

Sunday, October 3, 2021

## Getting Spiritual

(Message 5; Series: *Extreme Discipleship: Living into our Mission*)  
(Colossians 2:1-7)

### Scripture:

*I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. <sup>2</sup>My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, <sup>3</sup>in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. <sup>4</sup>I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. <sup>5</sup>For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.*

*<sup>6</sup>So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, <sup>7</sup>rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*

### Message:

He was angry with his children, the people at work, the people he'd gone to church with all his life. He got into fights about points of doctrine, about what the sign out front ought to say, about whether worship center should have pews or chairs. He carried grudges for years. There were people he wouldn't speak to. Outside the church, people didn't tolerate him because he was obnoxious. Inside the church his chronic anger was regarded as a zeal for the Truth. He was considered a spiritual leader.

She was a master of guilt, manipulation, and control - the most feared person in the church. She leads the Women's Bible study. Everyone is welcome, but only those who do everything she tells them to do make her inside circle. She is involved in a lot of people's lives, but she doesn't really seem to love them; she doesn't really know how. At home, she calls all the shots; ironic, because her professed theological system requires the husband to rule of the roost. But heaven help him, if he doesn't rule the way she tells him. At church, people look up to her as a spiritual giant and a model.

She complains constantly about her husband and children—they didn't treat her right, about her friends—they never include her, about change—she doesn't like it, and about life in general—she's gotten a rotten deal. And after her church split and those who wanted to focus on making more and better disciples had left, she was overheard to say, "Isn't it wonderful? We finally got our church back." People consider her a pillar in the church.

He's an author who views himself as a defender of the Truth; but he delights in ripping apart other Christians who disagree with his doctrinal positions. He deliberately twists what others have said and colors them in the worst possible light. He maligns their motives, even though he doesn't know what they are. He knows a lot about the Bible, but instead of becoming more loving, he's just becoming more arrogant. He slanders the truth in the name of defending the truth, and he's thought of as a spiritual leader. People mistake his passion for wisdom.

**In Colossians 1:28, Paul said our mission is to present everyone mature in Christ. The mission is important. We need to get it right!** If we get it wrong, we're in deep trouble. If we get it right, we'll be able to fulfill Christ's mission.

Paul addresses this in **Chapter 2**. At the end of chapter one (**1:28**), Paul reminds us of importance of spreading the message of Jesus Christ. Then, in Colossians **1:29-2:1**, Paul tells us how he personally toiled and struggled to present everyone to the Father mature in Christ.

Again, the word Paul uses for struggling is *agonizing*. Paul is in prison awaiting execution and he is praying for people he doesn't know and has never met both in Colossae and Laodicea. People are seldom willing to suffer for people they know, let alone for strangers. But Paul has a deep **burden** for people's **hearts** and souls, for disciples being disciples, for the lost, and for the harvest. Few church members seem to carry a burden for their neighbor's salvation, let alone strangers halfway across the globe. But Paul is on his knees agonizing, struggling, contending, and interceding for people whose names he doesn't even know. As Jesus' disciples, we should join Paul in agonizing about the impact we and the church are having on this world for the sake of Christ.

There is a direct correlation between being a mature Christian (i.e., one "*strenuously contending with all the energy of Christ*") and **spreading the Gospel**; between being fully devoted to Jesus and making more and better disciples.

Sheldon Vanauken writes, "*The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their completeness. The best argument against Christianity? It's Christians. When they are joyless, self-righteous, smug, narrow, critical or repressive, Christianity dies a thousand deaths.*"

Dallas Willard says, *“How many people are radically and permanently repelled from the way of Christ by Christians who are unfeeling, stiff, unapproachable, boring, lifeless, obsessive and dissatisfied? [This] Spirituality wrongly understood or pursued is major source of human misery and rebellion against God. Rightly understood, spirituality brings life. Wrongly understood, it is death. It creates prodigal sons and elder brothers, never someone who’s home with the Father.”*

### **What troubles me in all of this...**

...is not that such people exist. We all struggle in living out our faith, in becoming mature. No one is perfect; we’re all somewhere on the road to spiritual maturity.

...is not that these people are found in churches. I can’t think of a better place for them to be - churches are places for people who need to grow spiritually.

What troubles me is that in church after church people like these are considered the best examples of spiritual maturity we can find. They consider themselves—and have even been told—they are spiritual giants and people should become more like them.

