and definitions of a mature Christian does he give? How do we define maturity? Do you think Magdalen Road church is a mature church? Why? Or why not?