

Colossians 1:24-29 (NKJV)
A Christ Focus in Christian Living

Introduction

A preacher was becoming terribly distracted by a man who came to church every Sunday and slept through the whole sermon. One Sunday, the preacher decided to do something about it.

As he began to preach, the man fell fast asleep as per normal. The preacher then said quietly, "Everyone who wants to go to heaven, stand up." The entire congregation stood up, except the sleeping man.

When they had sat down, the preacher shouted at the top of his voice, "Everyone who wants to go to hell, stand up!"

This startled the dozing man. Still half asleep, he jumped up, looked around to see what was going on, and then said to the preacher, "I don't know what we are voting on, but it looks like both you and I are the only ones in favour of it."

What's the moral of the story? Don't let the preacher catch you sleeping? I'll put the moral of the story as this—Christian faith and service is very much about living for Jesus by standing up for the right thing at the right time. And to live for Jesus by standing up for the right thing at the right time is not easy. It demands that we constantly keep a Christ focus.

In Col. 1:24-29, Paul used his own example to encourage the Colossian believers to keep a Christ focus in their Christian faith and service.

The church in Colossae was a mixed church, comprising both Gentiles and Jews. It began during Paul's 3-year ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19). The church was founded by Epaphras (1:5-7) who apparently was saved during a visit to Ephesus. He likely started the church when he returned home to Colossae.

This letter to the Colossians was written by Paul as a prisoner in Rome. Epaphras visited him there to seek advice to deal with a heresy in the Colossian church (Philemon 23). Paul knew that the Colossians needed a Christ focus in the midst of confusion, and encouraged and challenged them accordingly in this letter.

We too need a Christ focus in our Christian faith and service for we are drowned by much confusing voices today. What does it mean to have a Christ focus in Christian living? First, it means ...

I. To keep advancing Christ's love for people, not their love for us (vv. 24-26).

Paul said in v. 4, "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you ..."

This is strange saying. What kind of person was Paul—rejoicing in suffering?

A tragic maritime accident once happened, involving one of our navy vessels (RSS Courageous) and a container ship (ANL Indonesia). Three servicewomen lost their lives, one other still missing and presumably dead.

They were all given full military honours during their funerals. Yet, those who were close to them—family members, relatives, colleagues, and friends—were all tearing or aching emotionally. No one was seen rejoicing before the TV cameras when the military honours at the funerals were telecast.

Why? Because they were all suffering—suffering from the pain of losing someone dear to them. Indeed during times of suffering, the normal response is to mourn, not to rejoice.

So, what kind of man was Paul who could rejoice in his sufferings? Of course, you and I know the answer—he was a masochistic, emotionally mixed-up man who rejoiced when he should be sad. Right? Of course, wrong! But what were Paul's sufferings in the first place?

Well, if he was indeed in prison when he wrote this letter to the Colossians, the immediate suffering he had in mind must be that of his imprisonment in Rome. He was imprisoned for his commitment to bring the Gospel into the Gentile world. Also, even from the point of his conversion in Acts 9, he suffered blindness for some days. After that, he suffered rejection from both Jews and Gentiles, threats upon his life, beating and whipping, and shipwreck. What a "dog's life" we may sigh in pity of Paul. But he counted it all joy. Why? Because he had committed to advance Christ's love for people, not people's love for him. If in his sufferings, Christ's love could reach some people, Paul would rejoice in that. That's his Christ focus in faith and service.

And Christ's love had indeed reached some people through Paul in his sufferings. How do I know? In v. 24, he said, "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you ..." Who is this "you"? It refers to the Christians in Colossae. Paul was kind of looking back at all that happened to him and said, "Because of my work in bringing the message of Christ's love to the lost, and having to suffer for this time and again, you (the Colossian Church) have been established and for this I rejoice."

Note that Paul said he rejoiced because he was suffering FOR people, not FROM something. If Paul had said that he was rejoicing because he was

suffering from something, it would imply that he somehow thought that being victimized by suffering would earn him a badge of heavenly honour; that to suffer was to be spiritual. We will be sadly mistaken if we think that by losing health and suffering from sickness will earn us more spiritual honour, or by losing wealth and suffering from poverty will earn us more spiritual honour. No, hurting in this life does not necessarily make us more spiritual than others.

