

**Paul's Ministry: Fulfilling the Word of God**

Scripture: Colossians 1:24-25

Code: 2137

**INTRODUCTION**

**A. The Circumstances of the Colossian Letter**

The little book of Colossians (only four chapters) was written by the Apostle Paul to a group of believers in a city called Colosse. Colosse was not a city of tremendous importance, but it had some significance as one in a triad of cities (Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse) in the Lycus Valley--a little valley where the Lycus River branches off from the Maeander River. The Apostle Paul wrote to this little church (which had been founded and initially pastored by a man named Epaphras) because they were undergoing some problems--they were being confronted by men teaching false doctrine about the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to straighten them out.

**B. The Consideration of Paul's Ministry**

Notice that Colossians 1:23 ends with the word "minister." Well, this term triggers Paul's thoughts for the next section, because in verses 24-29 he describes his ministry. He says, "I am made a minister," and then launches into a description of what that ministry involved--proclaiming the Lord Jesus Christ.

Frequently in Paul's letters, he stops to discuss the style, type, and approach of his ministry. He does this for many reasons. For example, he does this...

**1. To Establish His Authority**

Paul often defended his right to speak for God. Every time he said, "I am an Apostle," he was saying, "I am a sent one from God." At the end of Colossians 1:23 he says, "...I, Paul, am made a minister." In other words, he didn't choose to become a minister, God made him a minister. That fact gave him credibility and punch in speaking to the Colossians. When Paul referred back to his ministry, then, he was defending his right to speak for God--to establish his authority. He also did it...

**2. To Express His Wonder**

Paul was always in awe that God called him into the ministry. He continually reiterates the truth of his ministry because it was such a thrill to him. So, it was more than just a defense of his rights as an Apostle, it was also something that was exciting to him.

Paul wanted the people to hear him as the spokesman for God--not as a self-styled, self-appointed, noncredentialed teacher like so many that existed in the world. So, he repeatedly accredited his ministry.

Colossians 1:24-29 is simply a detailed look at Paul's ministry. In these verses, Paul presents eight different aspects of the ministry of a servant of God--eight different aspects that should characterize the life of anybody who serves the Lord Jesus Christ, whether it's teaching, preaching, or ministering

in any capacity within the framework of Christianity.

Now to begin with, let's look at point one:

## **I. THE SOURCE OF THE MINISTRY (vv. 23b, 25a)**

As Paul looks at his ministry, the first thing he wants to talk about is its source. This is seen both in verse 23 where Paul says, "...of which I, Paul, am made a minister," and in verse 25 where he again says, "Of which I am made a minister...." The word "minister" is not a highfalutin, elevated term. It's the Greek word diakinos, which means "servant." Now, how was Paul made a minister or servant?

### **A. The Calling of God**

#### 1. Acts 26:13-17

In relating his personal testimony to King Agrippa, Paul says, "At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them who journeyed with me. And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me? It is hard for thee to kick against the goads." In order to keep an ox from kicking while he was being steered in the right direction, pointed goads (or thorns) were put right up against the heels of the ox. So if the ox kicked, the goads caused great pain. Eventually, the ox learned not to kick. The Lord, then, was saying to Paul, "It's hard for you to fight against Me, to resist Me, to kick against Me."

Continuing on in verse 15, Paul says, "And I said, Who art Thou, Lord? And He said, I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet; for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in which I will appear unto thee; delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee." Now, that's a strong statement, isn't it? The Lord says, "Paul, I have chosen you to go to the Gentiles. You are now hereby made a minister."

The Lord makes ministers. His ministers are those who are called. He did it throughout the Old Testament. Read the stories of the prophets. There weren't any self-styled, self-appointed prophets. They were all called of God.

#### 2. Romans 15:15-16a

Throughout Paul's writings, he makes it clear that he was put into the ministry by God. In Romans 15 he says, "Nevertheless, brethren, I have written the more boldly unto you in some sort, as putting you in mind, because of the grace that is given to me of God, that I should be the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles...." In other words, "The reason I'm so bold in writing to you Gentiles is that the Lord has made me a servant to you. I'm only carrying out my ministry and doing that which God has called

me to do."

