

Colossians 1:24-27
Week 3
Mature in Christ

Good Morning. For those who don't know me, I'm Michael. I'm a pastor at our Lexington church. Been there for like 7 or 8 years now and grown my family from 2 to 5, but before all of that I served you here as a pastor, too. It always feels like a little bit of a homecoming for me when I get to pop into preach. So, thanks so much for having me. It really is a blessing and an honor to be here with you this morning.

We're gonna be in Colossians 1:24 and work our way through the first little portion of chapter 2. So if you've got a Bible feel free to go ahead and turn there as I set us up a little bit.

A while ago I was at my kids' soccer practice, which is sort of the thing I do now as a middle-aged suburbanite. And as we were loading up for home, I saw a bit of a ruckus play out in the parking lot. Fwiw, I wasn't eavesdropping - it was just one of those situations where if you air out your dirty laundry in public, the public is gonna smell it. Ya feel?

The short of the story was there was this other family getting into their car and they were LOUD. Like loud, loud. And they were not happy loud... they were more like "it's about to go down" loud.

And I was all "awkward penguin" like, "okay, kids get in the car... don't make eye contact... act like you don't hear anything..."

And I don't know exactly what the issue was. But, what I do know is the dad was mad, the boy was disrespectful, and the mom was trying her best at damage control.

And at one point, the man yells towards his wife... "This is the problem! You always excuse his behavior and this is why he's the way he is..." and then just got in the car, slammed the door while his wife and kid stood bewildered outside.

And man the whole scenario just hit me like a ton of bricks... because I know everybody has bad days... My family has them too... but it was like at that moment I felt the weight of a hundred marriages, and relationships and families... who have been hurt by each other's words and weaknesses - whose flaws and immaturities have dealt reverberating consequences into the lives of those they care for the most...

And just sort of thought, "Man, we need help."

Last week, we talked about how Jesus has come to reconcile all things for all time - to reunite heaven and earth by making right what sin has made wrong. And how his reconciling work is both an already and a not yet reality...

And moments like that moment reminded me that there's a whole lot of the "not yet" still left. In the world, in me... and, I bet if you were honest, you'd admit in you, too. And that while it might look

different for you... there is some area, some relationship, some struggle or weakness or immaturity... some little bit of hell, if you will, lurking in your that makes you go, "Ugh... that's not right."

Well, that reality is a bit of what our text is going to hit today. Let's pick up together in verse 24. 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, 25 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,

So, by way of reminder, Paul has just gotten done teaching us about the astounding reality that Jesus is God come in the flesh to put the world back together. The King who through his life, death and resurrection, is making all that sin made wrong right again.

And as we mentioned in previous weeks, Paul is saying these things from prison. If you're unfamiliar with Paul's life, he's in prison because he wouldn't stop sharing this message.

And for various reasons, it did not sit well in many of the places he preached - just like it doesn't always sit well in our own - and he essentially found himself sent off to prison for the sake of Jesus.

But, the thing to note here is that Paul doesn't feel bad about that. Paul sees his ministry - and specifically this part of it - as participation in the sufferings of Jesus.

His worldview is that Jesus not only suffered and died to redeem the world - and specifically his church - but that his sufferings are also the means by which He sanctifies or grows her.

And his suffering is a participation in that. He's not saying there was something insufficient about Jesus' suffering, but rather when he suffers like Jesus, Jesus uses it to change him, as well as the church.

So he sees the difficulty as a gift. And I want you to hold onto that idea, because that's gonna be important later on...

Let's keep reading...

I became a minister... 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.

The mystery of the gospel of Jesus that he's talking about here is that everyone is invited. This promise - to reunite heaven and earth - isn't just something reserved for the Jewish people - as was previously thought - but for everybody - Jews and Gentiles, alike - which is good news for most of us because, generally speaking, everyone here is a Gentile.

And, Paul says the glory of this mystery is "Christ in you" That Jesus intended nothing less than taking sin-ruined humans and remaking them from the inside out.

That by entering into our very nature - he gives us the hope of glory - that he will make us something new... give us new hearts, new desires. That through the Holy Spirit he would - to use a big bible word - regenerate us - meaning gives us new life... and enliven it while also putting the old one to death.

So say it a bit more succinctly, to take creatures with hell in us and form us into creatures of heaven.

That in the end, we would be these little walking and talking representations of Heaven on Earth... "little Christs," so to speak, which is what Christian means. People who are shaped into the image of Jesus by the Spirit of Jesus within us.

