

Sunday, September 26, 2021

The Disciple's Mission

(Message 3; Series: *Extreme Discipleship: Living into our Mission*)
(Colossians 1:24-29)

Message:

I used to love watching the television series, *Mission Impossible*, long before it spawned the Tom Cruise movie franchise (I admit, this kind of dates me, but it did run for a total of ten seasons):

"Your mission, Jim [Phelps, played by Peter Graves], should you choose to accept it . . . As always, should you or any of your I.M. Force be caught or killed, the Secretary will disavow any knowledge of your actions. This tape will self-destruct in five seconds. Good luck, Jim."

There was always something exciting about Lalo Schifrin's frenetic soundtrack as well as the tried and tested plot formula. It was popular for years and seldom failed to keep me glued to the screen. Today, the music is indelibly linked to the Mission Impossible television and movie franchise.

Jim, of course, always accepted the mission (It would have been a short episode if he declined). But it was always exciting to see how he and the team would survive another challenge to save the world against all odds. The higher the odds, the better the program.

The Apostle Paul has a God-given impossible Mission. Paul's impossible mission has similarities and differences to "Mission Impossible." Both missions are about saving the world. But Paul's mission was actually much harder – even, truly impossible from a human standpoint. And Paul's real mission has eternal implications.

Here was this Jewish rabbi who had been taught by the best following the mission of an old-covenant believer until he is suddenly, and dramatically confronted by the risen Christ. His life was turned upside down; or should I say, right-side-up.

His mission also changed; he was given an impossible assignment: change the world for Jesus Christ: "Paul, *I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting... Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I am sending you to them [i.e., to the world] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light. (Acts 26:15f.)* No big deal, right?"

Listen to what Paul says about his impossible mission: **(Read the Text)**

²⁴Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. ²⁵I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— ²⁶the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. ²⁷To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ²⁹To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

Here in Colossians 1:24-29, Paul tells us about **accepting** this mission: ***I have become its [i.e., the Church's] servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the Word of God [The Gospel] in its fullness.***

Paul defines his role as a disciple of Jesus Christ as being a “servant.” (Not a very flattering title for the leader of this world-saving mission). In these verses we’re considering today, Paul outlines this mission for believers not only in the Colossae Church but in Christ’s Church, not only then, but also now.

Imagine being given this mission for your life – the mission of changing the entire world and “rescuing” everyone from darkness and despair. Talk about an impossible mission!

And, oh, yah, if you’re a disciple of Jesus, that mission God gave to Paul, that impossible mission, he gave that same mission to you and me. **All** disciples of Jesus are called to “*get up, stand on our feet,*” and go into the world to proclaim the good news of a crucified **Savior** who is the resurrected **Lord**. Just before he ascended, Jesus said,

“Therefore, going and making disciples of all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20a).

We know this as the Great *Co-mission* because we share it with Paul, and believers everywhere until the end of time.

GOD’S COMMISSIONING (of Paul and all of Christ’s disciples)

Paul embraces his “co-mission”, acknowledging it in most of his writings:

Colossians 1:1 – *“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...”*

Ephesians 1:1 – *“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...”*

1 Corinthians 1:1 – *“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...”*

Galatians 1:1 – *“Paul, an apostle, sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father who raised him from the dead...”*

Romans 1:1 – *“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle and set apart for the Gospel of God...”*

Reading those verses makes it clear, that as a disciple of Jesus, Paul has been set apart for the **Church and the **Gospel**.**

(First) Note: Paul is very **conscious** of his calling and this immense responsibility... People talk about having a personal mission statement: Why am I here? What is my purpose? What brings satisfaction? Paul knows this mission must and will guide his entire life; everything in his life focuses on this. Scripture reminds us it guided Paul since his conversion.

(Second) Note Paul voluntarily **submits** to this call from God: *“I became a servant...”* (**1:23, 1:25**); he is not coerced or forced; instead, he rejoices at the opportunity and privilege to serve – to set aside his own needs and agenda - even knowing the road ahead will be challenging.

Paul understands he has no authority of his own. Nor does he have a message of his own. His responsibility is simply to be faithful to God, to the mission, and to the message (The Gospel).

(Third) Note Paul takes the mission and his responsibility **seriously**; he follows through in obedience. His faithfulness brought heartache, trials, and ultimately led to his death. But Paul never hesitated; never looked back, never regretted his decision.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, our response to Christ’s mission must be like Paul’s: we need to get up, stand on our feet, and go into His world...

OUR CALLING

Some will tell you that “good preaching” is preaching that makes people believe the words are coming straight from the pastor’s heart. I won’t argue that. But “good preachers” spend hours in their study preparing to make it look like the words they are sharing are fresh from their soul. During the week, good preachers engage the original text, read the commentaries, and spend time in prayer with the Father. On Sunday morning, people want to know their pastor has spent time with God throughout the week.

While many good things that happen may appear spontaneous (on the surface), most are actually the result of lots of **hard work** behind the scenes: a concert, an outreach event, a worship service.

