Paul's Servant Ministry
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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A number of years ago, 1981, February, I had the opportunity to speak for a week at Dallas Seminary. At that time I studied and prepared a week series on the chapter I read earlier - Colossians chapter 1. And that has become a very important part of the fabric of my life and perception of ministry. As I was sort of asking the Lord what I might share with you tonight, I was drawn again to this great rich passage. So open your Bible to the text that I read earlier - Colossians chapter 1, and I would like us to look together even if ever so briefly in a cursory fashion at verses 23 to 29.

I fear that for many the ministry has become more a profession and less a passion. Men seem more committed goals than to God, more interested in success than sanctification. Comfort has a way of softening the hardness of commitment. And we get caught in the method that sort of overpowers the message. And I want us to go back to this passage to just focus again on what I believe to be a very realistic view of ministry. It has a way of sort of stripping off the baggage, the useless baggage and turning Walter Mitty into a realist.

Verses 23 to 29 have so much rich insight into the life and ministry of the apostle Paul that we can't deal with, but I think we can uncover the reality of what is here. In reading the chapter as I did earlier, at least the larger portion of it, I read through that monumental passage from verses 13 to 23 which is a presentation of the majesty and saving dynamic of Jesus Christ the Son of God. It's an exalted look at the glorious Christ.

Coming out of that section in verse 23 at the very end there is a transitional statement. The transitional statement is, "Of which I, Paul, was made a minister." In other words, I was made a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That transitional statement triggers Paul into verses 24 to 29 in which he further defines the nature of his ministry. The message has been clearly articulated in the prior text and now, with that transitional statement, he moves into discussing the nature of his ministry. What it does is give us a perspective on how he viewed his own ministry.

And why is this section here? Well, as frequently was the case with the Apostle Paul, he was under attack as to the validity of his ministry by those who thought they were superior through philosophy, legalism, mysticism, asceticism, which he deals directly with in chapter 2. They felt that they had reached some higher level of spiritual knowledge and he was down on the low ground somewhere. And so in sort of a self defense of his own ministry, he takes some care to offer some details about

the validity and integrity of his own ministry in these verses.

It should me marked as an initial starting point that we look at the word minister which is the last word in verse 23. That term is the term deaconiafrom which we get the word deacon, which basically means a busboy or a table-waiter, a common servant. It emphasizes the simplicity, the meanness or the commonness of the task. He often uses the word servant in the English but doulasin the Greek which means a bond slave, which emphasizes the totality of submissiveness. Sometimes he uses the work hooperatace, which means under-rower which emphasizes the utter base lowliness.

And so whether he sees himself as a common servant, as a submissive servant, or as a lowly servant, he ever and always is a servant. That's a basic identification mark of the Apostle Paul. He says in 1 Corinthians chapter 4, when you write my epitaph, when you lay out your account, when you put down something about me to leave to posterity, may it be said of me that I was a steward, that I was a minister, a servant, a steward of the mysteries of God.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 9 he says, "When you write my epitaph, don't pronounce any great benedictions on my life. Just let people know woe is unto me if I preached not the gospel. I'm not worthy of any credit, I just did what I had to do or I would have been under the curse of God. I was ever and always a servant." He would have pleaded with us, "Don't name churches after me. Don't name colleges after me. Don't name cities in Minnesota after me. Just say, woe was unto him if he didn't preach the gospel." And so he says, "I'm not worthy of any commendation whatsoever. I did what I was under compulsion to do and serious, serious chastening if I failed to do it. I am a servant of the least rank."

I am convinced that the deeper the selfless attitude of unworthy servanthood, the greater the potential for usefulness. William Taylor, writing in that old volume, The Preacher and his Model has given us an interesting illustration. He tells a story about Pusa the Chinese potter being ordered by the Emperor to produce some great work for the Emperor. He tried long in vain to make a pot that would fit the Emperor and he couldn't do it. And at length, he was driven to absolute despair, he threw himself into the furnace in an act of self immolation and he was consumed in his own clay, as it were. And as the Chinese story goes, out came the most beautiful porcelain piece that had ever been produced. And so the Chinese tell the story that self-sacrifice is what makes the most beautiful work. I thought that was a strange story. I was in Hong Kong two years ago. I told it and a man came up to me and said, "That is a very familiar Chinese story." Familiar or not, it illustrates the simple thought that when we get lost in the act of self-sacrifice, the ministry has a sweet savor to it and a beauty.

