

# The Mystery of Ministry

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Good morning! Please open your Bibles to the book of Colossians...

Review: Jesus is Supreme over all and Sufficient for all that we need

## Intro

Pop Quiz! True or false

- goldfish have a three second memory
- cracked knuckles leads to arthritis
- Einstein failed math
- lightning doesn't strike the same place twice
- bananas grow on trees

These are all false. Goldfish will remember patterns after weeks or months. Cracking your knuckles has not connection to arthritis, but it might still be annoying to those around you. Albert Einstein didn't fail math. He was a genius; he was great at math. Lightning often strikes the same place twice, especially tall places and things like lightning rods. And finally, bananas do not grow on trees. Technically, they grow from bulbs like tulips. So they're actually large herbs.

Some of those were maybe more obvious to you than others. But perhaps a few were tricky because they seem like they might be true. It seems at lease 'plausible,' doesn't it – that bananas grow on trees? But on further examination, they're not true.

This happens with doctrinal beliefs too. Maybe you've heard or said or believed some of these things:

- God helps those who help themselves
- Money is the root of all evil
- To be filled with the Spirit means that you won't sin

While each of those may have an element of truth in them, they are ultimately not true. They sound plausible but they fall apart upon further examination.

Take "God helps those who help themselves." The idea is 'don't expect God to bless you if you're not doing anything.' And there are warnings in Scripture against laziness and

sloth. But the heart of the gospel message is that God sent Jesus to die in the place of sinners because they could not help themselves. And salvation comes, not by works, but by trusting in the finished work of Jesus. In that sense, God *only* helps those who *cannot* help themselves.

Paul's aim in this passage is to keep his readers from being deluded or led astray by things that sound like they might be true. Like 'Jesus is a great Savior, but you also need to do this or that to really gain His approval.' He's good, but He's not enough. Paul wants his readers and us to day to push back against such ideas. And to do that, he's going to give them some rich theology.

And so this morning, we need to do some theology together. I'm going to read our passage, then we'll work to unpack what Paul is saying here. And then we'll close by talking about how it applies to us.

### **Read Colossians 1:24 – 2:5**

Let's pray...

Have you ever talked with someone who keeps interrupting themselves with other thoughts? They start out talking about one thing, but then interrupt their story to give more background information or to explain another point. We've probably all been guilty of that. Well, sometimes I read Paul and it feels like that. Paul writes these long, complicated sentences that move from one idea to the next.

-like links on a chain

-like Russian dolls

So to get at what Paul is saying here, I want to look at two ideas near the heart of his message. Paul is going to address two things, two 'm' words, that we're going to need to understand to get what Paul is saying here. So let's do some theology together...

### **The Mystery**

The first piece of theology that we need to get is this word 'mystery.' It shows up a couple times in our passage. Look again at verses 25-27...

### Colossians 1:25-27

...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, **26** the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. **27** 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.

His task is to make the word of God fully known and more specifically – his task is to make known this mystery to his saints, the church.

The word mystery is used by Paul several times in the New Testament, but he uses it in a way that is more uncommon for us today. The word mystery is not referring to something cryptic or confusing. It's not a mystery in the Scooby-Doo sense – who is behind all the creepy things happening in the castle at night?

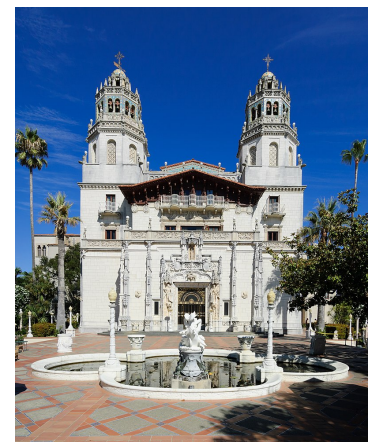
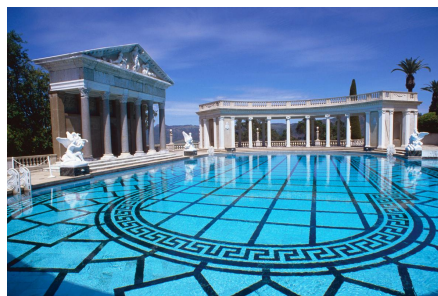
It's not that kind of mystery. The word mystery is used by Paul more like something that was previously hidden but has now been revealed.