That's the hope of our glory... And Paul says...this is why I do what I do...this is my end game: your growth, or rather, your maturity into this...

28 Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

He's saying, the reason I'm willing to endure this prison sentence, the reason I give my energy the way I do...the reason, I'm even writing to you now, even though we've never been together...is that I might help you - and everyone else I come into contact with—grow into this.

To personally experience more and more of this overlap of heaven and earth... To become more like Jesus... which, for the record, is what Christian maturity really is...

Like sometimes we can get it a bit confused... We can think maturity is things like learning to adopt certain spiritual practices or growing in our knowledge of theology... and certainly those are a piece of it, but really being mature in Christ... is becoming more like Christ.

- For your life to be more like Jesus' life.
- For more of that overlap of Heaven and Earth to exist in you.
- Lives marked by the quality and characteristics that marked Jesus' - things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control... to just name a few that Scripture often names...

That's Paul's goal and quite honestly that's our goal,too... Maturity is our destination... it's what we want for me, for you, as well as the rest of our church...

- Where it could be said of us that we are growing into the kind of humans God designed us to be.
- Where the overlap of heaven and earth meets in our marriages, in our parenting, in workplaces, and even in our free time when no one is watching... or randomly putting their kids in the car around us.

So, for a second, I just want you to think about all that means... for all the ways that heaven does not yet overlap or reign in you—in your behavior, your character, your soul-level thought life that maybe no one else knows but you. Do you realize that Jesus wants to change all of that?

He didn't die only to change your eternity, but to change your present too. And I don't just mean he intends to make you a person who stops lying and looks at inappropriate things online, though those certainly count. I mean:

- He wants to change your habituated responses to stress. Your destructive relationship with sex or food. The heartbreaking way you view who you are or your body.
- He wants to change the things you say to yourself in moments of self-hatred.
- He wants to take the ways you operate because it's all you saw growing up, and it's all your parents saw growing up, and he wants to remake you in such a way that a new trajectory starts with you, and blessing is passed down instead of brokenness.

To say it a bit differently, the life you actually want... Jesus wants for you, too.

So, going back to the story I started with, as I stood in the parking lot that day knowing the husband was still in the car, and the wife and kid were reeling, I couldn't help but see it as an analogy for us all.

It felt like a parable of sorts, that he just stayed there, stayed sitting in his car. And again, I imagine that for most of us, there are certain areas of our maturation process where we're content just sitting there in the car. Maybe you know it's not healthy. But it's what you've always done. At least you're used to it. It feels really ingrained and powerful.

But the invitation to all of us is to get out of the car!

To come to Jesus, the hope of glory, to change us. To forsake the ingrained, habitual patterns we have that are not good for us or our relationships... And let him do what he does best... transform us from the inside to the out...

And really, what I want for you today is to have a vision for that. To know this is increasingly where God wants to take you. You're not meant to spend your days on earth in perpetual immaturity.

You're meant to grow into the fullness of who Jesus has made you to be... to step more and more into what is already but not yet, heaven reuniting with earth. (pause)

But, with the rest of our time, I just want to highlight some things about this journey to help us along the way. Things that are just good for us know as we press towards this together...

1 - Nobody is there yet.

This one may feel like it goes without saying, but I think it's important to note... none of us have fully arrived. It doesn't matter if you've been following Jesus for 15 years or 15 minutes, we all have areas to grow.

This is how Paul starts chapter 2...

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, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

So, this might sound a bit too obvious... but if the whole reason Paul says he's writing is to help them grow... then the obvious implication is: they aren't finished yet. No one is a finished product.

I've heard before that "Sanctification is a long dirt road that ends in death." Kinda sounds bleak, but it's not meant to be. It just means, growth is always the road we're on. No one "arrives"... in fact, the journey is kind of the destination.

I love how Eugene Peterson describes it, he says the Christian life is "A long obedience in the same direction"

I have this really cheesy illustration that I got from another one of our Lexington pastors, Brandon Clements... which if you know him, you know... that fits.

But, don't mock it too much, because we use it in our marriage seminar and you're absolutely going to remember it when you leave here: we call it your JAW... everybody has a jaw. You know you have jaw, but the thing is you never see it unless you look in a mirror.

The reason this is cheesy is because in this case, JAW stands for "jarring area of weakness". And just like you can't see your physical jaw... you have a jarring area of weakness you probably can't see either.