And Paul saw himself as a servant. And that was the key to everything. Some years ago, John Stott wrote, "I cannot help wondering if this may not be why there are so few preachers whom God is using mightily today. There are plenty of popular preachers, but not many powerful ones who preach in the power of the Spirit. Is it because the cost of such preaching is too great? It seems that the only

preaching God honors through which his wisdom and power are expressed is the preaching of a man who is willing in himself to be both a weakling and a fool. God not only chooses weak and foolish people to save, but weak and foolish preachers through whom to save them, or at least preachers who are content to be weak and seem foolish in the eyes of the world. We're not always willing to pay this price. We are constantly tempted to covet a reputation as men of learning or men of influence, to seek honor in academic circles and compromise our old fashioned message in order to do so and to cultivate personal charm or forcefulness so as to sway the people committed to our care."

But where there is the heart of a servant, there is the beginning of an effective and powerful ministry. As we flow out of that word, minister, into the next few verses, verses 24 to 29, there are eight key features that fill up Paul's servant ministry. And I just lay them before you. Eight elements of ministry that he identifies for us.

The first is the source of ministry. He is saying, "Now I'm gonna talk about my ministry. First I want to talk about the source of it." I love this. I just love this. What is the source of it? Well back up into verse 23 for a moment. And you read the phrase, "Of which I, Paul, was made a minister. I was made a minister."

Go down to verse 25. "Of this church," he says, "I was made a minister." There is that interesting phrase that, "I was made a minister." Somebody acted on him to make him a minister. He didn't make himself a minister. Somebody made him a minister. And that's obviously the work of God. Somebody might say, "Well what made him a minister?" And the answer might come that it was his training or his education or his abilities or his grades or his professors or his desires or his view of the need or his church or his denomination or his mother or whatever. That answer is, it was God.

If you go back into the history of the Apostle Paul and hear his testimony, you hear him say, "At midday, oh king, I saw on the way a light from heaven brighter than the sun shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' And I said, 'Who art thou Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but arise and stand on your feet for this purpose I have appeared to you to make you a minister.'" Acts 26:16. Who made him a minister? Jesus Christ made him a minister. And so he says in verse 25, "I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God. The oechenomeion, the stewardship. What does that mean? It speaks about management. According to a God's plan and purpose and the scheme of things, he put me into ministry. It is a God given responsibility. It is a divine appointment. I love what he says in Galatians 2:7, he says in chapter 7 and 8 that it wasn't any man. "It was God and flowing down from there, it was God who put me into the ministry." In fact, he says, "What I learned, I didn't even learn from any man. When the Lord had put me in the ministry, there I was on my way to Damascus, minding my own business, preparing to kill some more

Christians, the next thing I knew I was ordained by Christ himself, sent into the ministry." The Lord took him into Navitae and Arabia for a period of three years and there is discipled and taught him as you well know.

Do we need to be reminded that in any ministry it is God who calls, it is God who equips, it is God who gifts, it is God who assigns? Not as dramatically as the Apostle Paul, but just as truly even if only through strong, compelling desires such as is indicated in 1 Timothy chapter 3. That takes us back, doesn't it again to 1 Corinthians chapter 9 as I mentioned it earlier, where the Apostle Paul acknowledges that he is worthy of no commendation whatsoever. He said, "If I did it voluntarily," verse 17, "then I have a reward. But if I'm in the ministry against my will, I have a stewardship that has been entrusted to me." And believe me, he was in the ministry against his will.

When John Knox was called to preach in Scotland, little did the world know what great impact he would have. To this day, if you have the privilege of preaching in Scotland as I have had, when you walk into the pulpit of the Scottish Presbyterian church they will tell you it is the John Knox pulpit. That's what they call it. A man left an indelible mark on the land only could we wish that his theology remained. "But then John Knox was called to preach," his biographer writes, "he burst forth in most abundant tears and withdrew himself to his chamber. His countenance and behavior from that day until he was compelled to set himself in the public place of preaching did sufficiently declare the grief and trouble of his soul."

He was absolutely overwhelmed by the immensity of the responsibility of being called by God. And he fought it. Martin Lloyd Jones writes, "The man who is called by God is a man who realizes what he is called to do. And he also realizes the awfulness of the task that he so much so that he shrink from it. Nothing but this overflowing sense of being called and compulsion should ever lead anyone to preach."

That's so important. That's so important to have that confidence of the call of God. And somebody's going to say, "Well where do you get that confidence?" I believe that if you follow the patter of 1 Timothy 3, it comes to a strong compelling desire that eliminates everything else.

Often I'm asked the question, "If you weren't a preacher what would you be?" And the answer is, "Dead." I don't know. There's nothing else I can do. Ask my wife. My son Mark said to me, when he was young, "Dad, in the pulpit you're something, but other that that you're nothing special." He was exactly right. And he was serious when he said that. And it was very insightful.