Similarly, the body of Christ just doesn't grow; the Gospel isn't just proclaimed; the harvest just doesn't come in; revival doesn't just happen; disciples just don't appear. They are the result of the work of Christ and His Spirit; they are the result of disciples of Jesus hard work, focused on carrying out His mission – regardless of the cost.

(First) Paul notes the **pain of the Gospel. The call of discipleship is hard; carrying out the mission (always) has a cost.**

Colossians 1:23b-24 reads, “...I, Paul, have become a servant...I rejoice in what was suffered for you and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions...”

Note Paul's self-proclaimed identity: “*I am a servant of the gospel.*” Paul paid his bills as a tentmaker, but his identity was always as a servant of the gospel.

However you pay your bills, whatever your vocation, your identity—as a believer—is a servant of Christ, or the Gospel, of Christ's body the Church. That is who you are; that is what you do.

“*I fill up...what's still lacking in regard to Christ's affliction*” is a **striking** phrase. It raises our curiosity. Don't misunderstand, Christ's death on the cross is fully **sufficient** and efficient for our forgiveness and reconciliation. That is not the issue Paul is discussing here. He is not suggesting our sufferings contribute in any way to our salvation – to Christ's loving sacrifice to rescue us – in any way.

What Paul is saying, is that he, other **believers**, and the **church** are not yet perfected; work still needs to be done. And the process of perfection inevitably involves **suffering** and pain. Any purification process requires turning up the heat. Spiritual growth, the perfecting of our soul, happens by persevering through hard times.

Paul says he is more than willing to pay that price- for his own sanctification and for the sanctification of others: “*For this I labor, struggling...*” (**1:29**) and “*I want you to know how much I am struggling for you...*” (**2:1**)

Paul uses the word “*agonidzo*”—the word is from an athletic contest where an athlete uses his last ounce of energy to finish the race. (It's root of our word—agonize). Paul knew the meaning experientially. Paul was maligned, criticized, abused, challenged, and ignored; he was shipwrecked, flogged, stoned, and imprisoned. He was wounded; he bled blood; he experienced exhaustion; he was even left for dead – for the sake of the Gospel. Being faithful to the mission came at great personal cost for Paul.

Paul is saying, *As I suffer, I contribute to the cause of Christ in this world—suffering with him for the sake of the body—completing in my flesh what was lacking in Christ’s affliction.* These are extraordinary words. Paul is sold out to Christ’s mission at great personal cost. But Paul, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, offered what is expected of every disciple of Jesus Christ.

Think about what that means for a moment...just so we understand before we leave here this morning...

...When you come home exhausted from work, instead of collapsing in your easy chair for the night, you give up your evening up for ministry...

...When someone promotes something lacking wisdom and contrary to God’s Word, instead of walking away, you stand up and confront them before they hurt themselves and others...

...When you are criticized by someone who doesn’t think you’re quite perfect yet or doing it right, and you respond graciously...

...When you invest in someone, mentor someone, pray for someone, and then watch them wander from God while it tears at your inside, you continue praying...

...When you see the Body of Christ torn apart by a contentious spirit or gossiping tongue, you don’t walk away, you become part of the solution to build unity...

Paul is saying, if you do these things, you’re *contributing to the cause of Christ in this world, you are fulfilling His mission, you are bringing in the harvest, you are making an eternal difference.*

When the gospel is presented, it will [always] **cost someone** something. That’s just how it is. It cost Christ the supreme sacrifice. When we engage the mission, we will, as Christ was and as he promised, be persecuted; we will all suffer for the sake of the Gospel. It comes with the job. The **blood** of the martyrs is the **fertilizer** of the gospel; sacrifice and suffering build his kingdom.

Why would Paul, or anyone, endure all that hardship? Paul says he is doing it for “you” – for the Colossians and he was happy (he rejoiced) to do it. He considered it an honor to serve his God.

Second, Paul notes the **proclamation of the Gospel.**

Colossians 1:28 reads, “*We proclaim Christ, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ...*”

Paul’s original wording is even stronger than the English. He is saying, “*admonishing every person and teaching every person...to present every*

person...” Not that Paul will engage with every person in the world, but that every person Paul engages with he will “admonish” and “teach” about Jesus.

Christ’s mission is to present everyone holy, blameless, and **mature** to the Father. At the end of his stay on earth, Jesus passed the baton to his disciples; Paul took it for a few laps and passed it to Timothy. It has been passed down from generation to generation. Same mission, same finish line. And now the baton is in our hands, in your hands.

The ultimate **goal** of the Gospel (and the Church) is to have Christ **formed** in people’s lives, that they be built up in the faith, that sin becomes increasingly unappealing in their life, that they begin using their gifts to serve others...so that one day they can be presented as “complete” to the Father. Paul says that happens when we admonish and teach one another.