### 3. 2 Corinthians 3:4-6a

Again we read, "And such trust have we through Christ toward God; not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God, who also hath made us able ministers...." Paul says, "My confidence and my trust come because my sufficiency comes from God. God has called me into this ministry, so He has equipped me for this." You don't choose your own ministry--God chooses it. Then you either obey or disobey Him.

### 4. 1 Timothy 1:12

In 1 Timothy 1:12 Paul says, "And I thank Christ Jesus, our Lord, who hath enabled me, in that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry." Paul says, "I'm here because He put me here!"

### 5. 1 Timothy 2:5-7

In 1 Timothy 2 Paul says, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time. For this I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle...a teacher of the Gentiles...." His ministry was ordained of God--not something whimsically chosen.

### 6. 2 Timothy 1:11

In 2 Timothy 1:11 Paul says, "Unto which I am appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles."

Who, then, made Paul a minister? God. Who, then, is the source of ministry? God. Who gave you the gifts you have received to operate within the body of Christ? Well, according to 1 Corinthians 12:11, the Holy Spirit gives "to every man severally as He will." The Spirit of God manifests Himself in the gifts of the Spirit so that we might minister. It is God who calls us and puts us in the ministry; it isn't something we choose.

## **B. The Commitment to God**

## 1. Paul's Stewardship

In Colossians 1:25 Paul says, "Of which I am made a minister, according to the dispensation [or `the stewardship'] of God which is given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God." The word "dispensation" in the Greek is *oikonomia* (*nomos*=law or rule; *oikos*=house). Literally, then, it means "to rule a house," or "to be a steward of somebody else's possessions." A steward didn't own anything, he just managed something for somebody else. In those days, a homeowner with a large estate would have a steward who would manage his whole house. He would take care of everything--employment, wages, supplies--and make sure everything was carried out. It was a very great responsibility.

Well, God owns the church; it's His house...His temple. So, when Paul says, "Of which I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me...", he is saying, "God appointed me to rule in His church on His behalf." The wording in this verse also suggests that God gave him a great estate to manage. It was a God-given responsibility--a divine office. Paul says, "It's God's plan, God's church, God's gospel, God's Christ, God's message, God's truth, and God's Word. And God wants me to manage it for Him. I'm in the ministry because God has put me here. I'm a steward."

a. 1 Corinthians 4:2--"Moreover, it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful." So Paul says, "God has given me a task--a divine responsibility. I'm obligated to fulfill it. God is the source of my ministry."

b. 1 Corinthians 9:16-17--"For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of; for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!" Paul says, "Look, don't come up to me and say, `Oh Paul, you're a minister. What a self-sacrificing, wonderful human you are.'" If someone had said that, Paul would have simply said, "I was going down the Damascus Road minding my own business when I got thrown into this deal. So, don't pat me on the back. I didn't ask for it. In fact, if I don't fulfill what I've been called to do, I'm in a lot of trouble. So don't pat me on the back about it. I had nothing to do with it."

Then in verse 17 he says, "For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me." In other words, Paul says, "If I had entered the ministry willingly, I could be commended. But I did it against my will. It is strictly a responsibility that was committed to me, that's all. I didn't ask for it, but I'm in a lot of trouble if I don't fulfill it. So don't pat me on the back-- pray for me!"

c. Galatians 2:7--Paul says, "But, on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel [to] the uncircumcision was committed unto me...." The gospel to the Gentiles was committed to Paul. He didn't have any choice.

d. Ephesians 3:1-3, 7--"For this cause I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles--if ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me toward you, how that by revelation He made known unto me the mystery...of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me...." In other words, Paul says, "God has called me and made me a prisoner of Christ. I'm chained to Christ; I can't get away. I have this tremendous responsibility to dispense the mysteries that God has given me--the truths of God's Word." So, Paul was made a minister.

