

The Approach of a Christ-Sufficient Minister

Colossians 1:24-2:5

²⁴ I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, ²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, ²⁶ the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. ²⁷ To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.

2 For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, ² that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words. ⁵ For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ

A few years ago, we had the privilege of having Sam Rotman perform as an outreach of our church. Sam Rotman is a Jewish believer in Christ, who is an international concert pianist. When Sam told his story, we heard that he had begun studying piano at age 9 and, by age 11, was committed to being a concert pianist. He ended up at Juilliard, the most prestigious music academy in the world, where he would practice for 12 hours a day, not including breaks. He studied there for five years, earning Bachelor's and Master's Degrees in Music. He plays entire pieces by memory. He has memorised over 2000 individual pieces. He has played in the greatest of musical venues, and in over 57 countries, where he plays and gives his testimony of faith in Christ. Sam Rotman is what you call a serious musician. He is serious about music. After understanding that Sam Rotman represents what it means to be serious about music, it would affect your view of anyone else who claimed to be serious about music. If you met such a person and asked them why they considered themselves to be serious about music, and they said, "Because I can play Silent Night on the piano with two hands; I always listen to Classic FM in the car, and I have a Beethoven CD", you would struggle not to laugh. You would say, "I know you think you are serious about music, but you aren't even close. Someone serious about music, at the very least tries to understand it, tries to know the basics of it, exposes himself to much music, and learns what it means, how it has been developed over the centuries, perhaps tries to learn an instrument – that would be a basic start in the direction of being serious. Dabbling your feet in music, using it as background noise, being amused by it – doesn't make you serious about it."

At school I swam with someone who went on to be a national champion. His daily routine was to attend swimming training at 5:30 in the morning for an hour, and then come to school. While we would go to the tuck shop and buy a hot dog or a hamburger and a Coke, he would have a special lunch packed, to avoid picking up unnecessary fat, and to make sure he had the energy he needed. He would go to swimming training after school for three hours, during which he would swim between 4 and 14 kilometres. He would spend hours perfecting his stroke. He subscribed to swimming magazines. He bought the very best swimming equipment. If you had met him and said, "I'm pretty serious about swimming – I watch it whenever it comes on TV, and I do laps every now and then at the public pool, and I own a pair of goggles", he would have thought you were joking about being serious.

We know serious when we see it. Except, it seems, when it comes to Christianity.

Paul was a serious Christian. In this passage, there are at least three descriptions of what made him serious. And when you compare the average Christian in the modern West to Paul, it really does seem a lot like comparing a jogger with the fastest sprinters alive, or people who like to browse

bookstores with English professors at Oxford. Professing Christians like to think they are serious, but it is hard to take them very seriously, when you have Paul as your standard of comparison. Here is Paul, suffering for the Gospel, regarding himself as a continuation of the sufferings of Christ Himself – this is a man serious about his faith.

Professing Christians might meet Paul and say, “Paul, I’m serious about Christianity. I own three Bibles, which I sometimes even read. I pray in my mind from time to time. I go to church once a week – except when we’re away on one of our frequent holidays, or when I have to make more money; or when I am really tired from working all week and just want to be at home; or when I oversleep from being out very late Saturday night; or when I have company; or when we have a family tiff at home. But otherwise I like to go. I own some Praise and Worship CDs, and I turn on Christian radio from time to time. I was even baptised. I own some Christian books and we don’t watch bad stuff on TV.” What do you think Paul might say to that? Would you expect him to take you seriously, if that is your definition of serious Christianity?

You know, when I think about certain professions, I realise how much I want them to be serious. I would like to have a serious surgeon when I need an important operation. If the nurses said “Well, sometimes he comes to work, and sometimes he doesn’t. He takes a lot of holidays with his family”, I’d begin to get nervous. If I found out that he had cheated on all his medical exams, and only pretended to know what was going on in the operating theatre, and bribed his way into his present job, I’d get even more uncomfortable. And if he burst into the room late, bopping to the tune playing in his iPod, and had a big black and yellow book “Surgery for Dummies”, I’d get up and walk out. We want our surgeons to be serious.

