

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 Colossians 2:1-5 A Faithful Church

1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument. 5 For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

In his book, “Stop Dating the Church” – Joshua Harris relates the following story and question. Please bear with me as we begin our study this morning with this insightful illustration:

Robert lives in Gilbert, Arizona. He likes friends to call him, “Fat Bob.” He loves life and people and enjoys laughing at himself. He’s got a good job and faithfully attends his church. But if you really want to see Robert excited, ask him about his Jeep. He talks about it like it’s a person. “She’s my baby,” he says affectionately. He searched for over two years to find just the right yellow and black Wrangler. “It was spotless. Just gorgeous,” he recounts.

“Once I got my Jeep...well, of course, I had to join the Jeep club,” explains Robert. The local club had over fifteen hundred active members. It offered meetings, parties, trail runs, and a website where members could exchange Jeep tips. “It’s a whole Jeep community,” Robert says.

Through the club, Robert hooked up with guys who taught him the finer points of four-wheeling. As his Jeep-discipleship intensified, Robert’s commitment only deepened. “I was totally hooked,” he says. “Every free moment was consumed. I was either working on a Jeep, planning a Jeep run, hanging out and talking Jeep, or going on-line to check our Jeep website.

Robert attended a conference where he heard a message by Joshua Harris about the importance of the local church. Harris started the message with, “Are you married to the church? Or are you dating the church?”

The question unsettled Robert. “God started speaking,” he remembers. “He was asking me, ‘Robert, what are you married to?’ And the only thing I could think of was the Jeep club. It was obvious, but I’d never seen it before: I was married to the Jeep club, and I was dating the church!”

Harris quoted another preacher saying, “If the church is central to God’s purposes as seen in both history and the gospel, it must surely also be central to our lives. How can we take lightly what God takes so seriously? How dare we push to the circumference what God has placed at the center?”

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As Roberts mind played back over the last two years, he realized that he had pushed the church to the outskirts of his life. He had invested so much in the Jeep club but very little in his local church. If a Jeep run was scheduled on a Sunday afternoon, he'd be watching the clock throughout the church service, ready to rush out as soon as the sermon was done.

“The reality is, I had no passion for the church of the people in it,” Robert told Harris. “I would do anything for the guys in the club. But I really struggled if I was asked to give time on the weekend to serve my church.”

What does passion for the church look like in a life? It's not hard to figure out. You and I already have the answer. We already know exactly what being passionate about something involves, because we all have our own version of the Jeep club – some interest or pursuit [some good or noble – others not so good and not so noble] that we care deeply about. It might be a hobby, or a sport, a career or an education. It might be a preoccupation with technology, your health, a political party, a cause or a relationship. Sometimes the signs of passionate commitment are all there, but we just haven't seen them yet.

If we were to look at the life and teachings of Paul, what would we conclude that he was most passionate about? Of course Jesus Christ would top the list, but included in that passion for Christ, because for Paul he could not separate the two, would be a passion for the church.

In our study of Colossians thus far and as well now as we begin chapter two, we have seen Paul's passion for both Christ's supremacy as well as the church's priority in his own life and through this letter he is seeking to instill that same passion in his readers; into people like you and me. If Jesus Christ was faithful to the church, then Paul wants to be faithful, like Jesus, to the church. And to be faithful to the church is to call believers to be likewise faithful to the church. Our text in Colossians 2:1-5 presents us with what a faithful church looks like as its people, you and me, seek to have the same passion for the church as did Paul and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The believers at Colossae were striving to be a faithful church and needed to be exhorted and encourage to stay the course. Our passage and these characteristics of a faithful church then not only reveal Paul's appreciation of the believers at Colossae, but also then an example for us to examine and follow as individuals and as a church.

I. A faithful church struggles for one another (2:1)

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face...

Our text begins with Paul wanting the Colossians to know something. He wants them to know “**how great a struggle**” he has for these believers. Notice the language here. First, Paul wants them “to know” – to behold, take note of, to be perfectly aware of and to consider his great struggle. “Look at my life,” says Paul. “Consider my example!” And just what is it that Paul wants considered? Paul wants them to consider “how great a struggle” he had on their behalf. The word “struggle” is the noun form of the verb we looked at last week in Colossians 1:29 where Paul said, “**for this purpose I labor, striving according to His power....**” The verb striving could be translated as agonizing. As Paul labored for the church, agonizing, that is giving everything he had for the work of proclaiming Jesus Christ. Here in Colossians 2:1, Paul says

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that he wants the Colossians to consider his “struggle” that is his “agony”. But this was not an agony of despair, but rather an agony, a struggle, an intense labor of delight. The word agony speaks of a contest, a fight, or a race. It has athletic overtones as one gives everything he has to win the prize. Here in our text,