## 2. Christian Stewardship

God has given each one of us a tremendous responsibility. No matter who you are as a Christian, the Spirit of God has given you certain gifts and called you to minister those gifts to the body of Christ. It's a serious responsibility. When you possess a gift of the Spirit, you possess something that belongs to God. And as a steward, you are to minister that gift and dispense it to those in need of it.

a. 1 Peter 4:10-11--Peter writes, "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." Every Christian has received a spiritual gift, so every Christian should be ministering. As a steward, you hold that gift; but it isn't your own. You are to use it and manage it for God's glory. According to verse 11, if you have a speaking gift, you're to "speak as the oracles of God.". If you have a serving gift, you're to serve "as of the ability which God giveth." Why? "...that God in all things may be glorified...." The source of all ministry is God. We don't choose it. So you had better examine your own heart to see what God has called you to do. Search your own heart to see just what your spiritual gifts are.

b. 1 Corinthians 12:4-6--"Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God who worketh all in all." Everybody has been given a different gift by God, but we've all been given a stewardship. He is the source of our calling and our gift, so we'd better use it and be good stewards of it.

Someday when you face Jesus Christ, the record of your stewardship is going to be based upon what you did with the gifts you were given. Are you going to be like the servant who buried what was given to him, or are you going to be like the servant who used good principles of stewardship and multiplied what was given to him? So, whatever the ministry, God calls us, equips us, and assigns us. Maybe it won't be as dramatic as Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, but it will be just as true.

So, the source of the ministry is God. Paul says in verse 23, "...I, Paul, am made a minister," and then in verse 25, "...I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God...." Second, Paul not only talks about the source of the ministry, he talks about...

## **II. THE SPIRIT OF THE MINISTRY (v. 24a)**

As we serve the Lord Jesus Christ with the recognition that God has called us, what kind of attitude should we have? What spirit should we have? Paul answers this in the first three words of verse 24: "Who now rejoice...." What's the spirit of the ministry? Joy. The spirit of the ministry is joy. Whatever ministry you have been given is to be enjoyed.

### **A. The Attitude of Joy**

#### **1. Its Cessation**

It's a sad reality that many ministering Christians don't have the right attitude. There just aren't enough joyous, happy Christians. It's like the little girl who saw a mule and said, "With a long face like that, it must be a wonderful Christian." There are a lot of people who have been given a tremendous responsibility by God, but grudgingly carry it out. In fact, many pastors have lost the joy of the ministry. They don't have the right attitude. They become like Jonah, who, even when his ministry was going good, was hesitant, angry, reluctant, bitter, and resentful. You say, "Well, I've got it tough in my ministry. It's hard to have joy." Oh, really? If you ever think you've got it tough in your ministry and you can't find joy, just read these words: "...and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame..." (Heb. 12:1b-2a). Why did He endure the cross? "...for the joy that was set before Him...." Jesus never lost the joy, why should you? Further, in verse 4 it says, "Ye have not yet resisted unto blood...." In other words, "You haven't died in your service, have you?" Oftentimes, I'll talk to somebody, even another pastor, who'll say, "Oh, I've lost the joy of the ministry." Well, do you know what that means? That doesn't mean they have bad circumstances, it means they have bad connections. You see, a Christian doesn't lose his joy unless he loses touch with the Lord. There's to be joy in the ministry!

#### **2. Its Constancy**

Oh, it's easy to get discouraged with circumstances. It happened to Paul. Referring to Israel, Paul said, "...I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart" (Rom. 9:2). But he never lost the internal joy. The element of personal joy was the spirit of his ministry. He was rejoicing everywhere he went. For example:

a. Philippians 4:4--Do you realize that when Paul wrote Philippians, he was rejoicing...even though he was in jail? Not an ordinary jail, but a hole in the ground called the Mamertine prison. In this particular prison, once a maximum of forty prisoners had been accumulated, the sewers were opened to drown all the prisoners. The water was then drained out (along with the drowned prisoners) and the process would be repeated. Well, Paul was in this place when he wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice." Someone might say, "This guy was out of his mind! What was he so happy about?" One thing is for sure, it had nothing to do with his circumstances, did it? He had a relationship with the living God that was perpendicular-- transcending all circumstances.