If I am called of God, then I have a holy calling, right? And I have a calling to be holy if I'm to represent God. That's why I'm so burdened to emphasize the matter of holiness in the life of the minister. If God called me, he called me to be a holy vessel. For only through a holy vessel can an unadulterated truth pass.

J.W. Alexander put it this way. "The great reason we have so little good preaching is that we have so little true holiness. And I guess we have to be often grieved at the modern shallow superficial, faddish, flippant treatment of God that comes out of the pulpit, but what it is is the reflection of a life that could be defined in the same way. But if you understand the majesty and the holiness and the awesomeness of a wonder-working almighty sovereign God, and you understand that he has ordained and called you and made you a minister to represent him, that is a compelling thing.

When you look at Isaiah 66:2, you're reminded that God says he's looking for a man who trembles at his word, a man who has a broken and a contrite heart and who trembles at his word, who has a healthy awe and fear of God like Isaiah who was broken in the vision of God in chapter 6 as we remember.

And so when you realize that this is a call of God, the implications are absolutely far reaching. Wish we had time to go into them. But I would commend to you a careful study of the concept of the fear of God in the Old Testament that drove those who were the true representatives of God.

And I'll tell you this, gentlemen, you will never rise above, you will never rise above your view of God in your preaching or your living. You will never rise above your view of God. So the first and foremost enterprise of your ministerial life is to know as much about God as you can possibly know. Because the greater your comprehension of God, the greater becomes the capacity that you have to live within the framework of that knowledge. And that becomes the breadth and depth and height of your ministry.

We then can easily understand the prayer of a Puritan who prayed, "There is yet so much unconquered territory in my nature. Scourge out the buyers and sellers of my soul's temple and give me in return, pure desires and longings after your perfect holiness."

God has called us into this ministry to represent him. We have a stewardship from God to be God's representatives. Paul says, "I didn't ask for this. I'm not in it because it was a lucrative profession. I didn't do this because I thought my talent was in this area. I am compelled, I am commanded, I am mandated, I cannot do anything else. I am under a curse if I don't do this. And in trying to accomplish it, I have to beat my body into submission because it is forever trying to run away. And if I happen to fall in that area, I will become useless." And so there was this overwhelming sense of the source of the ministry being God.

I have to confess to you that there are times in my life when it is the fact that I've been called of God that keeps me in the ministry because there are times when there's nothing else to do it.

Second point, just suggesting these things, is the spirit of the ministry. The source is God, clearly. What is the spirit of the ministry? I love this. Verse 24, "Now I rejoice." Stop right there. Many in the ministry admittedly are hesitant, reluctant, discouraged, disappointed, resentful, bitter, disheartened, lonely, angry. And we may go, at some point in out lives, through those kinds of things and I'm sure that none of us is exempt from those experiences, but with some people that's just kind of a settled attitude.

But Paul here tells us about the right spirit of the ministry. He says, "Now I rejoice." What does he mean by that? Well joy is the deep down confidence that God is in control of everything and it's all going for my benefit and his glory. It's not some circumstantial happiness. It's the deep down confidence that God is in control of everything and it's all moving for my ultimate good and his glory.

You look at the Apostle Paul and he had this tremendous joy. And he had it in so many ways, in so many circumstances. He could rejoice in the love of the Thessalonians and they were his joy and his glory. He said in chapter 2 of 1 Thessalonians. But he could also rejoice as he does here in his sufferings. You see, there was nothing that happened, be it positive or negative that could get deep enough to steal that deep down trust. That the relationship he had with God was forever and that God was controlling everything for his good and God's glory.

Never forget reading about the evangelical free pastor in Vancouver who jumped in a river and drowned himself. I knew a pastor of a church in Mississippi who was under such pressure from his congregation he had a nervous breakdown, they sent him into the city, put him in a hospital in Jackson and he jumped out of the fourth floor window the second day he was there and killed himself.

Those are very extreme illustrations of despair in the ministry. There are a lot of people, of course, who don't do that, but live in a kind of quiet desperation. Some of you would fit into that. I'm sure there are some pastors who might agree with Voltaire who said men are tormented atoms in a bit of mud, sick fools who only talk of happiness. Sad way to live your life.

But Paul rejoiced. Paul rejoiced even in a difficult situation. His joy was incessant, and his joy was independent. That joy, now mark this, was bound up in the depth of his relationship to God. Most people sadly devise their joy from material gain or human love or thrills or imagination or fantasy or the absence of pain or whatever, but our joy is in the Lord. And that's so obvious.