Paul is in agony for the benefit of other believers saying, **“on your behalf”** even believers who have never seen him personally. He wants the believers to know that whether he is with them or not, they are to know and can know that he is actively working, striving, agonizing to be of a benefit to them. I believe one of the greatest encouragements and motivations for ministry is to know that we are not just praying for one another; but literally struggling for one another; that I can know there are others are agonizing with me in ministry, that are willing to do whatever they can to help me or others in the church. There is a joy in knowing that others share in the same concerns I have for the church. And I wonder, is this what I am known for? Do people see me as one who agonizes over the church? Is this what you are known for? When we do not see one another's face personally, do we know that we are agonizing for one another, longing to be together, praying for one another, thinking upon how to encourage one another?

Paul struggled, labored, gave everything he had for the church and we not only can, but are to share in the struggle. If we love Christ, we will love the Church. If we love Christ we will struggle for Him which means we will struggle, labor and strive to see the church without spot and blemish, holy and blameless. There is much more that could be said, but let us look at our second point which explains not only the characteristic of a faithful church as struggling for one another, but also how this struggling takes place as a faithful church also stimulates one another.

II. A faithful church stimulates one another (2:2-3)

...that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

In verses 2 and 3 we are presented with three actions by which Paul's struggle for the church was revealed and become practically means by which we labor for the church as well.

First Paul says that by his struggle for the church it was his intent that **“their hearts may be encouraged.”** By this we are to see that it was Paul's desire *to encourage believers into right thinking and behavior.* A faithful church then is one that strives to encourage one another to right thinking and behavior. The verb or action here is “be encouraged” – something is supposed to happen to their hearts by their examination of Paul's life. The idea here means to have someone come along side of you and by way of life be a positive or encouraging influence. Paul wants their hearts encouraged. We need to be careful here because by “heart” Paul does not mean the seat of emotion. This is not about some sticky, sentimental emotion, but rather for Paul and the original readers, “heart” spoke of the thinking and will of a person. In other words, as these believers examined Paul's life and words, their own thinking and behavior was to be changed by it. A faithful church stimulates encouraged hearts; that is its people seek to positively influence one another's thinking and behavior by their own labors to live godly lives.

It is as if Paul is saying, “I desire to work among you and for you in such a way as it stimulates your hearts, that is your thinking about and willingness to serve Christ in the most holy

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and blameless of ways amongst one another.” That is a struggle worth contending for. But Paul is not done yet.

In addition to encouraging believers into right thinking by his own labors, Paul also wants to enliven the believers in loving unity. And so we see that a faithful church will strive to enliven in one another loving unity. As we read on in verse 2 Paul says, **“having been knit together in love.”** As these first readers learned of Paul’s life and passion for Christ and His church, this was to be a motivation, a reason for the church to be unified in love. The idea is that Paul’s agonizing for the church, which consisted of praying for them, writing to them, providing for their well-being, showed them that they had been woven together, both to one another and to Paul by God’s good providence. God put them together. They could marvel at being adopted into one family. They could reveal to outsiders and unbelievers that there was something different about their unity. The unity of the church is characterized as being “in love.” Our love for God and for one another is to be the defining characteristic of our unity. We know the words of Jesus well from John 13:34-35 which says,

34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

Paul labored to demonstrate his love for the church in such a manner that the Colossians and all who heard about him knew this affection for these people was unlike anything the world could ever experience. Beloved, that is a struggle, that we so learn to love one another that we would not only want to be together, but that others on the outside would take note and either think it strange or long for such a unity, a place of belonging for themselves. That is a passion for the church. Lord, let me so love the people here that they long to be together with me every change they get and other would long for that as well.

So, a faithful church stimulates one another; encouraging one another to right thinking and behavior toward God by our examples to one another; by enlivening one another to loving unity; and the last thing here is that the church excites one another to complete confidence in Christ. We read from the end of verse 2 and into verse 3, **“and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself...”** Again, let us note Paul’s desire; that by his own struggle for the church, these believers would learn of complete confidence in the person and work of Christ alone. Look at the richness of the language. Paul desires “all the wealth” and “the full assurance” as well as “a true knowledge” of God’s mystery be theirs. What a faithful church is to portray is that they are a wealthy people but such a wealth is not earthly or worldly. A wealthy church has **“full assurance of understanding”** – that is they comprehend something. The faithful church, like faithful Paul, agonizes over knowing the fullness of truth, the true knowledge of God’s mystery. And just in case anyone is not certain what this mystery of God is, Paul defines it, God’s mystery is the knowledge of Christ Himself. God’s mystery is Christ Himself in you, your hope of glory. The faithful church then wants to know and communicate their complete confidence in Christ alone; that He alone is the author and finisher of their faith, of their salvation and of their hope. As we read in Acts 4:12 -

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And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.