## **Have you lost your joy?**

Joy is the deep-down confidence that God is in control of your life. That doesn't change. Whenever I encounter a Christian who has lost his joy, I don't want to talk about his circumstances, I want to talk about his relationship with the Lord. Why? Because joy is generated from a recognition of what Christ has done in a person's life. And I'll tell you something else: Humility also generates joy. For example, Paul always thought of himself as so unworthy, that the thought of dying for Jesus Christ gave him great joy. Why? Because he didn't even think he was worthy of that. You lose the joy when you start to think that you're too good to be suffering what you're suffering. But that's the wrong perspective. An attitude of humility generates joy.

b. Colossians 2:5--Paul was imprisoned in Rome chained to a Roman soldier when he wrote, "For though I am absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ." Paul was absolutely undaunted by his circumstances because his joy was always based on his perpendicular relationship with Christ.

c. 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20--Paul writes to the Thessalonians and says, "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For ye are our glory and joy." Paul rejoiced about God and about everybody else. What happened to him didn't matter. What he's saying here is this: "I don't care what I go through. When I see that you know the Lord Jesus Christ and that you're going to be there at the Second Coming, I'm so happy, I couldn't care less about me."

d. Philemon 7--When Paul wrote this little letter of Philemon, he was a prisoner. In fact, he always talked about joy when he was in jail. In verse 7 he writes, "For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the hearts of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother." In other words, "When I hear about you, Philemon, I'm so happy about you." Paul always had joy in his relationship to the Lord and in his relationships with people. It didn't matter what happened to him because he was totally, absolutely unselfish.

When you see somebody without joy in the ministry, it's because they're selfish and they think they deserve better than what they have. In actuality, though, they don't deserve what they have, do they? Paul was able to keep his joy because anything that came to him--even suffering--was something more than he felt worthy to receive. Let me also say that once the joy is gone, you're in a lot of trouble, because everything you try to do is going to be done out of legalism and will have little effect.

## **B. The Thieves of Joy**

What are some of the thieves that rob us of joy?

1. Circumstances
2. People
3. Possessions
4. Worry

## **C. The Guardians of Joy**

What are some of the things that protect our joy?

1. Humility
2. Devotion to Christ
3. Trust in God

We've seen the source of the ministry and the spirit of the ministry. Let's look, now, at...

## **III. THE SUFFERING OF THE MINISTRY (v. 24b)**

In Colossians 1:24 Paul says, "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body's sake, which is the church."

### **A. The Misunderstanding of Suffering**

This verse has been severely misunderstood. There are some people who say that Christ's death on the cross didn't finalize all His suffering. Therefore, we have to continue to suffer and suffer in order to expiate sin. That can't be what Paul is saying! That would be a fatal blow to what he said earlier in the chapter. He said that Christ, "...through the blood of His cross....in the body of His flesh through death, [has presented] you holy and unblamable and unreprouvable in His sight" (Col. 1:20b, 22). Paul is not going to unsay everything that he has just said. He is dealing with a heresy in Colosse that taught that Christ's life and death had to be supplemented by asceticism and human works. So, he's certainly not going to say that we have to suffer to add to the atoning work of Christ. In fact, the word translated "afflictions" here (Gk. thlipsis) is never used to describe the atoning suffering of Christ. You say, "Well, what is he saying?" Let's look at it.

### **B. The Matter of Suffering**

In verse 24 when Paul says, "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you," he was referring directly to his imprisonment. From references that Paul makes in chapter 4 of this Epistle about his situation (vv. 10, 18), we can ascertain, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Paul was a prisoner at this time.

#### **1. The Perspective of Paul's Imprisonment**

Even though Paul was imprisoned at Rome, he never saw himself as a prisoner of Rome. He constantly referred to being a prisoner of Jesus Christ. For example, in Philemon he says, "Paul, a



prisoner of Jesus Christ..." (v. 1a), "...Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ" (v. 9b), "There greet thee Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus" (v. 23). So Paul saw himself not as a prisoner of the Romans or of any man. He saw himself as a prisoner of Christ.

## 2. The Purpose of Paul's Imprisonment

At the beginning of Colossians 1:24 Paul says, "...[I] now rejoice in my sufferings for you...." You say, "Why did he rejoice?" At the end of verse 24, Paul says that he rejoiced in his sufferings because it was "for His body's sake, which is the church." So, Paul saw his imprisonment as suffering for their sake and for Christ's sake.

