

# Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

“... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything”(Colossians 1:18).

## **Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians The Primacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1:1-29) The Gospel and the Church 1:24-27 (Part 3)**

**24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. 25 Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God...**

Last spring, after many years of letting this go and because it was something that I knew would please my wife, I determined to paint the slats and railings of our front porch. They were supposed to be white, but the years had made them dingy and grey. Now, I do not have a huge front porch, but as I sat down on the cold concrete and started to paint with enthusiasm, it was not long before I realized just how tedious of a task this was going to be. There were just over thirty slats, but they were four sided and each one took about 5 minutes to paint, or at least to paint correctly. Yes, I was doing the math in my head, 35 slats at 5 minutes a slat, that was about 175 minutes or about 3 hours. And all this was without painting the railing. I found myself getting discouraged as I kept considering how much time this was going to take. All of this was as I was painting the very first slat mind you.

But then I started to pray, asking the Lord for patience (as well for something else to think on). I determined just to focus on the one slat in front of me, to paint it thoroughly, knowing it would be pleasing to my wife as well as make the house look nicer. I thought through verses in my head and sang songs of praise to God. Again, I purposed not to look down the long line of slats yet to be done, but to focus fully on doing the slat in front me well. You know how the story ends. Before I knew it, I had completed the painting. I stood up (slowly for my back was a bit sore and tired) and greatly admired how much better everything looked having been painted. I was pleased. Not long after that, while I was still out front, my wife drove in and walking up to the front porch, she had the perfect reaction. She was absolutely pleased at the result and expressed as much. Again, I was pleased and it felt good to have accomplished the task well and with the resultant praise from my wife; and all because I was patient and wanted to fully carry out the task of painting the slats well.

The Christian life is an awful lot like painting that front porch of slats and rails. Particularly if there are areas of our lives that have been made dingy and grey with neglect, the task can seem overwhelming. We ask ourselves, “Can I really change? Can I really have victory over this? Can I really see all of this become white and beautiful with the resultant praise and affirmation of my Heavenly Father?” And even as we take this idea to the larger context of the church, the body of Christ, we might ask, “Can we really make a difference? Do we have the strength, the energy, and the resources to really affect people’s lives with the gospel? To make an impact in our community? To more thoroughly worship God and fellowship with God’s people with the resultant affirmation of our heavenly Father?” Of course, the answer is yes, we can and in order to do so, we must not only be determined to get the whole job done, but also to focus on the task before us, the task we have been called to this day and to do it well. Then, day by day, week by week and month by month, we will be able to look back and see our progress and praise our God for His working in us and know that we have been pleasing to God.

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“... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything”(Colossians 1:18).

We have been camped out on Colossians 1:24-27 for a couple of weeks as Paul expresses in these verses his passion for the church, the body of Christ. Last week we took some time to actually consider what is the church. Looking at the New Testament, we considered six snapshots, six descriptions of the church, noting that these were given to show of the in-depth and intimate community the church is suppose to be. We noted that the church is...

1. The household of the living God (1 Timothy 3:15)
2. The chosen, royal and holy people of God (1 Peter 2:9)
3. The flock of God (1 Peter 5:2-3)
4. The building of God (1 Corinthians 3:9; Ephesians 2:21-22)
5. The bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-27)
6. The body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27)

In each of these passages, we must realize that the emphasis is upon community, upon individuals united together to be one; to work together and to work effectively for the glory of God and the praise of Christ.

Coming back to our text in Colossians 1:24-27, I would like to remind you of what we are seeing. Here we see Paul's passion for the church. In verses 1-23 we have been exposed and bombarded with the powerful effects of the gospel of Jesus Christ; this good news that although all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and although all deserve death, eternal separation from God so as to eternally experienced the wrath of God, Jesus Christ came to this earth to save sinners and reconcile them; make peace between them and God (1:21-22) so that they can look forward to the eternal peace of heaven, being in God's presence and experiencing the fullness of joy that comes from being in His presence. This gospel is realized by all those who call upon the name of the Lord (Romans 10:17) and we can know if we have rightly called upon the Lord Jesus to be our Savior from ourselves; and we can know that that gospel has taken hold of our lives by our changed behavior, when we, according to verses 22 and 23, are firm in our faith, our thinking, our speech and our actions all longing to please and glorify God.

