

## PAUL'S GREAT COMMISSION

Ever wonder what makes people tick? What goes on inside people's brains that makes them act the way they do?

I wonder that sometimes when I watch the news. For instance, on July 2<sup>nd</sup> of this year, an 18-year-old, Tristan Jackson, killed two people and injured another 28 in Baltimore, MD. What works inside a young man that makes him willing to shoot up a block party in order to kill as many people as possible?

That same 4<sup>th</sup> of July week another 18 people were killed and an additional 98 injured in 21 other mass shootings across the US. How does someone do that?

On the flip side, what goes on in the heart of someone like Akron, OH police officer Aaron Williams? He was the first responder on the scene of a house fire. Learning there was someone inside, Williams kicked open the front door of the burning home and heard someone respond to his voice. Officer Williams ran into the smoke-filled house to rescue a wheelchair-bound woman from the first floor.

What makes someone run into danger to help a total stranger in desperate need?

We're intrigued by these kinds of biographical inquiries. They help us understand our world a little bit better—and, they help us understand ourselves: to aspire to what we see is noble and to recognize and reject our baser instincts.

Have you ever wondered what made the Apostle Paul tick?

Paul had walked the corridors of influence and power in ancient Jerusalem. He had been personally trained by Gamaliel, one of the most influential rabbis of First Century Judaism. Paul's own assessment of his pre-conversion life was this: "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1:14 ESV).

In his misdirected zeal for God, Paul sought for and received authority from the Jewish Sanhedrin to champion a determined effort to stamp out a splinter sect of Judaism called *The Way* made up of men and women who followed a crucified blasphemer called Jesus.

Paul wielded that power with great relish and effect. He said of himself at that time: “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities” (Acts 26:9-11 ESV).

But in one stunning encounter with Jesus, Paul’s life took a breathtaking reversal: the man who loved power and caused suffering and death for so many Christ-followers became a humble servant of Jesus and his church, and would himself suffer greatly for the sake of that church.

What worked in Paul as he embraced the life of an itinerant Apostle and church planter? We don’t have a complete account, but throughout his letters, Paul drops biographical clues, tidbits of information that give us glimpses into his heart.

Colossians 1:24-29 is one of those passages. Paul describes for the believers in Colossae a driving impetus behind his efforts—what compelled him to do what he did? To what outcomes did he aspire? This morning we want to look through this little window into Paul’s soul.

“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” (Colossians 1:24-29 ESV).

I think of this as Paul’s personal great commission, his personal goal and ambition, his own understanding of God’s call on his life. Paul says God commissioned him to serve Christ’s body, the church. At the time he wrote these words, his faithfulness to that call had landed Paul in Rome, under house arrest chained twenty-four/seven to a Roman guard. Look at v. 24 again: “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” (Colossians 1:24 ESV).

This is one of the more difficult passages in Colossians. In what sense did Paul “fill up what was lacking in Christ’s afflictions?” It certainly cannot mean that what Jesus did on the cross was insufficient, or incomplete. Paul’s whole burden in writing this letter is to demonstrate the complete sufficiency of Jesus. But what did it mean to fill up what was lacking in Christ’s afflictions?

When Paul had his confrontation with Jesus on the road to Damascus so many years ago, Jesus said something that burned itself into Paul’s soul. Luke records this: “...falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*’” (Acts 9:4)?

Paul thought he was bringing heretics to justice. Jesus told Paul that what he had done to his followers fell upon Jesus himself. Jesus so identified with his church that their persecution became his persecution. Jesus is in them and they are in him. So Jesus felt the attacks Paul made on his body, the church.

As an aside, think about the personal implications of that. Whatever you endure for the sake of Christ, whether it be ridicule or, if need be, actual suffering, Jesus experiences it with you. We are never alone in what we experience.

Paul got that. And, he understood that spreading the good news about Jesus in a hostile world would not be easy. He would pay a necessary price to preach God's message. Shortly after his conversion Jesus sent a man by the name of Ananias to speak to Paul. Among other things, Jesus told Ananias: "For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:10-16 ESV).

Paul talked about those sufferings when he wrote the Corinthians: "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Corinthians 11:24-27 ESV).

That was what Paul endured to preach the gospel and plant churches and so fulfill his ministry. And Paul knew that what he suffered, Jesus also suffered with him.

Even Paul's imprisonment in the heart of Rome with its threat of eventual execution was not an abandonment by Jesus but a participation in what Jesus himself endures in order to build his church. Church leadership can be a costly endeavor, and Paul rejoiced to pay the price for the sake of Christ's body, the church.

Look at v. 25. Referring to Christ's body the church, Paul says "...I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you..." God picked a most unlikely prospect for ministry—he does that sort of thing. What fueled Paul's passion, what caused him to rejoice even while under house arrest in Rome, was the enormous significance of the task God had given him: "to make the word of God fully known." Specifically, God commissioned Paul to reveal one of God's best secrets, that even Gentile nations would share equally in the rich glory of the Jewish Messiah: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

It's hard for us to understand what a radical thing that was in the First Century. Jews were the covenant people of God and Gentiles were not. Gentiles were outsiders, strangers. Jews called Gentiles dogs, considered them dirty—unclean—and treated contact with them as defiling. If it were not for the commission God gave Paul, you and I likely would not be sitting here this morning worshiping God and following Jesus.