In Philippians 1:29 Paul says, "For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him but also to suffer for His sake." In other words, Paul tells the Philippians, "It's not only my responsibility to suffer for Christ's sake, it's yours, too. All of us are to suffer for His sake--to suffer because of Him." The early church suffered because of Christ, didn't they? They really suffered. And Paul's perspective of this suffering was to rejoice.

You say, "How can a guy be thrilled about suffering?" Well, let me give you five causes for joy in suffering:

## C. The Merits of Suffering

### 1. It Brings Us Nearer to Christ

Paul wanted to get as close to Christ as he could. In Philippians 3:10 he said, "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings...." You see, when the world casts its slurs at us and mocks our Christ, that suffering, in a sense, helps us to understand what Jesus went through, doesn't it? In John 15 Jesus talks about the fact that since the world hated Him, it would hate us, too (Jn. 15:18). And He said that since the world persecuted Him, it would also persecute us (Jn. 15:20). Second Timothy 3:12 says, "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." So, suffering helps us to understand more about Him. Hebrews 13:13 says, "Let us go forth, therefore, unto Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach." There's joy in suffering because it brings us nearer to Christ.

A second reason we can rejoice in suffering is...

### 2. It Brings Us Assurance of Salvation

Suffering brings us the assurance of salvation. In 1 Peter 4:14 it says, "If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the Spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you...." In other words, when you suffer you have this tremendous confidence of the presence of the Spirit of God. That's a very assuring thing, isn't it?

So, suffering brings joy to the Apostle Paul, and to any Christian, because it identifies him with Christ, and because it brings him a sense of the presence of the Spirit of God-- assuring him that he belongs

to God. Third, suffering brings joy because...

### 3. It Brings Us Future Reward

When we're willing to boldly step out for Christ and speak the truth, regardless of the consequences, we are promised a reward. Romans 8:17-18 says, "...if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." There is a sense in which the suffering now will be rewarded in the day that we look forward to in the future. In fact, in 2 Corinthians 4:17 Paul says, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

So, suffering can bring joy because it identifies us with Christ, because it brings assurance of salvation, and because it brings a future reward. Fourth...

### 4. It Results in the Salvation of Others

In Philippians 2:17 Paul says, "Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all." In other words, "If I offer my life and you get saved, that's cause for joy. There's a price to pay, but that's all right. The results are worth it."

So, we can rejoice in suffering because it brings us nearer to Christ, it brings assurance of salvation, it brings a future reward, and it results in the salvation of others. A fifth thing is that...

### 5. It Frustrates Satan

When we rejoice in suffering, it leads to terrible frustration on the part of Satan. When he tries to discourage us and it produces good results, it puts a dent in the kingdom of darkness. In Acts 9:16 the Lord said, referring to Paul, "For I will show him how great things he must suffer for My name's sake." The way we respond to suffering reflects the glory of Christ.

Now, having given those five reasons why we are to rejoice in suffering, Colossians 1:24 adds another reason--bringing us back to our text.

## **D. The Motive of Suffering**

Not only does our rejoicing in suffering bring us nearer to Christ, give us assurance of salvation, bring us a future reward, result in the salvation of others, and frustrate Satan, verse 24 adds another reason for suffering: to "fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my [Paul's] flesh...." In other words, Paul is saying, "I am receiving in my body what is intended for Christ."

### 1. Suffering for Christ

This verse does not mean that there is anything lacking in the atonement. It does not mean that the value of the death of Christ is shortchanged in some way. What it does mean is this: The enemies of Christ were never satisfied with what they did to Jesus. They hated Jesus with an insatiable hate. They wanted to add to His suffering. So, as soon as Jesus ascended back into heaven and wasn't around any more, who did the world attack? The church! They began to persecute the church--whipping them, burning them at the stake, throwing them to the lions. Why? Was it because they hated them individually? No, it was because the church stood in the place of Christ. And since Christ wasn't around to hate, they hated the people who stood in His place. That's what it means to "fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ." Paul is saying, "Look, the world isn't done persecuting Christ. But since He's not here, whatever is lacking in what they want to do to Him, I am receiving into my body. And standing in the place of Him who stood in my place is a cause for joy. To take the blows meant for Him who took the blows meant for me makes me happy. If Jesus Christ could hang on the cross and take my sin and the punishment that I deserve, I think I can take a few punches for His sake." That's what Paul is saying.