Note that Paul said he rejoiced because he was suffering FOR people—i.e. FOR the Colossian believers. Looking at them, he saw how Christ's love had reached them and saved them; how his service in advancing Christ's love to them had reaped fruit—i.e. the establishment and growth of the Colossian Church. Thus, Paul rejoiced because he saw that his sufferings were not in vain. He did not rejoice merely because he had suffered.

In a somewhat strange way, Paul added in v. 24 that he would “fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ”. Surely, Paul did not mean to say that the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross was inadequate in settling the question of sin. What Paul meant was that even after the death of Jesus Christ, the enemies of God had not stopped in their persecution of those advancing the love of Christ for a sinful world. These messengers of Christ's love (whose number would include Paul) were being persecuted because those who had persecuted Christ did not have enough. Christ's afflictions were inadequate in the sense that God's enemies were not pacified even after Jesus' death. Instead, they continued relentlessly to oppose the spread of God's love in Jesus Christ for a sinful world. They continued to declare war on God by persecuting those who preached and spread the Gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ.

Hence, sufferings brought upon him by others became a divine necessity for Paul because in taking his faith and service in Jesus Christ seriously, he declared war on the ungodly and they on him. It is the same with us today if we want to take our Christian faith and service seriously, we enter into spiritual warfare with all that oppose God. And in any warfare, sufferings are part and parcel of the game. So, it's no shame to share your struggle from time to time with one another—we're all engaged in spiritual warfare.

Many hated Paul for sharing God's love in Jesus Christ. Yet he did not lose heart because he had a Christ focus—i.e. to advance Christ's love for people, not people's love for him. It is the same for us—when we advance Christ's love for people rather than their love for us, we are able to love people no matter how difficult they may be. In his sufferings, Paul continued to serve the churches rather than expecting the churches to serve him. In the same way, we handle our sufferings best when we reach out to help others rather than focusing on and complaining about our own pain.

Paul knew what was demanded when he called himself in v. 25 as “a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you”. Put in

another way, Paul said—“God has appointed me as His servant for you, and you are God’s household over which He has appointed me to care for.”

Well, we often like the honour of being appointed by God. But we often loathe the responsibilities to serve and care for others. We preferred to be served and cared for by others instead of serving and caring for others. And those in the service and caring professions can testify that it often seems like a thankless job—you get more brickbats than praises in spite of all your hard work. Loving people has no glamour at all. But being loved by people has all the glamour to it.

Paul rejoiced in his sufferings for the Colossians in particular, and the Church in general. He kept a Christ focus that advanced Christ’s love for people, not people’s love for himself. And we today can imitate Paul in these two ways:

- One, love people as we serve. I remember on my graduation from seminary, the President of the seminary and the Baptist Convention staff each gave me a card. The funny thing was that each card congratulated me and gave me almost the same advice—“John, as you go serve God’s people, love them, love them, and love them.”

For a moment, I thought there was some kind of conspiracy going on. I said within myself, “Thank you very much. But I am so full of love that it will be no problem for me to love people. Hey, I am actually overflowing with love and waiting for people to come and receive some of it.”

But I guess I said too soon. It didn’t take me too long to realize that it was not easy to love people no matter how loving a person you thought you were. Let me elaborate.

Preparing sermons took a lot of time from me when I was a pastor. But somehow, I had this feeling that after you had done all the preaching, people seemed to have hardly listened. And I began to complain, “God, these people are so indifferent half the time I preach that I can’t even fire up their spirit.”

One time, I decided to browse through all the sermons I had preached. To my surprised discovery, I was so upset with myself for having preached about half of them. The sermons were sound biblically and theologically, but they were crafted with words that were lacking much in love. So, I threw them all away, never to preach them again.

And I remembered the people. And no more did I complain against them saying, “Lord, these people are so indifferent half the time I preach that I can’t even fire up their spirit.” Instead I complimented

them by saying, “Lord, these people are so patient half the time I preach that they are so forbearing in spirit.”

Indeed, when we serve to advance Christ’s love for people rather than seeking their love for us, God will give us reason(s) to love them in Jesus Christ.