They’d be angry and offended if someone gently said, “I love you, but you need some help.” Meanwhile others look at them and think, “I’m not like that, so there must be something wrong with me. I must not be very spiritual.”

What does it mean to be spiritually **mature**? We used to sing the song, *“And they will know we are Christians by our veracity...”,* or was it *by our passion, or by our persistence of truth.* No, it was *by our love.* When we talk about being “spiritually mature” we’re talking about becoming more and more like Jesus so His wonder, awe, joy, simplicity, worship, gratitude, humility, servanthood, and especially his love shines through us.

When Jesus talked about true spirituality, people were willing to leave everything for it—they gave up positions, walked out of homes, sacrificed their careers, renounced past behavior, left sin, and accepted persecution, suffering, and the possibility of death. They did it willingly and eagerly, high fiving each other because they were convinced that this, at last, was the pearl of great price. Jesus was it!

Misunderstood spirituality produces people who are smug, self-righteous, unable to love, apathetic and critical; these people are left with cold hearts, inauthentic lives, and shriveled souls. We can’t afford to get this wrong. This, Paul reminds us, is too big! The mission of Jesus is at stake.

A lot of people have been hurt by people who misunderstand; Jesus spent much of his teaching years trying to correct misunderstood spirituality. When

Jesus preached his Mountain Message he repeatedly said, “*You’ve heard it said...but I tell you...*” It is easy to get wrong.

So how do we make sure we don’t mess up? It can happen to anybody. The Pharisees didn’t see it happening; but many of them fell hard and didn’t even know it. Jesus talked with them about their spiritual life frequently, and they always thought they were doing great.

**So when Paul stated his God-given mission (and ours) as “*My goal is to present everyone mature in Christ*” (1:28),** he meant we need to live as Jesus would have us live. Christ is **THE definition** of spiritual maturity; he *is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation*” (1:15). In Colossians 2:2ff, Paul goes on to describe more specifically what maturity in Christ looks like. Growing in maturity is a lifelong process that starts in the heart. There is no medication for it, it’s just hard conscientious work. Paul notes four marks of **maturity** that flow from a **heart** devoted to Jesus that we should strive for.

## **ONE: ENCOURAGEMENT**

**Paul writes, “*My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart...*” (2:2).**

The first sign of growing towards maturity is that you are “*encouraged in heart.*” The word for “encouraged” here means “*to comfort or console or to cheer up.*” It’s a heart that is **warm** and compassionate and just **gracious** with people. It is a life that has margins of grace.

There are two kinds of people in every church: people who discourage others and people who encourage others. Depending on which group is largest, the church will either grow or die. Encouraged and encouraging people are maturing people.

**Question One: Are you known for your persistent encouragement?**

We live in an age of rage. People are just full of anger. Little things like a lane change set people off enough to commit murder. During the shutdown in this pandemic, domestic violence increased in our homes and on the street. Baltimore has already had over 400 murders this year; Chicago is almost 600. In the world, if it doesn’t go our way, we get angry.

**How do we measure this? How are you doing?** Are you more irritable or less irritable, than say, six months ago?

What’s your first response when someone hurts you? How do you feel when someone (publicly) disagrees with you? Do you try to hurt them back, or are you able to be patient and decide on the best response?

Are you carrying more bitterness with you these days? Do you judge people and enjoy the sense of indignation that comes with that?

Do you use words to inflict pain on people? Do you find yourself exploding? [Some don't explode, they get sneaky and plan how to get even].

**In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says, "Love is not easily provoked." Where are you at on that one?**

Struggling? Are you being fed by Scripture? Are you asking God for help; are you listening to the teaching; are you fully participating in corporate worship?

The goal is to live as Jesus would have us live. If we're growing in maturity, Paul says we'll be encouraged in heart. And an encouraging and gracious church, is a great place to belong.

## **TWO: LOVE**

**Paul writes, "I want you to be united in *love*." (2:2)**

The word "united" often means, "*to be knit together, **connected**, bonded, or **joined**."*

The second sign of growing maturity is being known by our love. And love, by the Biblical definition is not just a feeling; not just a "love" for ice cream, or the Lions, or sunsets; it's not just warm fuzzies; it is an action, a **servicing** love, a seeking what is **best** for **others**. Love must be expressed. A servant, in contrast to a slave, is one who can still choose to follow their master's request. Joyfully, serving one another creates community, builds unity, and promotes harmony. The church is to be a place where we can learn and practice this love.

