

Mature in Christ

Colossians 1:24-2:5

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Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. My name is Penny and I'm the senior pastor here. It is good to be with you. If you are a guest or a visitor, welcome. We're glad that you join us this morning as we come to God's word, as we sing to him, as we celebrate his supper in a few moments. It is good and right for us to join together and be reminded of the gospel, the truth of who Jesus is. And that's what we're in need of, every one of us, whether we've been attending CTK since its inception or this is your first Sunday. We all need the same thing, and that is the grace of our Lord. If you've been walking with Jesus for decades or maybe you're a new believer or you're exploring the things of Christ, what we are all in need of is God's grace. And so we're glad that we would join together and be able to hear and be reminded of his grace because that's what we've been hearing in the book of Colossians. And we're going to continue to hear about this morning. And so if you have a Bible, you can turn to Colossians chapter 1. We're going to be looking at verses 24 through chapter 2, verse 5.

And if you have been with us over the last number of weeks, you've heard various things. We've heard various things about who Jesus is, that he is the preeminent one over creation and over the new creation, that the beauty of who Christ is, it is broken through sin and brokenness, and it is restoring and renewing those who turn to him, that we are to be grounded in this truth in the gospel. We use that word a lot, gospel. It simply means "good news," the good news that Jesus has lived and died and risen again and that he's making all things new. And that is what we need. We need that restoration. We need that redemption. And that's what we've been hearing about. It's what we've heard about in the last two weeks in Colossians. And that's what we'll hear about again this morning as Paul continues to describe for us and to tell us about who Jesus is and his work. And Paul this morning is not only going to talk about who Jesus is, but he's going to talk about how is it that we grow in our relationship with Christ. And so with that in mind, let's read Colossians 1, beginning in verse 24. Paul writes,

"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ." (ESV)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we ask that as we come to your Word now, that you would allow us to see and behold the goodness of your Son, our Lord Jesus. Let us see what he has done and how he is at work, and let us hold fast to your truth, hearing your Word and seeking to pursue after you. Grow us, we pray, in Christ's name. Amen.

Well, many of you know that I have a garden in my yard. I like to garden. I don't grow flowers. I like flowers, but I'm not good at growing flowers for some reason. I don't know what goes well with what, and so I just grow things that I can eat, which, you know, I like that as well. But I love growing and working in the garden because I love seeing these little seeds sprout up into beautiful things that we can enjoy around our table that we can save for later when it's cold and we can have tastes of spring and summer. And so though we're nearing the end of the growing season, I remember the very beginning of the growing season when those beds that were brown and gray of dirt became green, full of beautiful vegetables, beautiful things, and the promise of harvest. And this summer, the harvest hasn't disappointed. We're coming to the end, but we've had plenty of tomatoes and zucchini and potatoes and peppers. It's been a great summer of growing, except for one thing didn't grow well this summer. And this is sad to me because it's actually one of my favorite things to grow, and that's my sugar snap peas. I have no idea why they didn't grow well, but for some reason they didn't. We didn't have many to harvest, and we didn't get to freeze any to bring out later to put in my sugar snap pea salad, which is delicious. They didn't grow right. They didn't do great. And I knew that they weren't going to do well immediately.

You see, as soon as they started to grow, yes, they grew taller than me like normal, and yes, they had leaves like normal, but the leaves weren't quite as green as normal. And the bright white flower that gives forth the fruit, the sugar snap pea, it wasn't bright white. Instead, it was kind of dull and gray and wilted. And so I knew it wasn't going to be good, and it wasn't. The peas that did form, they were hard, and they lacked that sweet sugar snap taste. Now, I don't know why this happened. I don't know why they didn't grow properly, but I do know that as I saw that they weren't growing right, as they weren't maturing as I thought that they would or should, I didn't think, "well, this is just a different kind of pea this year. Same seeds, you know, but it's just an alternative growth path for the pea." No, I didn't think those things. I knew something was wrong, and I knew something was wrong because I knew what a mature pea plant is supposed to be like. Seeds are supposed to grow into strong, fruitful, mature plants.