Several years ago, I went to the Hearst Castle in California. It is a huge mansion continuously built over the 1920's and 30's by William Randolph Hearst, the publishing tycoon. It's the fanciest house I've ever been in. And they offer tours now – if you're into that kind of thing.

(scroll through pictures, stop on last one)

Well, we did take that tour. And it was amazing. I was in high school at the time, so a lot of it was lost on me, but it was a vast collection of art and ornate building features: huge staircases and bookshelves and chandeliers and woodwork. There was room after room with all of this ornate furniture and decorations – thousands and thousands of dollars worth of furniture and decorations.



Now imagine that this mansion was built and completed with all of this beauty. And you were invited to live there! But there's a catch – there is no power. There will be no lights, and all the windows will be covered. In fact, the furniture will be covered in drapes and dust blankets. It'll be there, but you just won't be able to fully see it, at least at first.



And then one day, the owner of the mansion arrives. And he turns on the lights. And now you can see! And he charges one of his servants, his butler, to take you on a tour. And so the butler now takes you around to show you this beautiful mansion, that you're really seeing for the first time. And while he does, he's opening the windows and removing the coverings on the furniture.

And it's gorgeous. It's so beautiful. All of this furniture and decorations were there all along, but now it's been revealed.

That's what the word mystery means. It was once hidden, but now it's been made manifest. It's uncovered.

The Old Testament was full of teachings and stories and prophecies that the people of God didn't fully understand. But then when Christ arrived and sent His Spirit, it's like the lights came on and now the mystery has been revealed.

And what is it specifically that was previously hidden?

### **Colossians 1:27**

this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory

Paul says that it's Christ in you – the hope of glory. This is the big deal that Paul wants his readers to know. They don't need to look anywhere else for mysterious teachings. There is no secret knowledge only available for a select few that's been hidden away from them. The mystery is that Christ is in you. Don't go looking for answers anywhere else – Jesus is enough!



We worked our way through a survey of the book of Leviticus earlier this year. And one of the things we saw was that God is utterly Holy and we are sinful. But yet, God made a way for sinners to commune with Him and not be destroyed. God dwelt in the Holy of Holies in the very middle of the camp. And to come before Him, the people had to be clean and holy themselves.

In fact, it was only the very clean and very holy high priest, alone out of all the people, that could enter into God's presence. And He but once a year after making sacrifices for Himself and the people. Only then, could He enter in to the inner part of the tabernacle where the glory of God resided. All of that emphasized the holiness and love of God in the midst of a sinful people.

But now, Paul says, the presence of God is not found in a tabernacle or a temple. Now, it is *in* the people of God. We are a new temple, a new house for God, built with living stones. And God now wants the riches of His glory to be seen and recognized among all people, including the Gentiles. So He now resides in His people themselves, through His Spirit.

Other times Paul will emphasize that Jesus's followers are in Him. We have been placed in Christ – and that's wonderful and true. But here, Paul wants us to know that Christ is in us. We have fellowship with God. He has just said that we have been reconciled to God. We've been restored to a right relationship with Him.

That's the end goal of the gospel message – that we would have communion with God. That's what will make heaven glorious. Because Jesus lives in His people through the Spirit, we experience the hope of glory. The hope of glory is the joy of communion with God forever.

The mystery is Christ in you. And that's enough. Look down at **Colossians 2:2-3** ...to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, **3** in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Christ is the mystery. He's been revealed. And in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

What does that mean?

I've been wrestling with how to understand and talk about this all week – what does it mean that in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge? And I think I may be wrestling with this for the rest of my life, but let me give you my best shot at what this means and how we could think about it.

First, notice that he calls wisdom and knowledge 'treasures.' They are wonderful things to possess. They provide riches. Wisdom and knowledge are to be valued and appreciated. But the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ.

Maybe think of it this way – when our kids were younger, we would give them a present for Christmas or their birthday or whatever. And it could be a really cool thing. But there were times when the box itself was what they went after. They played with the box and missed the good part. They didn't realize what they had.