Go on to v. 28: “Him [Jesus] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”

This is one of two passages God used significantly in shaping my own call to ministry. The other was from the Book of Ezra: “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel” (Ezra 7:10 ESV).

Very early on, while just starting out in Bible College, God used Ezra's example and then Paul's words to bring into clearer focus desires God was nurturing in my heart: to make the word of God fully known, to proclaim Jesus, to admonish and teach as wisely as I knew how with the goal of one day presenting before God's throne people who had become fully mature followers of Jesus because they understood and embraced God's message. The first time I read this in Colossians, it struck fire. I resonated with it's significance.

It energizes me yet. It has always been a touchstone that keeps me focused on what God called me to do.

It energized Paul. Paul wished that everyone he met might one day stand before God fully mature in Christ. *Fully mature means that they had become fully devoted followers of Jesus and fully developed followers of Jesus.*

Paul wanted people to be spiritually full-grown with a mature approximation to the character and conduct of Jesus himself.

By the way, what Paul shoots for in others becomes something of an aspiration for *every* believer's personal spiritual development. Have you ever considered full maturity in Christ as a goal for your life—something toward which you move actively and *intentionally*? Do you have any real expectation that down the road, when you have launched your families, when you hit those so-called “golden years,” you'll be a whole lot more like Jesus than you are today? Are you actively pursuing a life that is becoming a mature expression of the presence of Jesus in you?

Questions like that challenge me beyond words. They confront me with the fact that I can too easily slip into coasting spiritually—settling, hoping growth will happen by osmosis, or becoming satisfied by just being in church and having become enculturated to church life and expectations. That's like thinking spending enough time in a cookie jar will make me a cookie.

And then God reminds me that his goal for me is more than a nicer, more religious version of myself. God desires that Christ be formed in me. Christ-formation in me requires *intentionality* on my part that is a mirror response to intentionality on God's part.

When Paul wrote the church in Philippi, he acknowledged that he hadn't arrived at full maturity yet himself. But he was still in the hunt, and he kept after the goal of becoming a *fully devoted, fully developed Christ-follower*. And what Paul wanted for himself, he wanted for others.

When he wrote the church in Ephesus he defined maturity this way: “...the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children... Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:13–15 ESV).

To that end, Paul admonished and taught with all wisdom. Admonition and teaching are complementary essentials in ministry. Admonition addresses the negative, the problematic. It is warning, correcting, rebuking. It's counsel for avoiding spiritual danger, and straight up confrontation with disobedience.

Moms admonish all the time: “Stay out of the street. Clean you’re room—it’s a mess. Did you brush your teeth? Don’t talk to strangers. Do your homework.” If moms are not wise, we call it nagging. **Preachers, if they are not wise, sometimes nag too.** But still, admonition is an essential part of raising kids, whether they are our own kids in our homes or God’s kids in God’s house.

Teaching is the positive complement to admonition. Teaching imparts truth leading to understanding. Teaching informs us about what God has said and what God intends by saying it.

Both admonition and teaching have the same goal: transforming lives by renewing minds.

And before we set admonition and teaching neatly on the shelf labeled “What Preachers Do,” turn over a page to Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you [*all y’all*] richly, teaching and admonishing **one another** in all wisdom...” What Paul did, he expects all of us to do. While some have special callings, gifts and training, admonition and teaching—warning and instructing in the faith—is the calling of everyone who follows Jesus. It’s how God’s family operates.

My friend, Mark and his wife Janell have adopted a number of at-risk kids. Mark tells me what makes the whole family project work is the way older adoptees come along side and train the younger ones. The whole family understands their essential role in passing on family values and ways of doing things. Mark insists that he and Janell could never pull it off on their own.

That’s how it is in God’s family, the church. We have pastors who commit themselves vocationally to “...making the word of God fully known.” We talk about Jesus and in every way we can help people become ***fully devoted and fully developed*** followers of Jesus.

But the project is too big to leave to a few “professionals.” While some of us have been called to special vocational roles, we all share the responsibility for growing God’s kids into spiritually mature people—men and women who look and act like Jesus. To adapt a contemporary proverb: “It takes an entire church family to raise a child of God.”

Paul's great commission was to make God's word fully known. To keep Christ central. To admonish and teach—warn and instruct—with a view to presenting before the throne of Christ fully mature followers of Jesus—fully devoted and fully developed.

It is a commission he has passed on to us.

May God's Holy Spirit fill us with that same desire to become fully devoted and fully developed followers of Jesus. And may God's good Word find such rich lodging in our hearts that we in turn may admonish and teach each other with all wisdom until that great day when we stand before his throne, complete in Christ.

*Benediction:*

“Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to [the] gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen” (Romans 16:25-27).