In **John 13:35**, Jesus said, "*All men will know that you are my disciples because you attend worship on Sunday morning (no), ...because you tell them you're a Christian (no), ...because you belong to a great church with great programs (no), ...because you're an honest employee or business owner (no), ...because you love one another (yes!).*

Are you becoming an authentic servant? It is hard to serve occasionally; as a disciple, there isn't a switch to turn off and on. It is who we are. Real spirituality is a lifestyle of being united in love. Just volunteering at the mission one night a month isn't enough; mature disciples love to serve in ways that builds **community**, create **oneness**, and knit people together.

By contrast, misunderstood spirituality says, "I'll do servanthood, but we need to keep score; I want credit for my service; I want people to know what I've done and how mature I am.

**Are you known for your *love*? For your *servicing*?** Are you serving more and more? Are you serving graciously? Are you able to serve without thinking, "What a noble thing I'm doing now." Dallas Willard reminds us that "*One of the great signs of maturity is the thoughts that no longer occur to you.*" (i.e., you are

no longer consciously thinking about how getting ticked because someone inconvenienced you, you're no longer thinking about getting even, or you're not thinking how noble you are.)

The truth is, when we set our personal agendas aside, we'll discover that eagerly **following Jesus** as his servant is a much **better way** to live – like it is better to give than receive.

When love becomes second nature to the followers of Jesus in a church, not only do individual believers grow, but the church is also transformed, and the world is impacted.

### **THREE: WISDOM**

**Paul continues**, “*Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of **wisdom** and knowledge*” (2:3).

Paul is saying “*I want you to have wisdom.*” The word Paul uses here is a reference to “intelligence.” The Gnostics, that heresy that gripped Laodicea and Colossae, contended there were two levels of truth – truth for everyone and special truth for a select group. Paul says no. The wisdom (truth) is for everyone. The wisdom Paul is talking about is propositional **Truth**. In fact, this wisdom is a person. His name is **Jesus** Christ.

Since wisdom is **incarnated** in Jesus, we need to get into the **mind** of God. We need to start thinking what he is thinking; we need to discern his will; we need to see the world the way he sees the world.

Paul will write in the next chapter, “*Let the word [thoughts] of Christ dwell [linger/abide] in you richly*” (3:16). Wisdom comes when we let the Word dwell in us richly, that is, when we dwell in the word continuously.

A sign someone is lacking wisdom is that they make the same mistakes over and over and over, being constantly defeated by the same sin and living with a stream of regrets.

**Are you growing in **wisdom**?**

**I've been preparing to lead a Deeper Journey retreat in a new community starting tonight.** I look forward to these retreats as a time of worship, the solitude and silence, prayer and engaging the text. One of the best parts is taking a quiet walk on Monday afternoon – just Jesus and me.

I came across a story Richard Foster tells of a father walking in a mall with his two-year-old son. The son was whiny, cranky, and yelling – that is, being a two-year old.

The father was trying to deal with his agitated son: “It's okay, Danny. You can do this, Danny. Be patient, Danny.”

Someone observing asked, “Is your son Danny having a hard day?”



The father replied, "My son's name is Jack. I'm Danny."

Foster says the father scooped up the boy, held him close to his chest, and began to sing [off key, words didn't rhyme]: "I love you so much. I'm so glad you're my boy. You make me laugh. I love you so much."

As he sings, his son begins to relax, his eyes get big, his heart opens, he listens...

Done shopping, dad buckles his son into the car seat. The son looks at his dad and says, "Sing it to me again, daddy, sing it to me again!"

I feel a bit like Jack on those walks. God simply reminds me over and over, "I love you..."

### **Are you known for your wisdom?**

Sometimes in meetings, when I have a vested interest in the outcome of a decision, I'd lobby for my position. I've caught myself, not just trying to share another perspective, but to win the argument, to have people think I really know what I'm talking about. But increasingly, I hear this voice from God in the back of my head saying, "Doug, it's okay, it's my Church; and, I love you..." That awareness, reminds me that I don't have to impress anyone.