In Galatians 6:17 Paul says, "...for I bear in my body the marks [or `scars'] of the Lord Jesus." In other words, "The blows that I've received have been taken because the world can't hit Him."

### 2. Suffering for the Church

According to verse 24, Paul endured his suffering for the sake of the church--to win people to Christ and then to mature them in Christ. And he certainly paid a price. For example:

a. 2 Corinthians 11:23-28--Paul says, "...in stripes [or `whippings'] above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes, save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches." He did all that for the sake of the church. In fact, the whole time he ministered he worked to earn his own living--supporting himself and those who traveled with him (Ac. 20:34).

b. Acts 20:22-24--Paul says, "And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there, except that the Holy Spirit witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God."

c. 2 Timothy 2:10--Paul was willing to suffer anything for the sake of the church. He was willing to build the church at any price...even the price of his own life. And one day, an axe came down and severed his head from his body. In 2 Timothy 2:10 he said, "Therefore, I endure all things for the elect's sake, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." In other words, he says, "I'll do anything to get people saved and to make them grow. I'll go anywhere that I have to go or say anything that has to be said." In confronting the lost and in building the body, he suffered.

d. Acts 20:28--Paul said to the Ephesian elders, "Take heed, therefore, unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood." Paul always felt that if the Lord would shed His own blood for the church, he could certainly shed a little of his blood for the church, too.

So Paul says, "I'm not just a servant of the Lord, I'm a servant of the church. And I'll suffer for them, too." In Acts 20:31 we find that he wept over his ministry. It says, "...I ceased not to warn everyone night and day with tears." He suffered internally as well as externally--not just persecution but internal anxiety over the church.

Who is the source of the ministry? God. What is the spirit of the ministry? Joy. What is the suffering of the ministry? The willingness to go out and accept the blows from the world that are meant for Christ, rejoicing that you're even counted worthy to do it. Now, let's look at the fourth aspect of the ministry:

#### **IV. THE SCOPE OF THE MINISTRY (v. 25b)**

At the end of verse 25, Paul presents the scope of the ministry: "...to fulfill the word of God." Paul is simply saying, "I just want to do what He called me to do. And I will rejoice in any suffering that comes my way because it's necessary in fulfilling the scope of the ministry." Paul wanted to fulfill his ministry. In Acts 20 Paul said, "...bonds and afflictions await me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus..." (vv. 23b-24a). Paul's objective was to finish his ministry with joy. And do you know what? He did! In fact, that man's ministry still touches the world through the letters that he wrote.

#### **A. The Meaning of Fulfilling the Word**

What is the meaning of the phrase, "...to fulfill the word of God"? Well, primarily, I think it refers to the word of God given directly to Paul that called him into the ministry. Secondly, I think it refers to teaching all the Word of God to all of the people that God called Paul to. Now, did God call Paul to teach the whole world? Not necessarily. But He did call him to teach the whole Word to all the people that God sent to him.

When Paul was just about to die, look at what he had to say about his life and ministry: "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:6-7). Wouldn't you like to say that? Wouldn't you like to come to the end of your life and say, "God, I'm done. I can leave now, anytime You're ready"? You say, "How did he do it? How did Paul fulfill it? How could a man ever finish the work God gave him to do? How is it possible?"

## **B. The Method of Fulfilling the Word**

Paul was able to finish the work that God gave him to do because he made it his goal. He said, "I just want to do one thing: to fulfill the Word of God. I just want to do what He called me to do. My only desire is to fulfill my ministry and to teach the entire Word of God to the people He's called me to reach."

Now, some ministers (and many other Christians as well) get so carried away at this point, that they think they personally have to win the whole world to Christ. They wind up traveling all over the place, but their ministries are shallow--so shallow, in fact, that they are ineffective.

### **1. Paul's Economy of Effort**

Consider Paul's ministry. Did you know that the Apostle Paul affected the world--and is still affecting the world--but he only took three missionary trips? And in all three of those missionary trips he basically went to the same places in a little tiny area around the Mediterranean. He also got to Rome as a prisoner at the expense of the Roman government. That's as far as he ever got. Yet, Paul affected the entire world. How did he do that? He did it by putting certain limits on his ministry. For example, in Romans 15 he says, "For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ hath not wrought by me..." (v. 18a). In other words, he limited himself to only talk about what God did in his life--not just theory. And further, in verse 20 he says, "Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named...." Another limit that he had was to preach the gospel only in places that had not yet been reached.