We want our policeman to be serious. We want our security guards to be serious. We want our lawyers, and judges to be serious. We want our military commanders to be serious. We want the people looking after the nuclear missiles, and the people in nuclear power plants to be serious. When they aren’t, we are angry, because they are dealing with our security, and our wellbeing and our society.

Do you think the world needs serious Christians? What is it that Christians are supposed to bring to this world? Christians are to bring to this world its most important message – that God became a man, and died and rose to forgive our sins, and we must turn to Him and trust Him, or we will fall under His judgment. You would think that, having that kind of message, would make Christians the most serious-minded people of all.

But look around, and ask if Christians don’t seem to be half-joking about their faith. Think about the ones out there clowning around in Jesus’ name - Christian rock music; Christian parties; Christian romance novels; Christian teen culture; Christian biker groups; Christian everything. Let’s talk about people who attend conservative Christian churches.

We can barely find the books of the Bible. We don’t witness because we aren’t sure how, and haven’t tried to learn, and are rather ashamed to try because we’re living double lives. We have one standard of speech for work, and another one for church. 94.7 is on the radio when we drive during the week, and then a holy face is donned when we come in the doors on a Sunday. We go to clubs Friday night and church Sunday morning. We curse and swear and use God’s name in vain during the week and then praise it on Sunday. We gamble during the week and put money in the bag on a Sunday. We know more about the characters and plots of soap operas and TV series than we do about the accounts in the Bible. We have memorised more trashy pop songs than we have hymns, let alone Scripture. We can give the TV our attention for an unbroken span of three hours, but we start to fall asleep after five minutes of preaching – and we expect people to take us seriously!

Take those same people and put them in a room where life-saving information was being given, and it doesn’t matter how hot the room, how stuffy, how much sleep they have had recently, how early

they got up – they will stay awake to hear that life-saving information. But let the Word of God be preached – and it's 'ny-ny' time. This is what it means to be serious?

The most revealing thing is that Western Christians will often point to Moslems, orthodox Jews, Hindus, and remark – 'they certainly are serious about their beliefs.' They are! And their beliefs are wrong. So what is our excuse, if we claim to have the truth?

What does it look like when you are a serious Christian? Paul gives us a few answers. Paul's approach to the ministry reveals what it looks like when you are a serious Christian.

You're a serious Christian when your life is:

I. A Service to Be Offered

Paul says:

Colossians 1:23 of which I, Paul, became a minister, and again –

Colossians 1:25 of which I became a minister...

The word for minister is *diakonos*. It is where we get the word deacon from. It literally means – one who waits on tables; a servant who waits on others, meeting their needs. In the sermon entitled 'The Approach of a Minister', we saw what it was that Paul did to serve others - he *laboured*, he toiled, to bring them to maturity. Here is Paul, the great apostle, describing himself as a waiter – one who waits on others, so that they have what they need to mature in Christ.

Serious Christians know that Christianity, and therefore life, is not about amusement or entertainment, it is about service.

The man who volunteers to be a soldier, must do so because he wants to serve his country, not because he thinks it will be fun, and good for a laugh. Such a person will run away at the first sign of battle. A servant is someone who realises their greatest blessing will be in giving, not receiving.

Modern Western Christians will never be serious as long as they treat ministry as another form of entertainment. For as long as you are trying to get your Christianity to amuse you, entertain you, you will never be serious. Because entertainment is by nature non-serious. It is what you do precisely when you don't want to be serious. And if you try to have your relationship with God served up to you as entertainment, you are very far away from Biblical religion. If you want your religion as entertainment, there is a multi-billion dollar industry waiting to give it to you - Christian music, not to worship God, but to entertain you; Christian books, not to humble and instruct you, but to entertain you; Church music, not to teach, admonish and correctly teach your religious imagination, but to entertain you, which you can sing along to; Christian television stations devoted to keeping you entertained 24 hours a day. If you buy into all this stuff, you will never be serious.

For as long as you see this Christian life as one of many things which you use as a means to your own ends – you will never be serious. As long as you are the spectator, and others are the performers, you are the consumer and others have the product, you are the patron, and others are the servants – you have got your whole life back-to-front.