And then, in verses 24-27 and really moving all the way through chapter 2, Paul presents us with another way that the gospel affects those who have been reconciled to God by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. *Those who are transformed by the gospel of Christ develop a passion for the church.* They have an increasing love and commitment to the church. A couple of weeks ago we saw Paul's own passion for the church expressed in verse 24, that he was willing to suffer for the church, on behalf of and for the furtherance of the church. I do not want to belabor that point as we have already studied it and you can listen to or read the transcript. This morning I want to focus your attention on the next way in which we see Paul's being transformed by the gospel and being passionate for the church. We read in verse 25, ***“Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God...”***

In verse 24 we learned we are to be willing to suffer for the church and now in verse 25 we learn that we are to be determinedly spent for the church, even as Paul was so determined. What I would like to do from this verse is first show you how Paul was so determined to be spent for the benefit of the church, the body of Christ and then to show you how this passion and determination of Paul is not to be unique to Paul, but is to be the experience of everyone who has

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called upon the name of the Lord to be saved. It is to be the experience of everyone who is “in Christ”; of everyone who is in the body of Christ, of the household of Christ, belonging to the flock of God, and who is a stone in God’s building to be spent for the benefit of God’s people to the glory of God. Paul’s passion and determination for the church is to be our passion and determination. And so, I submit to you this idea; that to be transformed by the gospel (to know that you are being affected by the message of Christ) and to have a passion for the church (and therefore the desire to have Christ come to have first place in everything) means that you...

1. Are a dedicate servant
2. Have a divine stewardship
3. Are determined to succeed (to the glory of God)

Let us now consider the text in this light noting that being transformed by the gospel means that I am to be a dedicated servant, that I have a divine stewardship and that I am determined (by God’s grace) to succeed to His glory and honor.

## I. A Dedicated Servant

*Of this church I was made a minister...*

With reference to the church, Paul begins by telling his readers of his position or role in the church (a mini-bio) saying that he was made “a minister.” The word “minister” is a loaded word in our culture. Generally speaking when we hear this word our minds think about those who are pastors, who preach the word, who perform weddings or funerals. A minister is one who is found at the church, shaking people’s hands after the service. To most, the connotation of a “minister” is one who is in professional ministry. For this reason, I do not feel the translation here that Paul was made a “minister” is too helpful to us. The Greek word for “minister” is quite familiar to us, in fact it is perhaps too familiar and so it also carries with it some loaded ideas that might rob us of what Paul is trying to say. The Greek word here is “diakonos” from where we get our English word “deacon.” We might rightly translate this statement, “Of this church I was made a deacon...” But we know from the context of the passage and of Paul’s own position as an Apostle that he was not speaking of the office of deacon. We never read that Paul held such an office or position. And so we have to throw out any idea that Paul is speaking here of someone who oversees the grounds of the church, or helps manage the finances of the church, or of one who holds an office in the church.

But this leaves us with the question, “what is Paul telling us about himself by the use of this word “minister” or “deacon.” The very base meaning of the word “minister” here and therefore the intention that Paul is seeking to communicate is this – to be a “minister” is to be *one who serves for the benefit of others*. The best picture I can give you of what this word means here is when you go the restaurant and have someone wait on you. That person who takes your order, who brings your drinks and meal and who clears that table for you, that person, that waiter, that server is a “minister”, a deacon, one who serves for the benefit of others.