### **2. Jesus' Economy of Effort**

Consider Jesus' ministry. Do you realize that Jesus never left the region of Israel? He basically traveled back and forth from Galilee to Jerusalem. That's it. Now, do you think He had a sense of winning the world? You better believe He did...but He never left where He was. You say, "How could He reach the world if He never left where He was?" Because He knew how to do it. David McKenna said, "Self-styled Messiahs are megalomaniacs. Their sense of mission has no limitations short of conquering the world and conquering it now. At the slightest signal that their efforts are being frustrated, they usually respond with rage and madness." You see, Jesus used an economy of effort. He knew how to do what He wanted to do, but He did it within certain limitations. Jesus limited His

ministry. Why? Because the issue isn't how broad one's ministry is, it's how deep it is. God says, "You take care of the depth, and I'll take care of the breadth." Let's look at the limits that Jesus put on His ministry:

#### a. The Limitation of God's Will

The first limitation that Jesus put on His ministry was that He would only do what the Father showed Him to do. So, the number one limit on any ministry is God's will. Unfortunately, there are many people involved in all kinds of ministries that God doesn't have a thing to do with. Instead of spending their time doing what God wants them to do and what God gifted them to do, they're running around doing what they want to do. Usually it's nothing more than megalomania--an ego problem that gets out of hand. In John 5:30 Jesus said, "I can of Mine own self do nothing....I seek not Mine own will, but the will of the Father who hath sent Me."

So, the first limitation He put on His ministry was the limitation of God's will. The second limitation was...

#### b. The Limitation of Time

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "Mine hour is not yet come" (e.g., 2:4; 7:30; 8:20). He had a sense of timing. Certain things were to be done at certain times--the Father's time. So, unless something was the Father's will and the Father's time, Jesus didn't do it. That put certain limitations on His ministry, didn't it? I'll tell you one thing, though, when it was the right time, and Jesus was able to say, "...Father, the hour is come..." (Jn. 17:1), it was exciting, wasn't it?

The third limitation that Jesus put on His ministry was...

#### c. The Limitation of a Certain Group of People

The objective of Jesus' ministry when He first came into the world was to reach "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:6). You say, "Why would He limit Himself like that?" Because He wanted to tighten the circle of His ministry. And not only was His ministry to the Jews, it was to a certain kind of Jew. In Matthew 9:13 Jesus says, "...for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." He didn't come to minister to hypocritical, religious ones; He wanted Jews who recognized their sin. So, the scope of His ministry was narrowed even further.

Another thing that limited Jesus' ministry was...

#### d. The Limitation of a Certain Subject

Throughout Jesus' ministry, people tried to pressure Him into making political statements. When people asked Him what He thought about Caesar, what did He say? Well, very judiciously He avoided any political involvement and said, "...Render, therefore, unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God, the things that are God's" (Mt. 22:21). You see, He refused to be forced into political involvement because that was not His purpose. I know He had strong feelings about it, but He avoided it because He had limits on His ministry.

Jesus also limited His ministry through...

#### e. The Limitation of a Small Number of Disciples

Jesus limited the number of people that He discipled. In Mark 5, after He healed a maniac, the man "implored Him that he might be with Him" (v. 18b). Look at Jesus' response: "...Jesus permitted him

not, but saith unto him, Go home to thy friends, and tell them what great things the Lord hath done for thee..." (v. 19a). You say, "Why didn't He take him?" Well, a megalomaniac would have.

Megalomaniacs drag around lots of disciples to prove themselves. But Jesus knew exactly how many He could disciple effectively, and that's all He wanted.

The limitations on Jesus' ministry were astounding, yet He affected the world. Men who affect the world put limits on their ministry that allow them to do it with depth. Paul went back to the same people three times, and Jesus worked with the same twelve people three years. But ultimately, it affected the world. Learn this, people: The scope that you're going to have in your ministry must not be related to how fast or far you travel, it must be related to how deep you plow. You concentrate on the depth, and God will take care of the breadth.

