

Let's keep our Bibles open right there in Colossians chapter 2. I'm grateful for this opportunity to speak to our whole church today, and as much as I wish I could be with you in person, as verse 5 says, *though I am absent in body, I am with you in spirit!* And I look forward to the next time I can visit with you at an all-church event or at your campus.

The last time we looked at a passage together as a whole church, we were in Colossians chapter 1. And for most of that chapter, Paul speaks about the glory and grace of Jesus. It's like he takes a spotlight, shines it upon Christ, and invites us to marvel at what we see. But towards the end of chapter 1, without turning that spotlight off, Paul begins to shine some additional light upon his own ministry. He speaks about the challenges of his ministry, of the suffering and the affliction involved. At the same time, he speaks about the privileges of his ministry, and his commitment to carrying out God's call upon his life. Then, in Colossians chapter 2, Paul continues to open his heart, telling these believers about his struggle for their sake, his desire for their well-being, a concern he has for their future, but also the joy he feels when he considers their present condition.

As I've pondered these verses, I've found that what Paul says here captures so much of what I hope and pray for our church. So, I want to take this as an opportunity to open my heart to you. And I trust that what we see in these verses will resonate with many of us as we all seek to serve one another and build up the body of Christ here at The Orchard. So, let's jump in and consider what Paul says here about: his struggle, his desire, his concern, and his joy, and what these things mean for us.

We'll begin with...

1. Paul's Struggle

Look at verse 1. Paul says, *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* (v.1).

Some of you will know that I went to Taylor University where I studied Biblical Literature. In that program, my favorite class took place during January of my senior year. It was a month-long course on the book of Revelation. We spent the first two weeks studying in the classroom, and the second two weeks in Turkey visiting the seven cities which were home to the seven churches, to whom Revelation was originally written. And I'll never forget standing in the ruins at Laodicea, where I could look out and see the city of Colossae, or at least the mound under which that city was buried (I believe they have just recently begun excavating it). Colossae and Laodicea were neighboring towns. Paul wrote this letter to the churches located in these two communities, churches full of people he had never met, but whom he dearly loved.

He loved them so dearly that he was willing to endure a great struggle on their behalf. And that's always true of any faithful ministry. Think of the ministry the Lord has entrusted to you, how he has called you to serve our church, or your family, or your community. There are struggles you must endure, but you do so because you long to honor Christ, and you love the people he has called you to serve. The struggles might be physical. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul talks about the physical struggles he faced in ministry: the beatings, the shipwrecks, the toil, hardship, and

sleepless nights. And there will be some in our church, and certainly some among our global ministry partners, who have faced significant physical struggles for the sake of God's people. But the struggles can be emotional as well. At the end of his long list of struggles in 2 Corinthians 11, Paul says this in verse 28: *And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches* (2 Corinthians 11:28).

Ministry can be a source of great pressure and anxiety, because we really care about the people we serve, and we want so badly to see them doing well. And certainly, ministry comes with spiritual struggles. That may be opposition we face from our great enemy, or the battle we must wage against our own sin. But there's a particular spiritual struggle Paul mentions in Colossians that I want to highlight, and it's the struggle to pray.

In Colossians 4:12, Paul writes about a man from Colossae named Epaphras, who was with Paul when he wrote this letter. And he says, *Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers* (Colossians 4:12).

By calling prayer a struggle, Paul calls attention to something we all know to be true: prayer is not easy. But nothing truly significant ever is. I believe it was Tim Keller who once wrote that the most important things in life are never easy. And therefore, Keller concluded that because it is so hard, prayer must be one of the most important things. And church, as we seek to serve one another, and build one another up here at The Orchard, I hope that we will be willing to struggle for one another, in prayer, and in other acts of sacrificial love, as our Savior has served us. As we do, great things will happen among us. That brings us to our second point:

2. Paul's Desire

Paul's struggle had a purpose. All the energy he invested in his ministry had a particular goal. He desired great things for the church. As we look at verses 2-3, I want you to see three desires Paul had for the churches at Colossae and Laodicea. Three things I hope we all desire for our church as well. Here's the first. Paul desired...

A. That the church would be encouraged in heart

In verse 2, Paul writes that he endures this great struggle for the church *...that their hearts may be encouraged...* (v.2).