Our Understanding

You know, so far we've heard Paul speaking about the foundation that we have that is the gospel, and he's talked about us being rooted in the beauty of Christ's preeminence, but now he's telling us what maturity looks like. We see it in verse 28, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ." You see, Paul's expectation for the church, for us, is that we would not wilt or be stunted, but we'd mature, and just as I knew what a mature pea plant is supposed to look like, and what a healthy plant should look like, and what a healthy plant doesn't, Paul is helping us this morning by telling us what a mature follower of Christ will look like, and what he tells us is that maturity in Christ is going to have mature understanding, is going to be rooted in a solid foundation, and is going to result in mature community. That's what we're going to see. And mature understanding, Paul demonstrates for us this when he speaks of his own life. Did

you see it in verse 24, “now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body that is the church.” Now, before we get too deep into this verse, let's just remind ourselves of where Paul is when he's writing this. Paul is in jail. He's in prison, and he's been in prison multiple times, and it's not just prison that he's experienced, right? Think about his entire life. He's been shipwrecked, and he has been beaten, and he's been stoned, and he's been cast out of cities, and he's bit by snakes, right? He has led a life of suffering, and now he says, “I rejoice in my sufferings.” Not, “I bemoan”, “I complain”, “I sad face”, “I vague book”. No, “I rejoice in my sufferings”.

That sounds strange to us, doesn't it? If it doesn't sound strange to us, it would have sounded crazy to the people who are infiltrating the church with their new philosophy, because though we don't know about the new philosophy that was being inserted into the Colossian church, what we can surmise is that these adherents of this philosophy were trying to achieve some sort of enlightenment that would transcend the physical. They weren't looking to rejoice in their suffering. They would have said, *No, we have to throw off the body. We have to throw off the physical. We have to enter into this secret knowledge and awareness*, and yet Paul says, “I rejoice”. I rejoice in my suffering. Now, listen, we don't always know why we suffer, why we experience difficulty and struggle. In fact, I know in Tobias's Sunday school class this morning, y'all talked about Job and suffering, and that's one of the things, right, about Job. We don't know always how the dots are connected and what God is doing, and yet Paul here understands. He understands that suffering, his suffering, is for the sake of others, that that's how God is using it.

He has a perspective beyond just what he's experiencing in his difficulty and in his strain. Look, he says, “For your sake, I rejoice in my suffering”. He describes further, “I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body.” Now, before moving on, let me just acknowledge the first part of that clause, “filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions”, that is easily the most debated verse in all of the book, okay? So, there are all sorts of different interpretations, different ways of trying to make sense of it. We do not have time for me to go through all of them. So, this morning, what I'm going to do is tell you what it's not, and then I'm going to tell you what I think it is, okay? So, what is it not? What does Paul mean when he says, “I'm filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions”? Well, he's not saying that Jesus's atonement was insufficient in some way, that the cross of Christ was not enough. We know he's not saying that for a couple of reasons. One, this word affliction, it is never used in the New Testament to refer to Jesus's sacrifice or the cross, this Greek word. So, that's one. But more importantly, we know that Paul has already talked about how redemption comes only through the blood of the cross, right? We heard that last Sunday in our passage last week, that redemption comes only through what Jesus has done on the cross. And so, we know that Paul can't be saying that it's insufficient. He's not speaking here of what Christ has or hasn't done on the cross, okay? So, that's not what he's saying.

So, what is he saying? Well, I think he's speaking of what some have called the messianic woe. The messianic woe. Now, this is this idea that with the inauguration of the messianic kingdom, right, the inauguration of Christ's kingdom, which we heard about last week, that with Jesus's resurrection, a new order has broken through into the world that defeats death and hell and sin, right? That resurrection has come, and that with this messianic kingdom, part of the messianic kingdom is that as we await for him to return, the people of God will experience trial and tribulation and suffering because we are united to the Messiah who suffered. That is messianic woe. And we actually see this in the New Testament. We see it in

the gospels when Jesus says that we will experience tribulation, that we will experience difficulty. We see it in Romans when Paul speaks of our suffering, and it's the idea that being a disciple of Christ means that we will suffer with Christ, Romans 8, or that we will share in his sufferings, Philippians 3. And so the suffering of Jesus, not simply his suffering in his death, but his suffering in his life, denying himself, you remember his prayer? "Not my will, but your will be done." Denying of himself, fighting temptation, resisting the devil, this suffering of Jesus becomes the life of God's people.