Here in Colossians 1:24-25, we've seen four aspects of Paul's ministry. The source is God; the spirit is joy; the suffering is on behalf of Christ for the sake of the church; and the scope is the whole Word to the specific world that God has called you to, and then by His Spirit, to extend it to the world beyond. Now, those are only four of the features of the ministry. We're going to look at four more in our next lesson. However, if God's people were committed only to those four, quite a revolution would take place in the church, wouldn't it?

### **Focusing on the Facts**

1. Why did the Apostle Paul write the Epistle to the Colossians?
2. In his Epistles, why does Paul often stop to discuss his ministry?
3. What does the word minister literally mean?
4. How did Paul wind up in the ministry? To what extent was Paul's choice involved in the decision to become a minister of Jesus Christ?

5. Explain the following statement: God is the source of all ministry.
6. How does God specifically equip a person for a specific ministry?
7. What is the literal meaning of the word "dispensation" in Colossians 1:25?
8. What is a steward? How is a minister like a steward?
9. According to 1 Corinthians 4:2, what is required of a steward? Why is this important?
10. In what sense could it be said that Paul entered into the ministry against his will?
11. What is every Christian responsible to be a steward of?
12. According to Colossians 1:24a, what was the spirit of Paul's ministry?
13. What reason do people often give for the loss of joy in their ministry? What is probably a more accurate evaluation of what causes this lack of joy?
14. If Paul had continual joy in his ministry, how could he also have continual sorrow (cf. Rom. 9:2 and Phil. 4:4)?
15. Why shouldn't the joy in our ministry be proportional to our changing circumstances?
16. Why does an attitude of humility generate joy?
17. What evidence do we have indicating that Paul's joy was not related to his circumstances?
18. What are some of the thieves that rob us of our joy? What are some of the guardians that protect our joy?
19. What is the common misunderstanding of the meaning of Colossians 1:24? How does the context of this verse help to clarify this misunderstanding?
20. What sufferings is Paul specifically referring to in Colossians 1:24?
21. When Paul was a prisoner in Rome, why didn't he see himself as a prisoner of the Romans?
22. What are the five reasons why we can rejoice in suffering? Discuss each one.
23. What does it mean to "fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ" (Col. 1:24b)?
24. How did Paul suffer for the church? Why did he endure this suffering?
25. What are the two dimensions of Paul's desire to "fulfill the word of God" (Col. 1:25b)?
26. How do we know that Paul was able to accomplish the ministry that God gave him to do? What was the secret to Paul's success?
27. Why did Jesus put certain limitations on His ministry? What were these limitations?
28. We're to concentrate on the \_\_\_\_\_ of our ministry, and God will take care of its \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Pondering the Principles**

1. How would you know if God were calling you to be involved in a particular ministry? How would you rank the following criteria--from most important to least important: desire, apparent need, spiritual giftedness, others' counsel? Read Psalm 37:3-5; Proverbs 3:5-6; 15:22; Acts 16:6-10; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; 2 Corinthians 3:4-6a; and 1 Timothy 1:12. Would God call someone to minister in a specific way without giving that person the necessary spiritual gift? What are possible reasons why some people are successful in their ministry while others are not?
2. According to 1 Corinthians 12:7 and 12, every Christian is gifted by the Holy Spirit to minister to the body of Christ. It is the responsibility, then, of every Christian to be involved in ministering that



spiritual gift--being a good steward of that which is given by God. Are you being a good steward of the ministry that has been entrusted to you by God? Memorize 1 Corinthians 4:2 and 1 Peter 4:10.

3. Have you ever suffered or been persecuted for being a Christian? If not, why not (see 2 Tim. 3:12)? If you have, what was your attitude (see 1 Pet. 4:12-16, 19)? Review the five reasons why you can rejoice in suffering. The next time you are persecuted for your faith, take time to consider what Christ suffered for you.

4. Look over the limitations that both Paul and the Lord Jesus put on their ministries. Have you put any limitations on your ministry? If not, what benefits could be realized by doing so? Should you be more concerned with the depth or the breadth of your ministry? Why? What are some specific ways that you can increase the depth of your particular ministry?



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