There's a wonderful hymn that sometimes you hear a choir sing, "Jesus, my Joy". That's the spirit of the ministry. No matter what happens in the church, no matter what happens to steal my pain, to bring me tears, to break my heart, and I've been there. I've been there just like you've been there. I've been there with tears. I've been there when people have put the knife in and turned it. I've been there when there was nothing to hold on to, but that relationship, but it never varies.

I've even learned to embrace my pain. I've even learned to love adversity. Why? Because it drives me to the depth of my relationship with the Lord. And if I don't have the pain, I tend to stay on the surface. And when people have disappointed me at every turn, the Lord never does and that's not a clichÃ©. You run to that relationship and you rehearse in your mind all of the realities of that relationship.

Told the people recently a couple places where I preached, I'll never forget sitting in a staff meeting and saying, "I'm so thankful that you guys are my friends. You'll never know how much I love you." And one of them said to me, "If you think we're your friends, buddy, you got another thing coming." Just absolutely devastated me. Before it was over there was a mutiny. You know, those kinds of things are deep pain. Sometimes people say things to you that cut very deeply. Sometimes you work so very hard and people walk away from the effort you've made in their lives and they break your heart. But when your joy is related to the fact that you, unworthy as you are, are redeemed by Jesus Christ, and that heaven is your promised future and that God has privileged you to spend your life cultivating an intimate, deep relationship with him out of the overflow of which you can talk to other people, you've got to be thankful. Even if nobody shows up.

The very heart, believe me, of your joy is that relationship. And let me tell you something. At the very heart of your joy is a true assessment of your own unworthiness. Do you know why men lose their joy in ministry? I'll tell you in one word. Pride. You lose your joy because you believe you deserve better treatment. And the truth is, you don't. And neither do I. The worst treatment that you could possibly get from men doesn't come close to what you deserve because what you deserve and what I deserve is eternal hell.

And so, if I get anything other than that, I have a reason to be a happy man. And I can't expect any more than that. And I also know that the God who knows me best loves me most. Moses at the burning bush saw only his imperfections. Gideon at the threshing floor, only his weakness. Isaiah and the temple, only is filthiness. Peter, when Christ was there and he knew he was the living God because he controlled the fish, said, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man." And it was in the sense of humbleness and unworthiness and inadequacy that they deserve nothing, that everything they got from Christ became the source of their permanent joy.

There's old Jeremiah and they're about to throw him in a pit. They don't listen to anything he says and he weeps his way through his whole ministry. And all alone, he says, "Thy words were found and I did eat them. If nobody listened, God, I listened. And your word in me was the joy and rejoicing of my heart."

And I can tell you that men, that there are plenty of times when you wonder whether anybody listens. And you know, the most frightening thing in the world is to meet somebody from your service on

Monday and ask them what you preached about on Sunday. If you really want to inflict flagellation, do that. And you wonder whether anybody listens or anybody knows. But you say to yourself, "If nobody heard and nobody knows, your words were found and I did eat them and I feasted on them and they were in my heart the joy and rejoicing."

See, unhappy people in the ministry think they're not getting what they deserve. That's a pride issue. Where pride is present, joy is gone. And joy is the right spirit in the ministry. I'll tell you something. If you can rise above the pain and demonstrate the joy, you'll capture the congregation in that joy. It has to be joy in spite of very often.

Thirdly, the source of the ministry is God, the spirit of the ministry's joy, the suffering of the ministry, the suffering of the ministry - verse 24 he says, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake. And in the flesh I do my share on behalf of his body, which Is the church and filling up that which is lacking in Christ's affliction."

Now suffering in no way diminishes the joy. In fact, suffering ought to enhance the joy because suffering drives you deeper into the communion that you need with the Lord and the deeper you go into that communion, the greater should be your joy. Right? So, the greater the pain, the sweeter the joy.

And Paul is saying, "Look. I rejoice in my suffering." That sounds exactly like 2 Corinthians 12 doesn't it? I'm content with all that pain. I'm content with it all because of what happens as a result of it. He was not only suffering, of course, at the hands of the world in a physical sense, and all of the abuse and hatred for preaching the gospel, but there was a positive side to his suffering because he didn't view it that way. He didn't view the negative, "Look what's happening to me." He viewed the positive, "Look what I'm accomplishing through the suffering." He had plenty of suffering.

And he knew it was inevitable even in the future he said, you know, to Timothy, "Evil men will get worse and worse, and Timothy get ready, you're going to suffer. That's the name of it. That's just the way it is. And a godly life confronting an ungodly culture is going to get some reaction. You can expect that." But he says, "My sufferings are so purposeful." He says, "I'm suffering for your sake. I'm suffering for your sake." "Well what do you mean by that?" "Well, I do my share of suffering," he says, "on behalf of his body which is the church." "What do you mean?" "Well I'm suffering like this to get the gospel to you so you can be saved and to feed you the Word of God so you can grow up. It's for you. It's for you."