The point is that most of us are in different places on our spiritual journey, and even those who seem to be mature in many ways can still have one or a few areas of their lives that just seem, to others, as a jarring area of weakness that they can't see. Like... "oh my gosh, they're great... but what's up with that?!"

And the most terrifying thing about these areas of weakness, these blindspots if you will, is that you can't see them until they are exposed.

I'll give you an example from my life. A few months back, Lauren and I were engaged in a... uh... call it a robust exchange of ideas. And her idea was that I wasn't very engaged with her recently. I, of course, thought otherwise. And she goes... "you don't realize it, but you've gotten really distracted by your phone. You're always checking something or scrolling something. It makes me feel unvalued." To which I said, "Babe, no I haven't." And I kid you not, at that exact same moment, my phone buzzed in my pocket... and, as the words were coming out of my mouth... I was bringing my phone to my face.

It took me about 3 seconds to notice, and when I looked up, she was just sitting there smiling... she didn't need to say anything else. So, I put my phone down and said, "Okay, boo, tell me more..."

She was right! And I had no idea. I couldn't see it.

And silly fights aside, we all have things like this... to one degree or another. Parts of us that haven't yet been shaped and changed by Jesus.

- Ways in which we still fail to love God and people as we were made to do.
- Ways - like we've talked about previously - that we live more under the influence of the world around us, than into the reality of Jesus' kingdom.

And we need those moments of exposure and clarity. As embarrassing as they may be and feel, we need them. They are necessary for us to grow into maturity.

So I'll just say generally that some of you know that you are prideful, to an extent, but you don't yet understand how deep it goes.

- Some of you joke around that you have a hard time admitting when you are wrong, like "haha isn't that a funny quirk of mine..." but your spouse isn't laughing, and your kids aren't either, and when you joke about it your LifeGroup members cringe because they don't think you get it.

Some of you are more prone to drama than you know. You know it a little bit, but you are prone more in a lot a bit kind of way. And people are afraid to tell you. Do you know why? Because they know it will cause drama.

Some of you can be kind of difficult, and it's wreaking havoc on your marriage. Your spouse lays awake and night wondering if there's a possible way they could communicate that to you without world war 3 breaking loose, but they haven't come up with it yet if there is, so they just play on their phone until they can go to sleep.

Some of you have a habit of bailing, especially when things get tough or awkward. Right in the moments where transformation would begin to happen if you would commit and dig into relationships, you move backward. You retreat. Move from person to person, group to group, church to church.

All I'm trying to say is there are so many different ways to sit in the car, you guys. So many different ways for immaturity to play out. I don't even know all the ways it plays out for me.

I know some of them, but I need help seeing the rest, just like you do.... And the point is: the place maturity truly begins is in recognizing that fact.

2 - The road there isn't easy.

So, Paul brings this up a few times in a few different ways... He talks about his suffering and the struggle. 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... 4 I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.

He seems to be painting the picture that the destination of Christian maturity is absolutely worth fighting for, but the road there isn't always easy. As is the case with any other type of maturity as well.

Just think about the process of physical maturity. My kids frequently say things to me like, "It must be great to be an adult. You get to stay up as late as you want, watch TV when you want to, drive a car." And generally I'm like, "Yeah, being an adult is awesome... but you don't know what it takes to get here."

- All they see is no bedtime and a TV they get to be the boss of... they don't know about puberty and middle school yet, they don't know about first jobs, and taxes...

Adulthood is a pretty desirable status, but it's not an easy road to get there.

And God has set the world up in such a way that in order for you to get to pretty much any desired end state, it's gonna take a lot of blood, sweat, and tears to get there.

- You want to be the kind of person who runs marathons? Great, get those feet pounding the pavement, and save up for good running shoes.

This is where I think Paul's perspective on hardship is particularly important... for Paul the way forward is through the difficulty. The growth happens in the hard stuff.

There's a book that has become something of a cult classic in leadership and personal development circles called, "The Obstacle is the Way" by Ryan Holliday. And the main thesis is the key to personal growth is to learn to see obstacles as opportunities not impediments.

- There is always this thing in us that wants to believe that if something is hard, or is met with opposition - internally or externally, then it's the wrong thing to do or not worth doing... and most often that is what keeps people from actually growing.

Spiritual maturity is no different, even though it is a process that is begun and sustained by God's grace. I love the way Dallas Willard put this when he said "Grace is opposed to earning, not effort."