Life in this world is full of discouragements, but Paul longs to see God's people encouraged in the deepest part of their being, in their hearts. In our context, we often think of the heart as the place of our emotions. But in the ancient world, the heart meant more than that. The heart was the source of a person's will and intellect, as well as their emotions. The heart refers to the core, the centerpiece of a person's internal life, which affects everything else. So, Paul says, "I engage in this great struggle of ministry so that God's people will be encouraged in heart... in the depths of their being." And then he describes two sources of this sort of soul-level encouragement. He shares his desire...

B. That the church would be united in love

Look at verse 2, Paul says he struggles in ministry for the church ...*that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love...* (v.2).

One of the most discouraging things about our world is the divisiveness we see all around us. From the mounting polarization of our politics to the perpetual fury filling our social media, we are all aware that unity is an increasingly rare commodity. And unfortunately, the divisive nature of our world can manifest itself within the church. But that's not new to the 21st century. It's been a perpetual problem for God's people. But Paul's earnest desire is that the division would not disrupt the church in Colossae or Laodicea. He wants them to be *knit together* in love!

Now, when you hear that phrase, "knit together," don't think of your grandma knitting a sweater. I have nothing against that kind of knitting! But that kind of knitting isn't particularly strong. It's too easy to pull a thread and undo that work. No, when Paul talks about the church being knit together, he is talking about the church full of people supporting one another and striving forward together, the way the joints and ligaments within our bodies support us and allow us to move. In Colossians 2:19, he speaks about the way a healthy church... *nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God* (Colossians 2:19).

And what binds a church together like that? What brings God's people together like that? Love! So, if we want to maintain unity, if we want to be knit together in this divisive world, we must pursue love. Love, Paul says in Colossians 3:14, *which binds everything together in perfect harmony* (Colossians 3:14). By God's grace, let's strive to be a church full of people who love one another. That will strengthen our unity and encourage our hearts. That was Paul's desire for the church that they would be encouraged in heart, being knit together in love, and...

C. That the church would be secure in Christ

Look at verse 2 one more time and also verse 3: Paul says he struggles for these believers ...*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* (vv.2-3).

In the church, the love we receive from one another will encourage our hearts. But that's only a dim reflection of the kind of love we receive from God in Jesus Christ. Look at Paul's language. We live in a world full of so much uncertainty about the future, a world full of people who are desperately seeking truth they can stake their life on. And here, Paul is saying that we can have assurance and understanding. And not just a little assurance and a bit of understanding. He speaks about riches of full assurance and understanding! Where does that come from? From Christ! In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

You see the treasures of truth and the riches of assurance are hidden in Christ. And that word hidden doesn't mean they are hard to find, buried in some secret location that you may or may not discover. No, as one commentator writes, "They are 'hidden' in Christ in the sense that they have been deposited in him and are now stored up in him. [And] anyone who comes to know Christ by faith can draw from his store all [the riches and all the treasure] that exists."

Christ is the storehouse, the great treasure chest, in whom we find truth and assurance. And so, throughout Colossians, Paul constantly proclaims Christ, who died to forgive all our trespasses, who rose to give us new life, and who has guaranteed an eternal inheritance for us! He wants the church to find security in Christ, because as they do, they will be encouraged in heart. This is certainly my desire for our church, and I trust it is our shared desire! We long to be encouraged in heart, because we are united in love, and secure in Christ. But Paul knows something that could disrupt everything he desires for these churches. And the same thing could disrupt what we desire for our church. So, let's listen as Paul expresses his concern.

3. Paul's Concern

Look at verse 4. Paul writes, *I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments* (v.4).

When Paul says, "I say *this*," he is referring to the statement that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ. He is saying *this*, he is emphasizing *this*, because he has a real concern. Paul is aware of certain people who would delude the believers in Colossae and Laodicea by distracting them from maintaining focus on Christ and even leading them away from Christ. The question is, how might that happen?

Well, obviously, there would have been people in the 1st century, as there are today, who would openly and sometimes passionately oppose Christ. People who would deny his divinity, deride his message, and disregard him entirely. But that rarely threatens people in church. If I stood in the pulpit at The Orchard and declared that Jesus was *not* the Lord and Savior, I don't think many of you would be deceived. In fact, I know my time as your pastor would end very quickly! That sort of open opposition to Jesus would not delude you. No, Paul's concern is about a kind of false teacher who is far more subtle. He gives us a little more context regarding his concern in verse 8, where he says, *See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ* (v.8).