A more thorough definition of what Paul is conveying here is this, a “minister” is *one who gives up his rights and assumes a subordinate (or lower position) in order to benefit others*. The great and preeminent Apostle Paul, the one who prior to his coming to know Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior was on the fast track to being one of the most highly respected, most highly

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regarded and therefore most willingly served teacher of Judaism, gave up his rights and assumed the position of a servant, a server, in order to benefit the church. In a day when philosophers and great orators were often highly esteemed and served, Paul, the theologian and preacher of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ declares himself to be nothing more than a servant, one who performs the most menial of tasks, one who is the “go-for” the errand runner. Paul was made a servant and willingly dedicated himself to the task. Turn to 1 Thessalonians 2:5-7 where we see that Paul, although was granted a high privilege from God to be an apostle, one specifically called out by God to be a foundation for the church, rather regarded himself as a servant, a waiter to the church. We read,

*5 For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed — God is witness — 6 nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. 7 But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.*

Paul never considered himself special or anymore gifted than any other believer. With regard to his being an apostle, what did he say of himself? In 1 Corinthians 15:9 Paul said of himself, **“For I am the least of the apostles...”** And as we have already noted, in Ephesians 3:8 he calls himself the **“least of the saints.”** And yet this least of all became the servant of all. Paul, so grateful for and transformed by the gospel only wanted to serve the church for the glory of God. Let us be wary of titles and positions. [Personal illustration – when I visit someone, I do not regard myself as “the Pastor” but just a fellow Christian laboring for Christlikeness]. Sure, they have their place, but at the root of it all, we are all called to serve one another. Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve. Jesus said if we want to be great in His kingdom, we must learn to be the servant of all. Let us, like Paul and even more importantly, like Christ, be dedicated servants, willingly giving up our rights, willingly taking lower positions in order to benefit others.

## II. A Divine Stewardship

*according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit...*

In addition to being called as dedicated servants, those who are transformed by the gospel and who have a passion for the church are given a divine stewardship. Our text reads, **“according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit...”** Notice that Paul gives all the credit to God. Paul was made a “minister” and was given a ministry or stewardship from God for the express purpose of being a benefit to the local church.

Paul declares that as one who serves, he serves at God’s direction, according to God’s purposes and for the well-being of God’s people. A significant word we need to grasp here is the word **“stewardship.”** Sometimes the word is translated as dispensation or commission. It is the Greek word “oikonomia”. That might sound familiar for two reasons. First, remember that last week we noted that one of the descriptions of the church as found in 1 Timothy 3:15 is “household” from the Greek word “oikos” – meaning house. This word in Colossians 1:25 is from the root of oikos, but is oikonomia, meaning the way or overall plan of how a household works. From “oikonomia” we get our English word “economy” – meaning the management of the resources of a community. Right now we are aware of our national economy, that the management of our resources has taken a turn for the worse and things are tight. The “world”

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economy is under the management or mismanagement of the prince of the power of the air and is heading toward a path of destruction. But for those of us who are in Christ, in the body of Christ, we have been bailed out of this world’s economy and been made a part of the economy, or under the management of God’s economy. In fact, that is just what we read over in Colossians 1:13, **“For He [God] rescued us from the domain of darkness [this present economy] and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son [the management of Christ].”**

And here is Paul, saying that he has been given a specific task, a task, something to manage, his stewardship from God in order to benefit the church. We will see his specific task in a moment, but from this we need to recall that each of us has been called to be servants, given a specific task, a stewardship from God, for the benefit of the church. Paul’s words here are his own personal fulfillment of what we read is to be true of every believer in 1 Peter 4:10 – are you ready for this?

***As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.***

Paul had a special gift and from God and was employing it in serving the church of God. Notice that the Scriptures tell us the each of us has received a special gift, a reflection of the manifold or multifaceted grace of God. Not one single person can rightly reflect the manifold grace of God, but as we all labor together, we can more fully reflect this grace. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 12 where we see again the truth that each of us has a portion of God’s grace with which to specifically benefit the church. Beginning in verse 4 we read:

***4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. 7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.***

We each have a gift, a ministry, an effect, a manifestation of the Spirit intended for the common good of the body, the benefit of the church. The question you need to ask yourself then is this, “What is my spiritual gift?” “What has God given me by which to be a benefit of the church?” No one who is a genuine believer can say, “I don’t have one” – for the Spirit has distributed to each one such a responsibility as He willed. Some of you might be able to say, “I don’t know what my gift is?” and to those of you who say that I encourage you; it is time to find out. How do you do that? Let me give you three simple steps. First, pray – ask the Lord to reveal to you how He has specially equipped you to be a benefit to the church. Second, ask – ask your brothers and sisters in Christ if they perceive what your stewardship or gift is, for often other believers will recognize your gift before you do. And finally, experiment – read Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 and other passages that list various gifts and be willing to try them. See if you have the gift of helps, or exhortation, or leadership, or administration, or of teaching. Now is the time to find out how God intends you to contribute to the good of the body. Ask me, ask your Elder or other mature believers and do not rest until you have found it out.