That is what we are filling up in what is lacking in Christ's affliction, that we are participating in the suffering that Jesus engaged in first. As N.T. Wright put it, "Paul is not adding to the achievement of Calvary, he is merely putting it into practice, the principle of Calvary." See, what is lacking is the continued suffering of the people of God until Jesus returns. That as we suffer and press through difficulty and resist temptation and fight against sin, we can rejoice. We can rejoice, not because of some sort of baptized masochism, but because we are participating in the work of Christ for the sake of others. That's what Paul understands. That is the mature perspective, that suffering for the gospel is participating with Christ for the sake of his body. He makes it explicit, for your sake, for the sake of his body that is the church. You see, friends, by denying ourselves, by resisting temptation, by suffering for the church, we are actually making known the mystery that has been hidden. And Paul tells us that mystery in verse 27, it is "Christ in you, the hope of glory".

Now, as I was thinking about this portion of our passage, it reminded me of that story of Peter and John in Acts 4, and the hope that they had. Do you remember in Acts 4, Peter and John had been proclaiming the gospel. They had been teaching people about Jesus and redemption that only comes through him. And so they go, and they're causing a stir because of who they are preaching about and what they are preaching. And so they're called before the religious leaders, and they're examined and interrogated. And the religious leaders were told, perceived they were uneducated common men. They were astonished and they recognized they had been with Jesus. Something was different about Peter and John. And the difference was that they had been with Christ. And this difference, it plays out in chapter 5 of Acts, when again, they're brought before the religious leaders and they're interrogated. And this time they are not just interrogated, but they are beaten. And Peter and John, these men of great hope, these people who had been with Jesus, we are told that they went out from that place rejoicing because they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

People noticed that they had the hope of glory. People noticed that they had a hope not of this world. A hope that was so great that they could now rejoice in their suffering. A hope that was so great that they could say what Paul later said in Romans, that "we consider the suffering of the world not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed." That is a mature understanding. That is what we see in Paul. That's what he's inviting us to do. We may not always understand how God is using our struggles, our difficulties, our sufferings, but we can have understanding that the Lord is. And we can rejoice that he is using it for the good of his body.

Our Foundation

Now, if we're going to maintain this sort of understanding, we need to have a foundation. A strong foundation. Paul spoke of our understanding of his ministry, of the mystery of hope in Christ. But then he says in verse 28, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." So, you see what

the foundation is, what the soil, if you will, with which maturation occurs? It's hearing about Christ. It's Jesus is proclaimed. And this proclaiming comes in the form of warning and teaching. And we need warning and teaching. We need reminding of the gospel because there are dangers. We experience the dangers of deviating from the gospel. I mean, that's what Paul's been doing, right? With the Colossians. There's a threat that has come into the church with this teaching that they might turn from the gospel, that they might turn from the truth. And so, Paul is warning them, he's teaching them not to deviate. Now, listen, deviating from the gospel isn't simply taking away from the gospel. That's how we often think about it, right? To deviate from the gospel is to take away from it, to remove some of the things about it, right? Like, we can just keep on sinning because grace would abound. That would be deviating from the gospel. That would be taking away from it. That it doesn't matter. Give in to temptation. It won't really hurt that's deviating from the gospel. It doesn't matter. Jesus is the only way. Well, is he really the only way, right? Like, that would be deviating, taking away.