But there's even another element. It's so beautiful at the end of verse 24. He says, "I'm filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." Boy that is a strange statement. "I'm filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions, what do you mean by that?" First of all to say I'm filling up means that the afflictions given to Christ were not complete. Well what does me mean that the cross was not

enough? No, he's not talking about the cross. He's talking about the hatred and the animosity and the persecution and the suffering that Christ endured at the hands of the people who rejected what he said. But he said, "The world isn't through persecuting Jesus. The world is not through persecuting Jesus. The problem is he's not here, so they're getting me. The persecution of Jesus is not over. So I'm filling up what he's not here to take. You say is that positive, you bet. You bet. I receive the blows intended for the one who received the blows that were intended for me. He took the blows that I should have received on Calvary. I will gladly take the blows meant for him."

When they persecute you, they're not persecuting you, they're persecuting Christ. He's not here. You have the privilege of receiving those for him. Paul says, Galatians, he says, "I bear in my body what? The marks of Jesus Christ." I don't know if they had a piece of metal he could use like a mirror. I don't know if he could hold his back to a pond, but I'll tell you what. If you had as many lacerations as that man had, five times he was whipped by the Jews, three times he was beaten with rods which would have laid his back bare to the bone. And he was stoned to the degree that - you remember they left him for dead and I believe that's when he was transported to the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 10. This man was one battered human being. He must have been as ugly as sin, physically. They said his bodily presence was really weak.

I mean this man had it all over his body, you can see him at night as he takes off his clothes and he looks all over his body and he sees all this stuff - scar upon scar. And you know what his response is? "This was meant for Jesus, but I got to take it for him. See this big scar on my head? Well that was meant for Jesus, but I got to take that blister when the crushed my head with that rock." Those are the trophies of his ministry. He was standing in the gap and whatever the world would have done to Christ, it couldn't do it. They were doing to him.

See, that's what grieves me so much about this kind of preaching that wants to sneak up on everybody and offer them some kind of non-descript synthetic seed that is utterly inoffensive to make sure that they sort of sneak into the kingdom and they hardly even know what they're doing. To remove the offense of the gospel is not an act of subtle technique that is going to be effective. It is an act of cowardice. Says, "I'm not willing to preach the truth boldly. I will not bear the offense of men." Paul says, "I'll take it." Believe me, there wasn't one subtle thing about him. Not one.

We bear the blows meant for him. And we're not talking about suffering for stupidity's sake. We're talking about suffering for righteousness' sake. There's a difference. If you suffer for stupidity's sake, those are your own scars.

Where the church is built, Satan's going to react, right? The world system is gonna rebel. Disobedient Christians are gonna criticize. Jealous people are gonna condemn and you'll be falsely accused and false teachers will arise and people will misunderstand and you'll labor long and hard with a sense of inadequacy and some guilt for your failures. But through it all, a church will grow and

the scars are the scars you took in the process that would have been Jesus' scars if he'd been there doing it.

Suffering then is the suffering that comes to the one who is bold and faithful. And if you're not willing to do that, you're going to compromise. If you're going to spend your life trying to avoid the suffering, you're going to start to preach what Nicholas Von Hoffman called the Mush God. The Mush God is the God of the Rotarians and the ribbon cutters, whose laws aren't chiseled in stone, but scratched in sand amenable to amendment and erasure. He calls it the Cream of Wheat divinity. But if you're gonna preach the true God, it's different. If you're gonna gird up your loins, you're gonna go into a battle.

A young guy said to me not long ago, he said, "I'm gonna go and pastor a church, but I want to find one with no problems." I said, "If you do, don't go there or they'll have a lot of problems." Source of our ministry is God, the spirit of our ministry is joy, the suffering of our ministry is on behalf of the church first and on behalf of Christ second. Is that worthy? Oh, Paul says, "If I be offered on the sacrifice of your faith, I rejoice. If I die, getting you saved, sweet death. And if bear in my body the marks of Christ, what a reward."