- Two, handle comfort with prudence. We live in a culture that rejoices in comfort, not in suffering. Comfort is valued by many as perhaps the highest good in life.

You’ve heard of 24-hour *kopitiam* and 24-hour clinic. There was once some talks about 24-hour childcare centre. This facility is for parents who want to keep their children there for weekdays, and take care of them only on weekends. When asked why they would want to do that to their children, one “weekend” parent said, “So that we can work harder and earn more money and give better comfort for all of us.” Indeed, comfort is valued by many as perhaps the highest good in life. In the name of comfort, no price is too high to pay, even if it means less time for our loved ones.

Without trying to undermine the validity of comfort, I believe it will be good for us to handle our level of or desire for comfort with prudence.

Economic slowdown can squeeze many pockets at any time. But when such a time comes, it is perhaps a God-given time for us to learn to scale down and learn to live with less without depriving ourselves of what we need to have. What are some things that may be nice to have, that we like to have, that we want to have, but can afford not to have?

For those searching for work, I hope you will be prayerful in your choice. Sad is the worker who says, “The only reason why I am doing this work is the money.” Many people are frustrated with their work today because they have much pay but little passion in what they do.

We need a Christ focus in our Christian faith and service for we are surrounded by much confusing voices today. What does it mean to have a Christ focus? First, it means advancing Christ’s love for people. Also, it means ...

II. To reveal Christ in our lives, not just believe Christ in us (vv. 27-29).

In v. 26, Paul said that “the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations ... has been revealed” to Christians.

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What then is this “mystery”? The answer is in v. 27—“It is Christ in you.” The mystery is that the love of God in Jesus Christ is for “you”—i.e. the Colossians; the Gentiles. God not only loves the Jews, He also loves the Gentiles; the whole world.

When one believes in Jesus Christ, he has Christ in him. Now, this has nothing to do with secrecy, but with transparency. Let me explain. I say to you, “I have a wallet in me.” Can you see my wallet? No, because the wallet is hidden in my pocket—that’s secrecy; not to be revealed.

But Christ in us is not meant to be secret and hidden. Rather, Christ in us is meant to be transparent; to be shown openly; to be revealed. Christ in us is not some magic state that will guarantee us a place in heaven when the time comes. Rather, Christ in us is a lifestyle here on earth through which we openly show that Christ is really in us. So, Christ in us is transparency, not secrecy. In fact, if a person believes that Christ is in him, he is to show Christlikeness in his life and not hide it.

Paul told the Colossians that Christ was in them, just as He was in the Jewish believers. One of the beautiful things done by the love of God in Jesus Christ is that it brings different people together.

I remember a true story of a very special church in Portland, Oregon, USA. The church had an active ministry to AIDS patients. Some weeks after the church embarked on this bold and controversial ministry, a prominent church member by the name of Charlie phoned the pastor, Van Roland. This member was a dynamic, young professional active in the music ministry. He asked the pastor, “Could you and your wife come over and meet with us tonight? I’ve been sick the last couple of days and had a dramatic weight loss. I’ve just come back from the doctor’s office, and I’d like to talk to you.”

Van and his wife (Helen) walked over to Charlie’s house. There, Charlie told them that the doctor had diagnosed him to have AIDS. And Charlie told the pastor that he wanted to go public with this before the congregation.

Pastor Roland assured Charlie and his wife that he would support them in that decision. But first they would need to tell their families and to confirm the results of Charlie’s blood tests. When Pastor Roland and Charlie went to collect the results, the doctor said in surprise, “I’ve never seen this happen before—that a pastor would come in with someone like this!”

“Well, that’s the kind of church I go to!” Charlie told him.

The results were positive—Charlie indeed had AIDS. Pastor Roland said to him, “You’ve got to be honest with me now. If this is tough for you, don’t pretend that you’re okay.”

Charlie replied, “I feel God’s strength. I feel supported, and with you just being here today, the load is lighter.”

Before breaking the news to the congregation, Pastor Roland consulted a lawyer. He knew he needed to obtain legal disclosure permission before publicly revealing anyone’s HIV status. That done, arrangements were made to tell the congregation.