This is the true knowledge of God’s mystery who is Christ; or Savior, our Redeemer, our Lord, the very Gospel Himself. This is the true knowledge of Jesus as opposed to a false knowledge, or any mistaken, diminished, subpar, unbiblical, emotionally-driven rather than Scripturally derived; perverted, impure, weak, anemic, pathetic, unglorifying falsehood about Christ. The faithful church, like Paul, seeks to excite in one another such a knowledge because, according to verse 3, **“all the treasures of wisdom”** – that is the know how to actually live out the truths of the gospel; as well as all **“knowledge”** – the word here meaning the most intimate, the most telling, the most revealing truths about God are found only in Christ. If you want to know about the nature of God, the very details that make Him so wondrous and so glorious, then learn of Christ, because all such knowledge and then all such wisdom to live according to that knowledge is found in Christ alone.

III. A faithful church safeguards one another (2:4)

I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument.

As we come to verse 4 we learn that Paul speaks all these things to these believers so that they will be safeguarded or protected from deluding, persuasive arguments. A faithful church then safeguards one another by speaking, proclaiming all the wisdom and knowledge that are in Christ rather than listening to and arguing about other matters.

The word **“delude”** speaks of something that seems to be good, rational, and even reasonable, but in fact leads to wrong conclusions. We see people do this all the time, using what we call “proof-texting” that is they come up with something they want to say and then find a verse, usually taking it out of context, to prove not what the Bible says, but rather what they want to say. [if time permits, here is an example of bad proof texting as found in an article written by Rick Warren (author of “The Purpose-Driven Life”). While there is proof-texting that leads to grosser, more delusional conclusions than this, let this serve as an example of how this works]. Here is what Warren wrote:

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Psalm 2:4, “The One enthroned in heaven laughs.” Isn’t that a great verse? God has a sense of humor. God laughs!...Do you want to be more like God? Learn to laugh. A sense of humor can preserve your sanity.

What’s the problem with this? We read that God laughs, so what could be wrong with this? But if we actually look at the context of the passage, we see there is a huge problem, that this passage is not speaking about humor at all. Let me read Psalm 2:1-6 and pay attention to verses 4-5:

1 Why are the nations in an uproar And the peoples devising a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth take their stand And the rulers take counsel together Against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!” 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them. 5 Then He will

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Speak to them in His anger and terrify them in His fury, saying, 6 “But as for Me, I have installed My King Upon Zion, My holy mountain.”

Does God laugh according to this passage? Yes, but it is not referring to some therapeutic, stress relieving belly laugh or sense of humor. This laughter is that of scoffing at man’s pathetic attempt to usurp God’s sovereignty, a laughing that ends with God’s terrifying wrath and fury. The point is, this passage does not say what Warren wants it to say, yet he called Psalm 2:4 one of his favorite verses in the Bible. This is a delusional teaching of God’s word. This is what the false teachers at Colossae were doing. Their teaching was done with “persuasive argument” meaning that it was with the ability to talk someone into believing something even though it is based on wrong conclusions. This is where many believe something just because it is spoken in church or spoken a popular speaker. Succumbing to such reveals a failure to weigh matters biblically.

How do we overcome being deluded by persuasive arguments? Beloved, we must strive, agonize to be more and more biblical in our thoughts and actions. We must saturate ourselves in the truths of God’s Word. You need to be like the Berean believers of Acts 17:11 who checked out what they heard with Scripture. If I may be so bold to say this, deluded teaching in the church would come to a grinding halt if congregations did this. Each one of us has the responsibility to be immerse in the Scriptures so that we might effectively discern the presence of delusions.

I read of one minister who when he preached would constantly hear many members give loud “Amen’s” to his preaching. But the preacher realized that they were not really paying attention to what he was saying. They were simply following the rise and pitch of his voice and responding thoughtlessly with “Amen.” Finally then this preacher purposely wrote a sermon, abusing the text and making statements that were clearly unbiblical. Without hesitation, the congregation responded with “Amen.” At the end of the sermon he told them what he had done and admonished them where they had agreed with false teaching. Why did they do this? Because they did not know the Scriptures. A faithful church safeguards one another, seeking to know all the wisdom and knowledge of Christ so that neither they nor anyone else in their congregation would be deluded by false teachers.