Fourthly the scope of the ministry. Verse 25 he says, "I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed upon me for your benefit. That, I might fully carry out, literally, the Word of God." This is a very difficult passage to translate. Let me give you some of the translations. Authorized version says, "To give full scope to the Word of God." Then NAS says, "To fully carry out the preaching of the Word of God." The NIV says, "To present to you the Word of God in its fullness." And the Greek says, "To fulfill the Word of God." That's hard to pin the precise meaning down. You read commentaries and some will say it means to fulfill God's word to Paul by carrying out an obedient ministry. Another one will say, "To manifest God's truth in his living." Another says, "To declare God's word in his preaching." Another says, "To teach the whole council of God." And another says, "To teach the whole council of God to the whole world." So which one's right. Well, they're all right, I think. I think when God wants to say something that covers a lot of ground, he says it in a way that you can't pin down. What are you saying? Give full scope to the word. I mean, he says that. In fulfilling your calling, living the message, preaching the message, preaching it to everybody, preaching it to the whole world. Same root word is used in 2 Timothy 4:5 where Paul said to Timothy, "Fulfill your ministry. Do it to the full. Do it to the max. Do it do the max. And it does involve your life. If your people are going to watch your life, they're going to watch your family, they're gonna watch your attitudes, they're gonna watch your compassion, your zeal, your purity, or lack of it. They're gonna watch your consistency. They're gonna watch all that. It involves your life.

But the essence of what he is saying here has to do with that statement, "The Word of God." And he's saying, "You've got to give full scope to the Word of God," which I say simply means you preach the whole Word of God to as many people as you can. As faithfully as you can. Now you can get

carried away with that. Some people think they have to be the pastor of the whole world. I remember one fellow said that. He wanted to be the pastor for the whole world. There are some people who want to stretch as far as they possibly can.

David McKenna wrote these interesting words. He said, "Self styled Messiahs are always megalomaniacs. Their sense of mission has no limitations short of conquering the world, and conquering it now and at the slightest signal that their efforts are being frustrated, they usually respond with rage and madness."

You know, self styled Messiahs always want to cover the whole world. There should be some boundaries. I look at Jesus and I see some boundaries. He said in John 5:30, "I only do the father's will. Only do what the father tells me to do, I don't do anything else." Secondly, he said in the Gospel of John five times, "My time is" - what? "Not yet come. I only do God's will in God's time." And then he only did God's will in God's time to God's people. He said, "I have only come to the sinners, not the righteous, not the self-righteous. And I haven't come but to the lost sheep for the House of Israel." He had an economy of effort that was really frightening. "I only do God's will in God's time to the people God directs me to." And then he said, "I only preach God's message." He never preached anything but the kingdom. That's all he ever preached and even after he rose from the dead, came back for 40 days, he spoke of things pertaining to the kingdom, didn't he? That's all he ever talked about. He constantly talked about the kingdom. Never got into social issues, political issues, any of that stuff. He just talked about the kingdom. He only did God's will in God's time with God's people and God's message. And then he spent the great bulk of his time with 12 guys. God's priority people, God's priority men. He had amazing limits on his ministry.

And such precision is frightening to people who feel no such limitation and want to win the whole world. What does that say to me? It says to me, "Look, God has called me to preach the Word of God. That' what I want to do. There might be some other things I could do, but that's what he called me to do. I want to do it in the time he give me to do it, to the people he gives me to do it to, that's Christ Community Church, and I want to give the message that is the only word that I can bring from God and that's the word of the kingdom. And then I want to invest my lie in a smaller group of people like Jesus did so that I can multiply my ministry. And if I do that faithfully, then I can let God take care of the breadth of that."

This is the scope of the ministry - to give full scope to the Word of God then means that I know God is the source of my ministry. Joy is the spirit of my ministry. Suffering is gonna be in my ministry for the sake of the church and to bear in my body the marks of Christ. But I'm willing to do all of that and I recognize that the reason for all of that is so that I can live and preach the whole word to the world, that God sovereignly gives me. That's the scope of my ministry. That's the scope.

And I really do believe, men, that - and women, I say this for you as well, but particularly to pastors, I really do believe that the more profound and powerful the ministry to the people that God gives you, the greater will be its impact beyond that. And we said this the other day, you take care of the depth of your ministry, God will take care of the breadth of it. If you have something to say that rightly represents God and you can say it through a godly life and in the power of the Holy Spirit, then God will take it wherever he wants it to go.

The subject of the ministry - and we're hurrying - the subject of the ministry - verse 26, he says, "That is the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations but has now been manifested to his saints to whom God will to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the gentiles which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." Simply say this. The mystery is that which was hidden in the past. The mystery is simply another term for New Testament truth, for New Testament truth. Something hidden from the past time and the past people, but now made manifest. Once sacred secrets, now made available. Whether you're talking about the mystery of the incarnate God in Colossians 1, the mystery of Israel's unbelief in Romans 11, the mystery Babylon in Revelations 17, the mystery of the church in Ephesians 1, the mystery of the rapture, 1 Corinthians 15, the mystery of the bride, Ephesians 5, whatever element of it or the mystery of the indwelling Christ in the church who is our hope. Whatever it is, it simply refers to New Testament revelation. We are ministers of the mysteries of God. We are primarily new covenant ministers.