Our Lord got up from washing the dirty feet of His disciples, looked at them and asked:

John 13:12-17 *Do you know what I have done to you?* ¹³ "You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Paul gives us a second picture of a serious Christian. The serious Christian realises that life is -

II. A Stewardship to be Answered for

Paul says the following:

Colossians 1:25-27 *of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, ²⁶ the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. ²⁷ To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

Paul says his ministry, and his life is a stewardship.

What is a stewardship?

Matthew 25: 14-19 ¹⁴“For the kingdom of heaven is like a man travelling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. ¹⁵ And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. ¹⁶ Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. ¹⁷ And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. ¹⁸ But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. ¹⁹ After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

Stewardship has at least four components:

- 1) A Master or Owner
- 2) Who Commits His Goods to Stewards to Look After - v14
- 3) Who Leaves for a time - v15
- 4) Who returns and has the stewards account for his goods - v19

As Paul describes himself, he sees his whole ministry as a stewardship. It is a massive stewardship. God has left with him the task of making known what used to be a secret - the secret of Christ, who dwells in us; giving us a down payment – proof that we will be with him forever in glory. This truth was not known for generations, but now all the saints know it. And they are to make Christ known to believer and unbeliever. They are to testify of Christ.

Here is the same thing:

- 1) Jesus is the Master.
- 2) Jesus commits the message of Himself to His Stewards to look after and spread.
- 3) He leaves for a time. He has ascended and has called us to do this work before he comes.
- 4) He will return and call the stewards to account for His goods.

As Paul thinks on this, it fills him with earnestness. He knows every moment of his life brings him closer to that day of reckoning with his Master. He knows his Master will not be ignorant of the time, talents or opportunities he had, for Jesus gave them to him.

2 Corinthians 5:9-11 *Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. ¹¹ Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences.*

A serious Christian knows, and thinks about the fact, that he will answer for all his actions. He knows that he has an appointment which he cannot avoid. He will stand in front of Jesus, look upon that hair as white as snow, that face like the sun, shining in its strength, eyes like fire, and give an

account. The Lord knows how many years He gave you, what spiritual gifts He gave you, what teachers he gave you, what church, what country, and time period, and family, and provision, and protection, and health. He knows what opportunities you had to make Him known, to share the Gospel and mature other believers.

Anytime there is a sense of deadline -people tend to be serious. If you have to have completed a certain amount of work, or reached a certain target, or completed a certain project or assignment, or studied for an exam – that approaching deadline changes people from being frivolous to being serious. When your job, or your income, or your pass-mark is on the line, you know you have to buckle down. How many Christians know that your life has a deadline - by the day of your death, you must have completed all the assignments God gave you? And there are no second chances. Would that make us at least think of being serious?

There is a third thing which filled Paul with a serious mindset. The serious Christian sees life as a cause:

III. A Reward worth Suffering for

In a remarkable verse, **Colossians 1:24**, Paul says *‘I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, ...*

Paul was willing, and even desirous to suffer for the ministry.

The moment you are dealing with someone who is willing to give up personal comfort, personal enjoyment, advancement, personal good health, personal wealth you are dealing with someone committed – someone serious.

As someone has said, ‘the hen who lays eggs is involved, but the pig who gives pork is committed’. Kamikaze pilots were not half-serious. Modern Islamic suicide bombers are not half-serious. They are not the kind of people who could be persuaded to change their minds if there is something good on TV.

Notice Paul rejoices in his sufferings. That doesn't mean he enjoys suffering itself. He is glad for what his suffering means, what his sufferings bring about.

Phil 2:17,18 *Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. ¹⁸ For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.*

Now look at the second phrase of Colossians 1:24. What does he mean – *he fills up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ*? Does he mean that somehow the sufferings of Christ are insufficient? No. I agree with John Piper here. What Jesus' sufferings lack is a continual portrayal to a watching world. Jesus could only suffer for us once – at one time in history. So how will the world ever see a live re-enactment of the innocent suffering for the guilty, and suffering with forgiveness and love? Answer: When Christians suffer. When Christians suffer it allows a watching world to see Christlikeness in its glory – weakness made strong, joy in suffering. Christians are placed on the Via Dolorosa again and again – so that the world can see the heart of Christianity – the cross. And as far as Paul is concerned, this is what he is glad to do.