The 'good part' of wisdom and knowledge are found in Jesus. He is the best part of learning and growing and exploring and creating – all knowledge and wisdom finds its fulfillment as it points to Christ. That's true of art and music and technology and science and business and relationships and on and on. We can learn all kinds of things about all kinds of topics – but the good part? That's found in Christ.

He is the source and the purpose of all knowledge and wisdom. It's all been created through Him and for Him. Solomon says it this way, to have knowledge and wisdom, we must begin with the fear of the Lord. All knowledge and wisdom have to start there. All truth belongs to Christ. It's all hidden in Him. We don't need to go beyond Him for other 'secret' knowledge. Don't be deluded with plausible arguments.

Without Christ, art and music become boring or frustrating. Without Christ, science and business harm or use people and the created world. Without Christ, philosophy is empty and hollow.

Jesus is the 'good part' of knowledge. He gives meaning and purpose to learning. All things were made through Him and for Him. So in learning Christ, we find more and more that has been hidden in Him.

So do we treat Jesus as though He is truly sufficient for us? And do we recognize and appreciate the mystery of the hope of glory – Christ in us? That is the mystery which has been revealed – Christ in you.

## **The Ministry**

If the mystery is Christ in you, then what is the point of Paul's ministry?

His point, put simply, is to proclaim the mystery of Christ and labor for this mystery to have its full effect in their lives.

So he says here, in verse 25, **Colossians 1:25**

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*

Later in verse 28, **Colossians 1:28-29**

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil [hard effort], struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Paul labors and works so that he would be able to make the Word of God fully known and therefore proclaim Christ. This is what he aims at – warning and teaching everyone so that he might present everyone mature in Christ.

If I might return to the story from earlier – Paul views himself as a servant in this mansion of God's mystery. That's what the word 'minister' means – servant. And now that Christ has come, he's like a servant or a butler who is going around and telling everyone the mystery. He's opening the windows and taking off the drapes over the furniture. My aim, he says, is to make known this mystery that was hidden for ages. My job is to proclaim Christ.

These two verses – twenty-eight and twenty-nine – were the first verses I preached here at Cornerstone five years ago. They've been so helpful to me when I have doubts or struggles in ministry. What am I supposed to be doing? Here's the answer – proclaim Him. Point people to Jesus.

When I'm in conversation with people or have people come to me for counseling, I can sometimes get caught up in what I'm supposed to say. What can I really say to help this person?

Maybe you've had that experience. Someone is walking through a difficult situation, and you don't know what to say to help?

I recommend doing what Paul commends as the heart of his ministry – proclaim Him. Point people to Jesus. Remind them of His care and love. Remind them of His rule and authority. Remind them of his sovereign power and good plans for them. Proclaim Him.

These verses have been so helpful to me that I put them up in my office.

(show picture)

This is a picture of these posters hanging above the couch in my office. If you ever come in and sit on that couch, then know that right above your head, I'm being reminded to proclaim Christ. That's my aim – to point people to Jesus.



Then he says more specifically in verses one and two of chapter 2 what his specific goal is for his readers. Look there.

### **Colossians 2:1-2**

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, **2** 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,

He says, I labor for you and those at Laodicea. Why? What is he aiming for? That their hearts would be encouraged. That they would be knit together in love. And that they would grow in assurance of knowing Christ. If I were writing this to you at Cornerstone, I might say, I want you to know how great our struggle is for you to know God and grow together. That's what he's saying here.

The word struggle here could also be a reference to prayer. Paul often uses that word to describe how he prays. Later in this letter, he will say that Epaphras struggles on their behalf in his prayers (4:12). So Paul describes his prayer life as a struggle. The picture is that he is pleading and begging God to encourage them, to unite them, and to reassure them in their faith.

But his struggles aren't just in prayer. They also involve physical suffering. Look back up at verse 24 of chapter 1. Maybe it stuck out to you as we read it...

### **Colossians 1:24**

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,

What is going on there? How could anything be lacking in Christ's afflictions?

When we come to a verse like this, it can be helpful to understand first what it doesn't mean. I heard a preacher one time compare it to sorting out puzzle pieces. If you've put together a jigsaw puzzle before, what's one of the first things you do? You sort out the edge pieces and corner pieces. You know those pieces won't end up in the middle of the puzzle.