People ask me why I spend so much time in the New Testament. Because I'm a minister of the new covenant - the revealed mysteries. It's what I'm to do. I'm to unfold the Word of God and the new covenant. You say, "Well do you pay no attention to the Old Testament?" No, because you can't even understand the depth and the breadth and the height of the New Covenant unless you understand the Old Testament. It comes alongside.

And so the subject of our ministry is the mysteries. Where you gonna find the mysteries? In the word. And no wonder Paul said to Timothy, "Preach the word, preach the word, in season, out of season, that is so clear. I don't understand how anybody can go on a pulpit and do anything else. I don't understand how anybody can do anything other than be an expository preacher because if you're gonna preach the word, you gotta preach the word. Paul said in Acts 20, "I have not failed to declare unto you the whole council of God."

Most people who pastor churches, most people will go their whole lifetime and never be able to say that because they haven't done that. Because they haven't done that - preach the word. Bring them under the authority of Scripture. I'll tell you, I see my goal is to bring my people under the authority of Scripture so that they consciously submit to its authority and then to take them through the Word of God and whatever it says, if they're consciously submissive to its authority, they're going to respond to.

The Word of God, we don't even need to beg the issue to say it, but the Word of God is the subject of our ministry and the primary emphasis is on the New Testament. Paul even told the Corinthians that the things that happened in the Old Testament were as examples to those now living, upon whom the end of the ages have come. But the primary text and context of our ministry is to unfold the mysteries revealed in the New Testament which concern Christ, the Messiah, who lives in you, now, by faith and gives you the hope of glory.

Number six - the style of the ministry - verse 28. "We proclaim him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom that we may present every man complete in Christ. What is the style of the ministry? Just quickly, we proclaim, we admonish, we teach. Proclaim there is catungello , herald, announcement, preaching if you will. We preach.

Just a footnote on that, when you go into the pulpit, how do you view yourself? What is the role of the preacher? There are kind of five little images you might stick in your mind. First would be the ritualist, where you see your role as part of the liturgy. Well, we did this, we stood up, sat down, sang this hymn, did this, waved our arms over here, went through the liturgy, now it's my turn. I stand up, do my piece, sit down and then the next thing goes. Some people would see the sermon as nothing more than a piece of the liturgy.

Some people see themselves in the pulpit as a pitch man or a con man in some ways, I guess. That the whole idea of the pulpit is to get everybody to buy into your program. Whatever you're selling, whatever it is, you use it to expose them to your cause whether you want to get them to march on city hall or whatever it is.

There are some who see themselves in the pulpit as what I call the drill sergeant. You're up there to bash everybody.

There are some who see themselves in the pulpit as the lecturer. They see themselves as an information dump. It's sort of an academic trash truck. They just turn around backwards and dump a whole lot of - data.

How are you to view yourself? I think you're to view yourself as a persuader. You know, you never preach without preaching for decisions, verdicts, every message I preach should be so clear and so penetrating and so direct that people are gonna say, "I understand what he said and I'm gonna do that." Or, "I understand what he said and I'm not gonna do that." But they don't walk out of here saying, "I don't understand what he said." Or, "I understand what he said, but I don't know what to do about it." You gotta understand what I say and you've got to understand that you have some choices. You can do it or not do it. And your problem isn't with me because I used the Word of God. Your problem is with God. You force them, you pin their ears back. You force them to a decision.

I'm telling you tonight, you're gonna walk out of here and you're gonna understand there are some elements that make a proper ministry. And you're gonna go out of here and you're either gonna say to yourself, "I understand that and I'm not about to change." Or you're gonna say, "I understand that and there's some areas of my life I need to change." Or you're gonna say, "I examined my heart and I think I'm on target, but God help me to refine these things." Or you're gonna go out of here and say, "I've heard him and he's better on other occasions than he was tonight." And just be plain old analytical. God have mercy on your sin-sick shriveled up soul if you do that.

You're to be preaching and you preach for a verdict. And then you admonish, which means you warn people. And then you teach that positive doctrine, so you're proclaiming. And in your proclaiming, there is an element of warning. And there is an element of teaching. There is never courigma without didicae. There is never proclamation without content. Can't be like the guy who jumped on his horse and rode off madly in all directions. People didn't come to see you fight a swarm of bumblebees in the pulpit. They came to hear some truth. Right?