He was no stranger to it.

2 Corinthians 11:23-28 *Are they ministers of Christ? -- I speak as a fool -- I am more: in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. ²⁴ From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was*

shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; ²⁶ in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; ²⁷ in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness -- ²⁸ besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.

When Nero began putting Christians in animal skins doused with oil on poles and lighting them as human torches; during the times of throwing Christians to the lions for the pleasure of the watching crowds – I don't think you had to tell those Christians – ‘Let's be serious about our faith.’

When the Spanish Inquisition was destroying whole villages, torturing people in unspeakable ways for holding the same faith we do, you didn't have to tell them to be serious. You didn't have to tell Stephen, Polycarp or Irenaeus, or John Wycliffe, or John Hus, or William Tyndale, or Martin Luther, or John Calvin, or Felix Manz, or Conrad Grebel, or Van Zinzendorf, or John Wesley or Jonathan Edwards, or John Paton, or Adoniram Judson, or Hudson Taylor, or Charles Spurgeon, to be serious. In fact, if you go to modern-day China, or Sudan, or Nigeria, or Indonesia and as you meet persecuted Christian – you don't have to tell them to be serious.

Suffering breeds seriousness. Those who aren't serious don't become Christians.

This makes me wonder how many are really saved in our Western church. When the price tag is so little, it's easy to claim that you are Christ's. But what if it threatened your property, or your material possessions, or your reputation, or your job, or your children's wellbeing, or your own health, or the lives of your loved ones?

The truth is that suffering immediately sorts out the serious from the not serious. We like to play until it hurts, until it gets hard, until it costs. Then it's not fun. And those who were merely playing, take their toys and go somewhere else.

Now the fact that you do not face persecution is not something you have done wrong. What is wrong is when we avoid all suffering that could come from proclaiming Christ. How about speaking up about your faith at work? How about making that hard decision which could cost you extra money, but showing the world that you refuse to compromise? What about becoming the nerd or square at school by refusing to go to the parties, by refusing to speak as they do. How about calling your work colleagues on their cheating, on their unethical choices?

This is a far cry from being tied to a stake and burnt, but our willingness to do these small things at least shows we are serious. We join with Paul in saying – ‘I will do whatever I need to do to show forth Christ to the world.’ It seems like an inverse law – the greater the cost, Christians face it; the smaller the cost, the more reluctant people become. If we will not face the smallest of sufferings, I wonder if the Lord will not bring the greater ones to draw out of us the faith He has given us.

It seems to me that sincerity and seriousness go together. Those who are truly sincere in the faith are serious about it. Those who are not wholly sincere, are not wholly serious.

You might remember how we gained our English word ‘*sincere*’. In Roman times, clay pots would be sold in the market. Like today, no one would want to buy a cracked pot. But what some dishonest traders would do is take some wax and put it into the cracks. When done carefully, you could not tell that there had been a crack at all, the wax looked like clay. A person would buy it, not knowing that there were any cracks in the vessel. The problem was, when the temperature rose, the wax began to melt. Suddenly that vessel which seemed perfect revealed its cracks, and whatever it had held began leaking, if not gushing, out. So merchants who wanted to assure people that they were selling them genuine goods without fault would write ‘*sine cere*’ which is Latin for ‘without wax’.

A sincere vessel didn't have a problem with heat, it was the insincere vessels that did.

There are a lot of people naming Jesus in the un-persecuted church today. And by their smiles and songs and handshakes on a Sunday morning, you can't tell them apart from any other. But if persecution was to come, the heat of it would soon melt the wax, and the cracks would become evident.

It is those who are without wax – those who are sincere – they are the ones who are serious. They don't see themselves as consumers, they see themselves as servants. They don't see this as some kind of game, they see it as a deadly serious task with a deadline, and they are willing to give themselves entirely to the task. They write the Lord a blank cheque insofar as their lives go.