So what does this verse *not* mean? Well, it can't mean that the work of Jesus was somehow deficient or not enough in some way. There is a mountain of verses that teach the opposite, and we've seen some in Colossians already. Jesus has reconciled us to God, making peace by the blood of His Cross. When He died, He cried out, "It is finished," because He had completed the work necessary to save sinners like you and me.

So that's an edge to this piece. What else can we say? Well, there are a variety of options that commenters recommend, but I think the best reading is that Paul is speaking about his role in delivering the gospel to the Gentiles.

The reason for that is that we see the same phrase 'filling up what is lacking' over in Philippians chapter two. In that passage, Paul is talking about how this man Epaphroditus (which is likely the longer form of the name Epaphras) has delivered a financial offering to Paul despite the great danger he faced.



He says, **Philippians 2:30**

“for he [Epaphroditus] nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

So you see the same words there? Epaphroditus completed what was lacking. What was lacking? Was the offering not enough? No. It wasn't that Epaphroditus added to the offering financially. What was lacking was that it needed to be delivered. It needed to get from Philippi to Rome where Paul was. And that's what Epaphroditus did – he filled what was lacking by delivering the offering.

I think that's Paul's point in Colossians 1:24. He is fulfilling what was lacking in that Christ had died and rose again so that even the Gentiles might be saved, but they hadn't yet heard. They hadn't heard, so that what was lacking. So Paul is fulfilling what was lacking in the work of Christ by taking the gospel to the nations. His role as a steward is to proclaim the mystery of Christ, not to add to it or change it in any way.

And he is happy to suffer if it means that Christ is known. His ministry is all about proclaiming the gospel so that his readers would be firm in their faith.

That's how he concludes this section.

**Colossians 2:4-5**

I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. **5** 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.

He doesn't want them to be deluded or misled by plausible arguments – things that sound like they could be true but ultimately are not. He wants their faith to be firm and in good order, not divided and led astray by the false promise of secret knowledge.

There are these false doctrines being promoted around Colossae, and Paul doesn't want them to try to leave Christ and hold on to other things that promise spiritual wisdom or the secret to life.

Jesus is all that we need.

So to summarize the theology of these verses:

Paul's ministry is to proclaim the mystery of Christ. He labors to make the word fully known so that everyone in the church might reach maturity in Christ.

That's the theology of this passage. Now, let's think about how that theology applies to our lives. I have three questions here. They're not trick questions or true or false like earlier – just three yes-or-no questions for you to consider to yourself. And I really want you to answer them, maybe even write them down for yourself. And have in your mind, what's your answer?

**Question #1 – Is your faith in Christ firm?**

What would you say? Yes, it is or no, not really.

This question assumes that you have faith in Christ, so maybe you need to start there. Have you made the active choice to put your trust in Jesus to save you? Have you responded in faith to the free offer of the gospel and are you trust in in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins?

I don't want to assume that everyone in this room has done that. So maybe you'd say, no, I have not. Friend, let today be the day of your salvation! Maybe you have questions about what that means or you're unsure of exactly what to do. That's wonderful, we would love to help answer them from the Bible. But at the end of the day, this is something that is between you and God. Have you put your faith in Christ?

And for those of you who would say, yes, I have done that. Let me ask you – is your faith in Christ firm? Is it solid? Paul says in verse 5 that he rejoices in the firmness of their faith. In verse 2, he prays for them to have full assurance. So is your faith solid? Is there a stability there?

If your answer is no, then you should do a little self-diagnosis. Why is my faith not firm? Is there, for example, something about the work of Christ that you are not believing? That He really is God? That He really did die for you? That when you trust in Him, His righteousness is really given to you? Or maybe for you there is some fear in your life or some pride that is regularly eroding your faith? There may be some habit or pattern in your life that is leading you away from having a firm faith.

Do some thinking here, because Jesus did not die to secure your salvation for you to live in insecurity. He did not finish the work so that you would treat it as if it were unfinished. He does not intend for you to live in uncertainty.

Now, all of us struggle with doubts – all of us do. But Jesus wants you living as your normal experience with a firm faith. Is that true for you?

**Question #2 – Are you growing toward maturity in Christ?**

Are you? Is your answer yes or no?