## **FOUR: GRATITUDE**

**At the end of our reading, Paul says,** *"Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in faith as you were taught, and overflowing with **thankfulness.**" (2:6-7)*

This is another one of those great verses we encounter in Colossians.

In chapter one, we came across **1:28** (*"He is the one we proclaim admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature"*) and we'll discover **3:17** (a great verse to memorize) fairly soon (*"Whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."*)

These two verses (**2:6-7**) are a series of metaphors about being focused on and preoccupied with Jesus:

To "**walk**" (NIV unfortunately changed it to *"continue to live..."*) is a common metaphor for living in **intimate** fellowship with Jesus.

**"Rooted"** is an agricultural metaphor for staying connected and drawing **nourishment** and strength.

**"Built up"** is an architectural metaphor for building on a single firm **foundation.**

**"Strengthened"** (lit. established) is a legal metaphor about a **guarantee** that sealed or established a financial transaction.

While all of these mixed metaphors would drive a grammar teacher nuts, Paul is simply saying, “it’s a done deal.” Jesus guarantees your forgiveness, your life, your salvation, his love for you, your status before God, your future: “Let Jesus be the path on which you walk, the soil from which you feed, the foundation on which you build your life, the guarantee you treasure.” Jesus is the path-maker, root-digger, foundation-laying, guarantor.

And since our relationship with Christ is **assured** and **guaranteed**, we can (and should), Paul says: “*Abound in gratitude; overflow with thanksgiving, worship and praise God.*” If we live this way—walking, rooted, built up, and established in Jesus—our lives will reflect our gratitude.

**Are you known for your gratitude?** Are you more grateful? Are you doing less complaining?

“**Overflowing**” [*perisseuo*] is often used to describe the fruit of the Spirit. It’s a word the Greeks used for a bottle so full of something that it was spilling over. Contrast a near-empty toothpaste tube you need to squeeze real hard; The tube does not yield its contents easily.

One of my sons loved to pour his OJ (orange juice) to the top of the glass—plus a little so the top had a crown. That’s abundance; it flows; if you bump him, you get orange juice.

When someone bumps you, what flows out of you? Gratitude is a dominant characteristic in a growing and maturing Christian. With gratitude, things we used to take for granted, are now seen as gifts from the Father. Our minds are filled with these thoughts, so we overflow with gratitude. Do you find you express gratitude more and more often?

**This is serious business Paul is calling us to.** How is our encouragement, love, wisdom and gratitude coming? Are we growing in spiritual maturity? The rest of Colossians is really just how we live out **Colossians 2:6-7**.

Suppose your dad is a world renown orthopedic surgeon. People travel from around the world to be treated by him. With the same confidence a mechanic changes spark plugs, your dad removes and replaces hips, knees and shoulders.

At twelve years of age, you’re a bit young to understand the complexities of who your dad is...and then stumble down the stairs and sprain your ankle. You writhe on the floor and scream for help. You are just weeks away from basketball tryouts. This is no time for limping. You need a good ankle.

Your dad walks into the room still wearing his surgical scrubs. He removes your shoe, peels back your sock, and examines the injury. You groan at the sight of the tennis-ball size bump. Anxiety kicks in.

“Dad, I’ll never walk again!”



Dad replies, “Do you know what I do for a living?” Actually, you don’t. You just know people call him doctor and he goes to the hospital every day.

“It’s time for you to learn.” The next day he picks you up after school and drives you to his office with a constellation of diplomas on the wall. Adjacent to them is a collection of awards that include words like “distinguished” and “honorable.” He hands you a manual on orthopedic surgery that bears his name.

His cell phone rings. “Let’s go,” he says, “we’re off to surgery.” You can watch from the observatory as I reconstruct an ankle. Your dad is the commandant of the surgery suite. He never hesitates; he never asks for advice. He just does it. One of the doctors watching says, “Your dad is the best.”

As you ride home, you look at your father. You see him differently. If he’s a master at orthopedic surgery, he can probably treat a swollen ankle. You ask, “So you think I’ll be okay for tryouts?” “Yes, you’ll be fine.” This time – you believe him.

We grow in maturity as we **watch** our **Father** work through his Son, Jesus Christ. We grow in maturity as we **strive** to be more and more **like** him. We grow in maturity when we get back to the **basics** – to really **trusting** in Jesus.

**Please stand for closing prayer.**

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