As you can imagine, there's a lot of scholarly discussion and debate about the particulars of this verse. What sort of philosophy was threatening the church? What were these human traditions? And what does "elemental spirits of the world" mean? We could spend a whole sermon answering those questions. But, with the time we have today, notice what is crystal clear: Whatever particular teaching Paul is referring to, here's the issue: that teaching is not according to Christ.

What does that mean? Well, listen to the way the NIV translates this verse. This captures it very well. *See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which **depends** on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ* (v.8, NIV).

You see, the question is, on what—or on whom—do you depend? Where are you looking for truth and for life? For understanding and assurance? Are you looking to Christ, in whom all those treasures are found? Or are you looking somewhere else? False teachers will have you look somewhere else. Later in Colossians 2 Paul talks about those who put too much emphasis on certain spiritual rituals, certain forms of worship and religious experiences. But while they are fixating on these things, they are losing their focus on Jesus.

So, Doug Moo writes, “The teachers [Paul refers to here] are probably not denying that Christ was central to God’s saving purposes. They seem rather to be arguing that certain practices must be added on in order to achieve true spiritual fulfillment. But, for Paul, in this case, addition means subtraction: one cannot ‘add’ to Christ without, in effect, subtracting from his exclusive place in... salvation history.”

And returning to verse 4, notice how they do it, *I say this in order that no one may delude you **with plausible arguments*** (v.4). It all sounds so plausible. So convincing. So compelling. But that’s what makes it so dangerous. And so, Paul labors throughout Colossians, and we must labor in our ministry here at The Orchard to keep the focus on Jesus—on his word, on his work, and on his grace. Let me offer one specific application: Thanks to the internet, we have direct access to more information today than most people throughout history could have ever thought possible. Our phones are portals to an infinite sea of content. And there’s plenty of good out there, but there’s plenty of bad as well. Some of the bad is obvious, but some of what we encounter may sound very plausible, even compelling, and yet, if it does not accord with Christ, if it does not teach us to depend upon Christ, it will delude us, and it will deceive us. So, we must be on guard.

We must test everything (every video, every post, every article) according to the word of Christ. And reject anything that would lead us away from Christ. That was Paul’s concern for the churches in the 1st century. And I’m sure he would have the same concern today. But I’m also confident that if he got to know our church, he would express the same joy he shares in verse 5.

4. Paul’s Joy

He says, *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* (v.5).

You see, by God’s grace, things were going well in the churches at Colossae and Laodicea. Paul is not writing to confront them because they have gotten off course. He is writing to spur them on in the direction they are headed! He is rejoicing in what he has heard. They have good order: Good doctrine and good practice. They are firm in their faith: depending upon Jesus. They are healthy churches. And Paul wants them to stay that way! So, one writer says, this

letter to the Colossians is like a vaccination against future illness, as opposed to an antibiotic to cure a present sickness.

And brothers and sisters, by God's grace, we belong to a healthy church. There is good order here. There is firmness of faith in Christ here. Let's rejoice and praise God for what we have, and let's do all we can to preserve and protect what we have, because it is possible to go astray. Remember, the book of Colossians was a letter for the church in Colossae and the church in Laodicea. At the end of this letter, Paul tells the believers at Colossae, *When this letter has been read among you, have it read in the church of the Laodiceans* (Colossians 4:16).

Paul wanted the Laodiceans to know that he rejoiced to hear of their good order and of their firmness of faith in Christ. But within a decade, something changed in Laodicea. They grew overly confident. They gave in to pride. And they became spiritually stagnant. So, through the apostle John, the Lord Jesus sent them a letter. And he told them, *You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked... be zealous and repent* (Revelation 3:17, 19).

Church, we never want to find ourselves in that position. By God's grace, we have good order and firmness of faith in Christ. Let's praise him for it! And let's protect it!

Conclusion

Here's how we can do that...

First, we depend upon Christ, personally, and as a whole church family. We receive the treasures of wisdom and understanding found exclusively in him. We reject anything that would pull us away from him. We resist anything that would distract us from him. We rest all our hope and find all our security in Christ alone. As we do this, we will enjoy unity in Christ. Again, as Colossians 2:19 says, as we hold fast in faith to Christ the head of the church, *the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, [will grow] with a growth that is from God*. And this security and unity will encourage our hearts.

Church, let's continue to make this the goal of our ministry, and let's do all we can to pursue this goal together. Even when that pursuit involves a struggle.