Paul says his aim is to present everyone mature in Christ. He's not talking about perfection. But he is talking about growth – an increasing devotion and love for Christ. Are you pursuing that? Or are you perhaps, just drifting?

Nobody drifts into excellence. Nobody drifts into maturity. Nobody becomes godly by accident.

Paul says three times in verse 28 that his aim is to warn everyone, teach everyone, so that he might present everyone mature in Christ. This is for everyone – not just some special group. This is for all of us.

I have the privilege of coaching my youngest son's U8 soccer team on Saturday mornings. *I didn't know you played soccer, Nathan?* You're right. I don't. I don't know the first thing about soccer.

But U8 means under 8 years old, and they needed coaches, so I hope I'm better than nothing. This league isn't aimed at developing all-stars or professional soccer players. There are some talented kids, of course. But the goal is for everyone to play. It's for everyone to try to score, for everyone to get in the game. Pastor Josh, who plays soccer and knows it well, is helping to coach the Varsity team at Faith Christian School. They're a very good team and he's a very good coach. Not everyone gets to play, that's not the goal. The same is true for college and professional athletic teams.

But the church isn't a professional soccer team. Everyone should be in the game. We are all called to contribute. We all have a role to play. And there are tons of resources available to help you grow. We have small groups and equip classes. We try to help with

counseling needs and spiritual direction. We have access to RightNow Media and a resource library under the stairs. We give away books and resources regularly.

There are people who labor for your maturity in Christ. Week by week, your pastors labor on your behalf. We pray and study and think and plan and meet with you. Now, I know you're paying me. (thank you!) But God intends for you to benefit from our labors. So let me put it simply – are you benefiting from our labor? Or more crassly, are you getting your money's worth? Our pastors labor for you, even struggling and toiling, so that you would be growing toward maturity in Christ. So are you taking advantage of those who labor for you? Are you growing toward maturity in Christ?

**Question #3 – Do you know all that you have in Christ?**

Did you notice all the riches and treasure language in this passage? The riches of the glory of the mystery, the riches of the treasures of all wisdom and knowledge...

Paul is using this language of riches and treasures on purpose. He's saying, the Christian life is like living in this mansion. It is fully stocked with treasures and valuables **for you**. And his point, is that in Christ, this is what it means to be in Him.

This is one of the major, repeated messages of the New Testament. We have riches in Christ. The riches of God's goodness to us in Romans 2, the riches of His grace to us Ephesians 1, the riches of His generosity towards us 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 8, God will supply every need according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus Philippians 4.

Paul is saying you need to explore and get to know and appreciate the riches that are yours in Christ. You should walk down the hallways of your mind and see and wonder at the riches which are yours in Christ. There are pictures there and promises written so that you would be reminded of the riches which are yours in Christ, now and forever. If you are in Christ, you should remind yourself of these truths every day.

So do you know all that you have in Christ? And if not...ransack your Bible for the riches. Wrestle with God until you know what He has promised.

Paul's ministry is to make this mystery of Christ fully known, so that we would be mature in Him. So is your faith firm? Are you growing? Do you know what you have in Christ? Let's pray...

## **Lord's Supper**

We come now to celebrate the Lord's Supper together. This is a great reminder of what we have in Christ. Because Jesus shed his blood on the Cross and gave His body for us, we can be forgiven of our sins when we put our faith in Him.

This act is a memorial of what Jesus has done for us. There is nothing magical going on here with the juice and the bread. They are signs pointing to the finished work of Jesus and a tangible reminder that He bore our sins on Himself to reconcile us to God.

Jesus calls for His disciples to do this in a worthy way, in remembrance of Him. We are to examine ourselves, confessing our sins, and calling to mind the great mercy of God in saving us. For this reason, this table is for Christians. If you are here and you are not trusting in Christ, I'm glad you're here, but I would ask that you heed the warnings of Scripture and refrain from partaking.

But if you are a Christian but belong to another church which preaches the gospel as you've heard it this morning, you are invited to come and partake with us as a sign of the unity of Christ's church.

In just a moment, we'll pray and you will be dismissed by row to come and receive the elements. It is all gluten-free bread at all the tables, so don't let that keep you from partaking with us. I'll ask that you pick up both the bread and the cup and hold on to them. We'll take them together as a sign of our unity.