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And for those of you who know what your spiritual gift is, let me simply ask you, are you using it for the common good and benefit of the church? How could you be using that gift better or more effectively or even more frequently? How can you be encouraging others; training others and teaching others to be involved in your exercising of this God-given spiritual gift.

One of the things I have been working through as your pastor and would appreciate your own input and involvement is asking and answering the question, what does it take to make our Sunday morning experience a true act of worship to God and fellowship with one another? Beloved, it is not just about the pastor having a sermon ready, or the musicians having the music put together. There are a multitude of things to be done before, during and after the service. Something as seemingly mundane as checking the bathrooms a couple times during our time together to make sure they are clean and stocked helps our focus to be on worship and fellowship. To be involved however and whenever you can in set-up, clean-up, in teaching. Everyone has a role. And when we run out of physical things like these to do, always remember that each one of us is to come to church with the intention of specifically praising the Lord, so do you have specific praises ready for others to hear: and of specifically edifying or encouraging the saints. Do you that someone has had a good or a bad week? How can you encourage them in such things? Let us never come to church unprepared for such things.

Paul was a servant according to the stewardship, the plan, the gift, the direction of God for the benefit of the church. Let us be wary not to change the intent of verse 25 to read for us as, “a servant according to my plans figured out by me for my personal growth and convenience.” That is not a passion for the church. That would not be seeking Christ to come to have first place in everything. And that would not be a heart transformed by the gospel. Let us know and practice our divine stewardship.

### III. A Determination to Succeed (to the glory of God)

*...so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God...*

The final point I wish to offer you from Paul's little biography is found in his own determination to succeed to the glory of God. Because Paul had been transformed by the gospel, he was willing to be spent for the church. We read, **“so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God...”** Paul's specific stewardship or gift by which he could benefit the church was found in being a pastor/teacher; one who faithfully preached the word of God. But I love the way that he puts it here in our text. Paul does not simply want to preach the word of God. He does not want to just get by in the fulfilling of His God-appointed stewardship. He does not want to be half-hearted in his service to God by serving the church. He says that he wants **to “fully carry out the preaching of the word of God.”**

To be fair, this could mean that Paul wanted to preach the full counsel of God's word, that he did not want to leave out anything. This is reflected in the ESV translation of the verse where it says, “to make the word of God fully known.” But I do prefer the NASB here placing the emphasis on Paul's desire to spend himself completely in this God-given gift of preaching the word of God. As Paul anticipated the end of his life, he made this comment to the young preacher Timothy - 2 Timothy 4:6

***For I am already being poured out [fully spent] as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.***

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There was nothing half-hearted, mediocre, average or ordinary about Paul’s efforts to use his gift or stewardship for the glory of God and benefit of the church. Paul wanted to, by God’s grace, to succeed. The idea behind “fully carry out” is to bring to completion; to fully accomplish; to leave nothing undone or incomplete. It implies the opposite of half-hearted or haphazard efforts. To fully carry out one’s stewardship is to have a view to excellence. Did you hear that, “excell”ence – to excel in the gift given.

Paul was determined to succeed in exercising his gift and if we follow his example and imitate him as he imitates Christ, we ought to be excited at the prospects of knowing and excelling in the exercising of our spiritual gifts. Beloved, our God has called you to this and bestowed upon you such a precious wonder. The church needs you in this and needs you to consider how to fully carry out your gift to the benefit of the church. Let us pray for this; let us pray that we be dedicated servants, having a divine stewardship and are determined to succeed and be spent in our gifts to the glory of God.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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