Admonishing literally means, “*to straighten out thinking...*” In other words, it is a matter of correcting where someone has gone astray, walked down the wrong path. The world in which we live has some crazy thinking. Only proclaiming Truth will straighten it out,

Teaching is about presenting the truths about God, the world and the way of faith as the Scripture reveals them. The goal is not additional information, the goal is life transformation and growing maturity through encountering Christ.

This one verse sums up my professional life and ministry: *He is the one [Christ] [I am] [we are] to proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all [his] wisdom so that we may present everyone [leaders, staff, members, neighbors, the world, etc.] fully mature in Christ. (1:28)*

This morning, no one should walk away still fuzzy about Christ’s mission, the Gospel, or the Church... or the role of a disciple.

We don’t have small [Life] groups, neighborhood gatherings, or ministry programs just so people can get together, build friendships, enjoy each other’s company, have fun and experience some fellowship... (although, all of those are nice benefits)

We don’t do this just to support people in crisis, to come alongside people in their grief, to establish more programs and build an adequate volunteer base for our ministries... (those are all great by-products of the Gospel and integral in the life of the church)

We do all of this, **everything**, to “*present everyone mature in Christ.*” This is all about the Gospel, about getting people to be more like Jesus; and about getting people home walking with Jesus. The proclamation of the Gospel is the ultimate mission and essential purpose of the Church. Nothing less...nothing else. It’s a non-negotiable mandate from God.

This work belongs to all of us who follow Jesus; and, we all have more work to do...

How many of you have someone in your family who is not yet perfect? Do you know anyone here at Church...who isn't yet perfect? Is there someone in your neighborhood? At work? In your school?

Truth is, none of us have fully arrived yet; it is a lifelong process, a lifelong journey. There is a finish line. And where there is a finish line, there is also a starting line. While it sounds like an overwhelming responsibility and an impossible mission; we need to engage it like one would eat the proverbial elephant, one bite at a time. One step, one conversation, one testimony at a time...

That's the mission: proclaiming the Gospel—i.e., inviting, admonishing, teaching—so we [the Church] can present everyone in the kingdom mature in Christ.

Third, Paul notes the power of the Gospel.

Paul writes in Colossians 1:27 - *"...to them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."*

"To this end I strenuously contend...with all my might...as hard as I can...until I'm fully and completely exhausted." No. No. No. Paul says, *"To this end I labor, struggling with all the energy Christ so powerfully [this is our word for dynamite] works in me."* **(1:29)**

In my first church, several years after I left, a member's home literally blew up. Thankfully, they were not home at the time; but pieces of their home were found over a half mile away. That's explosive power. Gospel power, by its very nature, is explosive power.

In just a few years after Christ's resurrection, the Gospel reached Rome; Asia Minor became over 90 percent Christian; the Church was a **powerful entity** throughout the world. Sadly, over the centuries, the church has often become disconnected from its power source. That disconnect has traumatic implications.

Persevering on Christ's mission is hard work. Paul pulls no punches. He reminds us to always keep the goal in sight as he did - *"to this end I strenuously contend"* **(1:29)**. Paul persevering against all odds is a sure sign that God is deeply involved.

We're talking more power than the Energizer Bunny; we're talking **resurrection** power, **Spirit** power, **Truth** power; sovereign, sufficient, and

supreme power. We're talking about power that just keeps going and going and going.

Fourth and finally, note the purpose of the Gospel.

Colossians 1:28 reads, *"He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature (i.e., fully developed) in Christ."*

The purpose of the Gospel is not just to get as many people's ticket-to-heaven punched as possible; the purpose of the Gospel is to **transform lives**, so Christ-followers get to heaven mature.

We tend to talk about Jesus as our Savior (from sin) and (serving him as) Lord as if they're two separate things or two different steps in discipleship. But biblically, they are inseparable. Jesus is Lord. If Jesus saves you; the Lord saved you. Unless you acknowledge Jesus as Lord, he can't save you. And if Jesus is our Lord, he will start to grow your relationship so you'll be more like him. And, if we're not growing in maturity, if we're not becoming more Christ-like, it's probably not real.

When you're asked to give your **testimony**, don't just talk about how Christ saved you (years or decades ago), share what Jesus is doing in your life right **now** (or lately). This is the essence of the Gospel: it is making us different, transforming us, changing us, now, day by day, until we're mature before Christ.

Enoch lived a long time. He never died; he was never buried. He walked with God.

Genesis 5:23-24 tells us, *"When Enoch had lived 65 years, he became the father of Methuselah. After he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether Enoch lived 365 years. Enoch walked with God, then he was no more, because God took him away."*

Picture Enoch and God going for one of those long walks – something they did often. God says, "Enoch, you're getting to be an old man now. We've been walking together a long time: for miles and miles, for years and years. You must be getting tired. I love you a lot, Enoch. I love you like a son. These walks have been so wonderful. Today, I've noticed we've walked a long way from your house...in fact, we're closer to my home than yours; why don't we just go to my house? And they did.

The purpose of the gospel is to get closer to His home than ours, so when it comes time to die, we won't have far to go.

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