Beloved, this is why regular Bible reading is so important. Would you read daily? Starting in January the church will have on the website as well as in hard copy a new Bible reading program for us. Would you commit to reading through the Scriptures to know the wisdom and truth of Christ that would guard your soul from error and enable you to be a safeguard for others? The Lord proclaimed it accurately when He proclaimed through the prophet Hosea, **“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge”** (Hosea 4:6). Therefore, if a believer or attender of a church seeks to go outside the church, which is the pillar and support of the truth, or more specifically outside the revelation of Scripture to be taught of life, the nature of God, the character of Christ; or of how we are to be saved – the result is a delusion. To look to the Kabala, the Koran, the New World Translation, the Book of Mormon, any secular scientific theory of life, teaching of humanism or the like, these will delude the soul; if one is looking for answers to life in them; for all wisdom and knowledge is found in Christ alone. The faithful church safeguards one another from such things.

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IV. A faithful church supports one another (2:5)

For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

A faithful church struggles for one another, stimulates one another, safeguards one another and finally, they support one another. Consider Paul’s statement in verse 5 again. While he is not with them personally, he has able knowledge of their spiritual well-being and in sending Onesimus and Epaphras to them, he is with them by way of his teaching and exhortation. But note what he says is his rejoicing; his cause of joy. The church at Colossae practiced “**good discipline**” and was known for their “**stability**” of faith.

The phrase “good discipline” is a military term that speaks of order in the ranks. It was used to describe troops that were found in ready formation for battle. As Paul uses it, we are to understand that this church was ready for service. They were doing everything necessary to be prepared for battle. We might say that they were living as genuine Christians; dependent upon Christ; proclaiming Christ and living out the gospel. This implies that they were supporting each other. They were preparing each other. They did Colossians 1:28, teaching and admonishing every man among them to be complete in Christ. They were giving attention to one another’s spiritual lives and doing everything necessary, even agonizing over one another’s spiritual condition. When Paul calls them to desire to present every man complete in Christ in 1:28, it is as if he is saying here that they already had been supporting one another in this. Who are you helping to be found in battle formation. Who are you discipling in the Lord? Who is discipling you? A faithful church supports one another in good discipline and so I exhort you to be involved with others here in learning about Christ.

This good discipline lead to another description of this church and therefore of a faithful church, that is “**the stability of your faith.**” The word “stability” is also a military term that speaks of “a solid front” – an army that cannot be moved. For us it speaks then of a church, a people that are solidly anchored in the truth of Christ and Him crucified. Even as the false teachers sought to delude them, Paul speaks of their ranks as stable and unbroken. For this to happen would require believers to help keep the lines solid. There was a game that used to be played by children where two lines were formed and one shouted to the other, “Red rover, red rover send “someone” right over. That someone would then run hard and try to break through the other line of children who were holding hands. Of course, wherever that red rover aimed, the group sought hard to hold on tight. That is a solid front, the stability of the line.

Beloved, passivity does not build faithful churches. The faithful church is dependent upon *all the membership* to exercise spiritual disciplines in order to increase spiritual growth. This is not a luxury but a necessity. Stability of faith in a congregation is constantly ongoing. It is not something we decide once and then never work on again. Consider Paul’s language, military terms. I have never heard of an effective army just happening. The most effective armies train hard, in fact agonize, going over and over their duties and deployments in order to be strong and win the day. The faithful church has the same determination so that whatever battle comes to us, we are ready, solid, in order, believing in Christ, trusting in Christ alone.

Beloved, we should be agonizing, struggling, striving for the church in such a way that as others see our example, they are encouraged in their thinking and behavior, enlivened in their loving unity, excited in their complete confidence in Christ, watching over one another and

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preparing one another to be orderly and firm in their faith, resisting the enemies of the gospel and faithful to proclaim Him who is our hope of glory, Jesus Christ.

How do we do this? Let me give you just a few things by which you can participate in being part of a faithful church.

1. Join the church – just like Robert and the Jeep club, make a visible commitment to be accountable to a local body of believers.
2. Make the local church your priority – build your life around the church and its people. This means that things like football, hunting season, skiing, sleeping in, enjoying beautiful weather, and other concerns are to be secondary, not primary.
3. Make your pastor’s job a joy – I know, self serving, but biblical; Hebrews 13:17 says:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

4. Find ways to serve – membership is not spectatorship – if no apparent ways present themselves, find ways to own the church.
5. Give faithfully, heartily – the local church is the place where you are nourished spiritually, relationally and held accountable. It should have a priority in your resources.
6. Connect with people – passion for the church means being a part of community, pursue relationships with others who you can encourage and be encouraged by in the things of the Lord.
7. Share your passion – speak to one another and to others about what Jesus did for the church and your involvement with it.

Soli Deo Gloria

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