But deviating from the gospel isn't simply taking away from the gospel or reducing it. It's actually adding to it as well. And I have to tell you, as Western American Christians in Roanoke, Virginia, I think this is where we have greater danger of adding to the gospel, of adding to the gospel, of basically approaching the gospel with, well, the follower of Jesus is Jesus plus something, whatever that something might be. Now, I know we've been in the church, many of us, for many years, and we know we're not supposed to say those things, right? Because it's just me and Jesus, right? Like, Jesus is the only one who saves. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life", not all these other things. So, we know we're not supposed to say it, but don't we very easily fall victim to this of creating a litmus test that's beyond the atoning work of Christ? Things like how a person votes or how they might educate their children, or the music that we listen to, or the people we socialize with. Isn't that just us saying *Jesus plus whatever that thing might be*? I mean, that's actually what was happening with the Colossians, right? What was seeping into the Colossian church, it wasn't a call to reject Jesus, it was to add to Jesus with a spiritual knowledge, a hidden knowledge. But that's deviating from the gospel by adding to the gospel, and we need reminding of that.

We need warning about that, and I hope that is what we hear every single Sunday. I hope that that is what we are hearing from this pulpit, and from our Sunday school classes, and from our times together. I hope that's what we're hearing every single Sunday, that we hold fast to the gospel. We don't turn from Christ by taking away or adding to him. We stand firm with him. I hope that's what we hear here, but I hope that's also what we hear in our friendships, in our relationships with one another. I mean, we should ask ourselves, do we have people in our lives who will warn us about the dangers that we are flirting with, about the possibility of us deviating from the truth of the gospel? Do we have people in our lives who will say those things? And when they do, are we thankful for their commitment to us to our maturity? Paul said he toiled and struggled and prompted them towards maturity. He did it for them, for their sake.

Our Community

Now I know he was an apostle, right? He was an apostle, and that calling was unique, right? That office is over. There's no apostles here. There's no apostles anymore, okay? And that doesn't change our responsibility to others, to encourage one another, to proclaim to one another, to warn and teach one another so that we would be prompting one another towards maturity. That is the foundation of the gospel. That's the foundation that gives way to that

mature understanding we already talked about, but that's also the foundation that grows into a mature community. And that's how Paul ends in chapter 2 verses 1-3. He says, "I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is in Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." So Paul's saying you've been assured of the knowledge of God, the wisdom found in Christ, and so now this mature community will look like what? Hearts being encouraged and knit together in love. I love that image. Knit together in love. I mean, it implies that we are not standalone, separate threads wrapped around our own individual spools, but instead, as Edith Schaeffer put it, "we are a tapestry". Have you all ever seen the back of a tapestry? If you ever get a chance, you should. I know, like, I don't know where you would find a tapestry. We don't have castles and, you know, maybe some of you have tapestries in your houses. I don't know. But if you have a chance, look at the back of the tapestry, and you know what you're going to find? You're going to find a mess. It looks awful. It looks weird. It's strange. It's like all these different threads, all these different colors, and there's no seemingly pattern to it. There's no coherence, and they're going in varied directions. It's kind of like a Jackson Pollock painting, except with thread.

It's just everywhere, and you can't make sense of, I mean, you know, you can, okay. Jackson Pollock's good, but regardless, you know, you understand what I'm saying. It's a giant mess, but if you take that tapestry, and you flip it over, what do you see? It's a beautiful picture. You look at the front, and you see these different threads, these individual strings, and they have been knit together to form this beautiful picture, and that's what Paul is telling us the church is to be. That as we grow in maturity, we are joined. We are knit together in love. That this beautiful picture that's formed out of divergent strings and messy lives, they are knit together in Christ. You see, friends, as we mature in our understanding of what the Lord is doing, and as we are built on the foundation of the gospel, this is how the Lord matures us, not simply as individuals, but as a community, as His body knit together in love, standing firm in our communal maturing faith in Christ. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you have given us your church, your body, and that you have not left us to ourselves, but you are knitting us together so that we would grow, not as individuals, but we would grow as a community of maturity, that we would hear your warning, we would embrace your teaching, we would hold fast to the gospel, and understand how you are using us to build up your people. And so we pray, Father, that you would give us this mature understanding, that you would root us in your gospel, and that you would grow us together, knitting us in love. And you would do this for the good of your name, the glory of Christ, and the good of your people. And it's in Christ's name that we pray, and all God's people said together, Amen.