In other words, grace precludes you from earning your standing or merit before God. You are saved by grace through faith alone. But growth and sanctification still require your effort. It requires you following Jesus, doing the things Jesus did, to get more and more of his life inside of you.

This is why many of the things we see Jesus model for us we now call "spiritual disciplines." We don't call them spiritual ice cream trips, because they can take effort. Things like prayer, Bible reading, fasting, solitude, etc. can have some resistance from us. Sometimes they are like going to the gym, where you don't really want to go but then as you are working out and after you're like "I'm so glad I did this."

- Things like community, and forgiveness, things like confessing our sins to one another, confronting one another in love, none of those are easy. They are disciplines. They are difficult journeys to be taken in order to get to a desired state.

But according to the Scriptures, it's all worth it. The difficulty of the journey is well worth the desired outcome. Even for Paul, he describes his ministry in terms of great difficulty, and yet great joy... he expects it, and so should you.

3 - We're on the trip together.

In verse 5 Paul 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.

So the thing that jumps off the page to me is how Paul has a vested interest in the maturity of these people that he's never met and how He wants their growth so much he's willing to give of himself to see it happen.

In fact, that's been something a theme through these first two chapters of his letter. He's consistently reiterated to them, "I'm in your corner. I pray for you all the time. I'm writing to you now because I care so much about you and don't want you to have to just figure things out on your own."

And here's the thing... the Scriptures tell is that's not just a him calling... but that's the posture we're all meant to take. We're meant to be this community that supernaturally helps one another grow to maturity.

How he'll write it elsewhere: Ephesians 4... the whole body builds itself up into mature manhood... the fullness of Christ."

Part of our calling as the body of Christ is to help each other. To have the mindset that the way we grow is by growing together. By, in Paul's words, toiling and struggling toward this goal for another.

We warn, and teach, and give wisdom, and toil, and struggle, with all the energy supplied to us in Jesus, to present each other mature in Christ.

I have a good friend that we'll call... oh, I dunno, "Adam", who has a joke he often shares after he prays. When he prays and God answers the prayer, his favorite thing to say is "I'd like to thank Jesus and me for that one." It's sort of his tongue-in-cheek way to point out the power of prayer. That God actually listens and responds when His people pray. And it's always good for a chuckle, but I really think there's something to it - especially when we talk about maturity.

It gives me this mental picture of being there on that day when the Kingdom has fully and finally come and seeing a matured version of somebody in my LifeGroup, and being able to look to Jesus and say "Look at Matt! Look how much he's grown! I helped with that. I mean it was your energy and power, Jesus, but I struggled, and warned, and taught, and look at him! And what's more is he did the same for me! I was real mad at him that time he called me out on my sin, but, you know what? He was right. I'd like to thank Jesus and me for Matt, and I'd like to thank Jesus and Matt for me.

It's honestly kinda how it's meant to work... and most of you should know this, but I always want to reiterate it when I have the chance that this is a big part of the reason we do everything the way we do it. It's the reason we're so big on community and why we prioritize LifeGroup involvement and structure groups the way that we do.

It's because, as I heard a professor once put it: "most spiritual growth happens within 3 feet of another Christian."

You can hide and fake it anywhere, but it's a lot harder to do in a group that sees you and knows how you act when someone says something a bit sharp to you, and when your kids are acting up, and when people

keep asking you questions over and over. It's a lot harder to fake things in that context than it is just here in a Gathering.

And groups aren't the only way, but certainly a primary way that we pursue maturity together. Confessing sin to one another, sharing struggles and hardships and areas of needed growth, confronting one another in love when necessary... and having a space for others to see our JAW and tell us about it.

We are to present each other mature in Christ by committing to one another, fighting for one another, asking the questions that have to be asked, saying the things that need to be said, encouraging one another, bearing one another's burdens... this is how it happens. We're on the trip together.

So, let me just tell you the 3 best things I think any of you could do for your spiritual health and others:

- Commit. Some of you are still figuring out if you're in. If this is something you are really interested in or not. Jump off the log. Get in a group. Commit to being one of the most consistent people there.
- Ask for help. Some of you need to ask others for insight you don't have into your life. You need other people who love you to let you borrow their eyes, and see things you don't see. Maybe start with a small group, maybe your spouse and 1-2 people from your LG. Ask them what areas you may need to mature in. Ask them if there is anything they are afraid to tell you or ask you.
- Speak up. Some of you need to be willing to answer those questions. Be willing to actually say something that might help someone else. Risk the awkwardness and the fact that people might get mad at you.