Number seven, the sum of the ministry. What are we after? What's the sum of it? Verse 28, "That we may present every man perfect or complete in Christ." Boy what a task. That we may present every man perfect or complete in Christ. You saw your guy say, "Well, you know, I really feel that I'm going to be looking for a new church because my ministry is done." You just go, "Done? You mean you're done. Your ministry is not done." Oh, if I - could we take out a list and say, well, you know, I've only got so many folks and, you know, they're, 84 percent of them are perfect in Christ. Oh. Your ministry isn't done. You may be done and God may be moving you. The ministry isn't going to be done.

You know, we're for the perfecting of the saints and I'll tell you right now, that's a hard job for me to do 'cause I'm not perfect and so it's a little hard to lift them above me. But the goal of my ministry is to work toward that. The goal of my ministry's not to get a crowd. That's easy. Easy to get a crowd. Simple, just give away money. Easy. You want to have a crowd at your church, just tell everybody comes is gonna get a twenty dollar bill. Yeah. They'll come. Put on the elephants in the parking lot deal or whatever you want to do. You can get a crowd. It's easy. Very difficult to make mature people. Very difficult. Takes your whole life, pouring it into them, but that's your goal.

You just say the problem with many churches is that the pastor's worried more about the empty seats than he is the occupied ones. And if you're not concentrating on the occupied ones, the empty ones are gonna stay empty. Because sheep have sheep, shepherds don't. And if your people involved in the reproduction process, you're gonna be very frustrated trying to accomplish spiritual goals.

The sum of the ministry is completeness in Christ. I'll tell you, that's a lifetime challenge. People look at me and they say, "You've been there 22 years. Don't you think it's time to leave?" And I say to

myself, "You know, I'm trying to do what the Lord has called me to do with the people he's called me to do it with and we're not there yet. We're not there yet."

But I'll tell you, I don't get too frustrated about it. I have to confess. I really don't. I'm happy. I go home, kiss my wife, have a great time, love my kids, relax, because I - they're all gonna be perfect someday anyway - all of them. All of you dear people in our church, you're gonna be perfect someday. I'm not gonna go crazy trying to get you there when you're gonna get there anyway. Why should I lose my sanity over that? I can only do so much and I know you're all eternally secure - you're all gonna get there. So I'm gonna do the best I can, but I'm not gonna wind up in the funny farm. I'm not gonna be under any illusion that I'm supposed to destroy myself and my family and everything around me in the process.

There's a point at which I had this wonderful confidence that all the imperfect people are someday going to be perfect in glory. Now we may not recognize all of them because the change will be so dramatic. But anyway - I gotta close.

The strength of the ministry - the strength of the ministry - the strength of the ministry - we've seen the source, the spirit, the suffering, the scope, the subject, the style, the sum of the ministry, you say "That's so grandiose, who can do it?" The strength of the ministry, verse 29, "For this purpose also I labor." He says I work hard, I agonize, but I do it according to what? His power, which mightily works within me. When Henry Martin said, "Now let me burn out for God," he wasn't kidding. I mean, it's hard work. I don't think any job in the world is as hard as this job. People have no idea how hard this job is. And it's an agonizing thing.

But we're back to that apparent paradox again aren't we? We're working our heads off and if anything good happens, God did it. Anything bad happens, it's my fault. That's a hard paradox to live with, but that's it. Somewhere along the line you yield to that, don't you? I'll do everything I can to be faithful to what God calls me to, but when it's all done, it's all him. I want to walk in the spirit, be filled with the spirit, I want all the things that happen to be a result of the power of God.

Charles Spurgin, wonderfully gifted by God is a powerful preacher, used to say to himself over and over again every time he slowly mounted the pulpit, "I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost." Just a reminder of his own frailty. Spurgin wrote, "The gospel is preached in the ears of all. It only comes with power to some. The power that is in the gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher, otherwise men would be converters of souls. Nor does it lie in the preacher's learning, otherwise it would consist in the wisdom of men. We might preach 'til our tongues rotted, 'til we should exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless there were mysterious power going with in the Holy Ghost changing the will of men. Oh sirs, we might as well preach to stone walls as preach to humanity unless the Holy Ghost be with the word to give it power to convert the soul." That's the strength of the ministry. If you want to be that kind of

minister, may God help us to be.

Lord Jesus, thank you for our time tonight. Just refreshing to think these things through. Be reminded again of the duty you've called us to. We love you. We thank you for laying out for us a perspective in this wonderful passage that can give us direction as we endeavor to serve you. With all our different gifts and all our different locations and people and needs, Lord, you're more concerned that we be the kind of men you want us to be than anything else. For if we're what you want us to be, doing your ministry in the way you want us to do it, then you can build your church to the glory of your name. To that end we pray that you might receive all the glory. Amen.

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