On the appointed Sunday, a carefully worded statement was read to the congregation at the end of the service. In essence, it said that Charlie had been diagnosed as HIV positive because of lifestyle choices made several years in the past. He had since sought the Lord’s forgiveness and had long abandoned those behaviours. It also added that the pastoral staff was standing fully behind Charlie and his wife, and because of the kind of church they belonged to, the couple wanted their spiritual family to know about the situation.

When Pastor Roland finished reading the statement, the entire congregation (well over 1,000) spontaneously stood to their feet and gave Charlie and his wife a standing ovation. Then, the pastoral staff prayed for the couple. And when the invitation was given to the people to come forward and affirm Charlie and his wife, a long line came pouring out of the pews for an hour. No one seemed to want to leave church that Sunday.

(The Power of a Promise Kept by Gregg Lewis, pp. 155-58)

Well, I am not saying that our pastor should immediately befriend AIDS patients, or our church should start a ministry for AIDS patients. What I want to encourage here is that we Christians should learn to put aside our differences and to live together because Christ is in each of us. One way to show Christ in us is to live as one in Jesus Christ by tearing down the walls that we have erected to separate us from each other—denominational walls, racial walls, social walls, etc. We need to say with conviction, “We don’t care who you are. If you want to know God and to grow spiritually, this is the place for you. You’ll be loved and cared for here.”

Paul stressed in v. 28 that “Him we preach”. In other words, we preach Christ in us as the Good News for those who believe. We can preach no better Gospel than that. However, we can present every believer a better person. How? By “warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.”

Yes, the Gospel is not only to be preached and shared for conversion. It is also to be accompanied by spiritual admonition and instruction. Spiritual birth must go on to spiritual maturity—that's the gauge of ministry success. Christ in every believer demands every believer grows into maturity in Christ ("perfect in Christ Jesus" in v. 28). God gauges success by whether a congregation is spiritually nurtured and nourished. And this has two implications for the church:

- One, church strength has to do with nurture, not just numbers. Yes, large numbers of converts and big premises can be positive indicators of progress in church ministry. However, God's plan is that all converts be presented perfect in Christ and this is only fully realized at the coming again of Jesus Christ. Hence, church success and strength is more than filling the sanctuary to the fullest, using the facilities to the fullest, or packing the calendar to the fullest. Rather, it has much to do with growing each believer to the fullest in Christlikeness, beginning now and continuing till Jesus comes again.

Indeed, big numbers and buildings can do great things. But big numbers and buildings may not be for every congregation. But Christ is for everyone. And growing unto perfection in Christ is for everyone who has Christ in him—bishop, elder, deacon, pastor, usher, Sunday School teacher, regular worshipper, and all alike. So, a strong church preaches, warns and teaches because it sees great potential in every unbeliever to be saved, and great potential in every believer to be nurtured.

- Two, preaching is centred on the message rather than on the messenger. Preaching today is very much about personality. Is the preacher a nice man? Does he move me? Can I connect with him? Is he humorous? Is he dynamic? These can be valid questions. But if they become the sole criteria for good preaching, the danger is the messenger becomes more important than the message; suave charisma becomes more important than sound content.

Preaching is preaching in that it reveals and expounds God in Jesus Christ. If we hear much about ourselves (self-esteem, self-worth, and self-realization) and little about God in Jesus Christ, we are then made to have a greater sense of self, not of God. It is really self-worship under the disguise of God-worship. It is much like good therapy but little like Gospel preaching.

Conclusion

To live authentically as a Christian is to live with a Christ focus by advancing Christ's love for people; by showing Christlikeness in our lives.

Is this easy? Of course, it's not! That's why Paul ended in v. 29 by saying that "I also labor, striving accordingly to His working which works in me mightily."

Living with a Christ focus is never easy. To labour is to work until you are spent and exhausted. To strive is to struggle with all of one's energy. This is the picture of Paul's words as he lived and served, and challenged others to do so as well.

Never easy, but always possible. Why? Because even as we work, God Himself is working powerfully in us to enable us to live out this way.

I pray that we will not lose courage; that we will work hard at living and serving with a Christ focus, yet always dependent on God to empower us to do so. Amen!