All that being said, I've got one more tip for the journey, and this is where we'll land things...

4 - The gospel is the way.

If maturity in Christ is the destination we are all meant for, the gospel is the way to get there. As Paul begins to shift into the meat of the letter, here's what he says...

6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

"Just as you received Christ, so walk in him." You received Christ by placing your faith in him, not yourself. By trusting in him to save you because you can't save yourself. You received Christ by humbly coming to God, acknowledging your sin, and asking him to cover it, forgive it, cleanse you from it, change you from the inside out.

Paul is saying, keep doing that, over and over again, together. Walk in that same attitude, that same spirit, that same acknowledgement that you need his grace. Or as Jesus says in John 15... abide in me, and you will bear much fruit...

- To keep coming back to the reality of who He is and what He's done. Preaching to yourself and others what is truly true... that his love and grace are the truest true things about you.

That's what's gonna help you see life most clearly. That's what's gonna help you see you most clearly... and most importantly, that's what's going to help you see God most clearly.

To revisit the story I started with, I find it beautiful that the gospel not only gives us the vision of what we are to be conformed into—the image of Christ himself—but it also gives the mercy and identity we need to get there.

- I don't know what your indwelling sin issues or areas of weakness or immaturity are. But I imagine if you are anything like me, when they get revealed you may be tempted to spiral in shame. To deflect, blameshift.
- On the flipside, when you're one yelling as you storm across the parking lot, you may be tempted to be self-righteous, because at least you don't do that. At least you don't have that weakness.

The gospel meets us in both of those responses.

- It gives you the grace and identity you need to have your weaknesses exposed, and to receive that as a means of God's grace and leadership in your life. Like he is a surgeon, putting his finger on cancerous tissue. If you are in Christ, you are covered by his perfect righteousness so you can just smile, and say "You might be right. And maybe this is God's means of calling me out of this."
- And it tears down your pride as well. Frustration with others can feel very justifying, but you are not justified by your frustration. You are justified by the same grace the other person is in need of, and you need it right now too.

So the gospel provides the only context imaginable that allows everyone involved to simply look to Jesus, with the goal of us all maturing in him, and mutually help one another grow without a trace of condemnation or superiority.

And I love that the end of our passage today wraps up with the result of doing this. That as we walk in Christ the same way we received him on the path to maturity in Christ, the end result will be "abounding in thanksgiving."

We will see more and more just how stuck in immaturity we were. How much the ways of hell were still stuck inside of us, some in ways we couldn't see for ourselves. We will look back and think, "I can't believe that's how I operated," and thank Jesus for calling us out of that, and committing to bring the reign of heaven into our lives here on Earth.

To look back and think, how good is Jesus that he doesn't leave us in the car, stewing in our own immaturity? Left to wallow in our sin with JAW?

Instead he comes alongside of us, through his Spirit and through his body, the church, and he doesn't shame us, but he does boldly and kindly call us to get out of the car and follow him to maturity.

And when we see his commitment to us, and how he is relentless in his pursuit of bringing heaven not only to Earth but to the recesses of hell in our lives, what else is left to say other than "Thank you?"

Thank You for being You.

PRAY

Father,

I just want to pray for us that Paul prays for the Colossians... that you would grow us into the fullness of understanding and knowledge of who you are and what you've done.

That you would mature us, develop us, into who you've made us and saved us to be.

Keep our eyes on Jesus - the author and perfecter of our faith.

In Jesus name,

Amen

Communion

After we hear the Word of God each Sunday, we typically carve out time to respond. We do so in 3 ways: we sing, we pray and we eat.

The worship team is gonna continue to lead us in songs to and about Jesus - the hope and peace He brings.

If you need prayer this morning, members of our church family will be off to the sides of the stage... they'd love to pray for anything you need this morning.

And we eat. This is a meal we call Communion, or the Lord's Supper... a meal given to us by Jesus to remind us of his sacrifice to save us. It's bread that represents His body broken for us. And wine for His blood given for us... to cleanse us from sin, to give us hope for the future, and bring us home to God who fills our hearts full.

It's a meal that reminds us of who Jesus really and truly is.

If you're a believer in Jesus, you're invited to take a moment - confess to God whatever sin you may need to - and come to the table and eat in remembrance of Him.

So, let's stand and sing, pray and eat.