

Introduction

We finished chapter 1 last week, and we saw Paul outlining for us the battle that we are engaged in as well as part in it. This week, the bonus sermon, will focus on the role of the local church to bring us to the mystery of maturity.

Because I think sometimes when we hear battle and we are encouraged to pick up the sword of truth and fight, we picture ourselves standing in a field, face to face with a great enemy ready to do battle. We picture ourselves as the central figure, the hero of some mythology, ready to go. The protagonist vs. the antagonist. Good vs. evil. And what we tend to leave out of our picture is those at our right and left. Those we come into battle with. Those who God has given us to fight with, to trust in, and to support when the time comes.

This is extremely important. Because individualism is one of the greatest tools of the deceiver. The idea that we can do it on our own, that strong people don't need help, and that the Christian life is just about your personal relationship with Jesus Christ. IT'S A LIE! And it is a lie that is widely accepted in the culture that we live in. Individualism is part of what we are fighting AGAINST. Because as an idea, it is doing great harm to the identity of the church, Christ's body. It is plucking off people right and left by making promises of how unpolluted Christianity could be if you could get rid of the sinners, and the hypocrisy, and the two-faced liars. As if locking yourself in a room with the Bible would protect you from any of that. You sinful, hypocritical, two-faced liar. So Paul goes right at it, as he reveals to us the mystery that is the local church. **Colossians 2.1:**

The WORK of the local church

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, 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.

The focus of Paul's letter is two unique local churches, those in Colossae and Laodicea. And we have addressed the fact that these churches were not planted by Paul himself, but were the outworking of his labors in Ephesus. These are church plants from that original church. So pretend you're Paul... it would be easy for him to pass off any responsibility here. But he continues to reiterate that he has great concern for these people by nature of their connection to Jesus, not just their connection to him.

If we look specifically at what Paul is saying here: he continues to beat the drum of the struggle that he is engaged in on their behalf. We have seen this evidenced in his

praying ceaselessly for them (v.9), his suffering for their sake (v.24), his teaching and warning everyone (v.28), and no holds barred struggle (v.29). Paul wants them to KNOW that this struggle is not a manner of mere words. He is not just talking for the sake of talking. He is not a guy who stands up and throws out compliments for the sake of buttering up. He is not stretching the truth to add drama to the story. The word translated KNOW here is not representative of just hearing and filing away the information... it is an acceptance to the core of their beings. Paul wants them to truly get the fact that he does not view them as individuals doing their individual thing. He doesn't see them as that church over there doing their thing. He sees them as brothers. He sees them as partners in the battle that we outlined last week.

His desire is for them to KNOW this because of how he knows it will affect their faith. He is not concerned with what they think about him. He isn't saying this so that they will all buy Paul's newest book, subscribe to HIS blog, and follow HIM on Twitter. Instead, as much as Paul is talking about himself, it is not for his sake. He wants them to KNOW this, so that they, together as the organized local churches will:

1. have their hearts encouraged
2. be knit together in love
3. reach all the riches of full assurance...they will understand the knowledge of God's mystery

So let's unpack this a little bit.

Have their hearts encouraged

First, Paul desires that their hearts be encouraged. When we think of the operation of the heart, we can either go extremely clinical, or extremely emotional. If we go clinical, we define the heart as the central point of the WORKING of the body. All of the blood in the body passes through the heart to be pumped back out. It is the center of operations. When it stops, you stop.

If we go emotional, we think of the heart as this unbound, fluttering source of great joy and pain. It is that thing that we have to offer to someone else (I gave her my heart). Hearts are the expressive source. They control our actions (I can't choose who I fall in love with).

Reading this in either of those ways does injustice to what Paul is referring to. The heart is both of those things, but in the way that the Bible uses the word (and the way that it would have been understood in an early Greek/Roman context) it is MUCH, MUCH more. The heart is clinical, it is emotional, but it is also devotional. It is the devotional aspect that takes emotions, it takes control center, but it adds the personality, the

intellect, and will. It is not detached from passion as the clinical leads to, and it is not divorced from reason as the emotional idea of the heart goes. Instead, it is all of it. It is what we do because of what we believe. When Paul says heart, we should hear faith.

And to have our faith encouraged seems to mean a bit more than having our emotions tickled. Because our emotions can swing with a quick word. Our close friend for a number of years can do one thing and be blacklisted. It doesn't take much to move our emotions. In order to shift or make a move in our beliefs requires much more; and takes much more time. It requires, not just what we feel in the moment, but being convinced that something is true in all moments. So the way that our hearts are encouraged, is that we see more and more that Jesus is the answer in every and all situations. He is fully sufficient. He is fully sovereign. He is fully loving.

The encouragement of our hearts that we are talking about is more about bracing, or strengthening than it is about appeasing or tranquilizing. It is not about simply giving a quick boost of energy...it is about solidifying our faith in Jesus. Paul's heart is not that we come to a level of comfort, but that we achieve a level of strength. And this strength is linked to love. It is not standing up on our own to face the storm. It's not about your personal walk with the Lord. It is strength linked to relationship. We NEED the church to bear with us in loving relationship for the time that it takes to sanctify our hearts and have them truly encouraged.

Knit together in love

The second thing that Paul is struggling for is to see these churches be knit together in love. His aim is that the people in these churches become interconnected deeply to the extent that they become one.

I don't know how many of you are knitters out there, but my wife is. And she will sit next to me on the couch sometimes as I am reading or as we watch a movie together, and to watch someone knit, especially if you have no idea what is going on, it quite a sight. There are two needles, and they move around and in and out of each other in some organized way to become a hat, or a sweater, or some other single item. And it is not that these strands of yarn are just connected to or existing with each other, they are woven together. Not once or twice, they are connected thousands of times, fully fused into one another.

This idea of knit together is much different than the idea of bonding that we often hear: glue. I have heard it said that the Spirit is like a glue that hold us together. But if you think about how glue works, it creates a layer of bond between two things. Glue holds very well, but if you need to break two glued things apart...you can. Get a crowbar. Hit it with a mallet...it will come apart eventually. Those two things may have been

connected to one another were always distinct pieces, they just happened to be bound. But to be knit is to be connected much more completely. The pieces cannot simply be separated, in order for them to come apart they need to be destroyed.

To be knit together is a fusing that is similar to what happens to two people in marriage. Genesis tells us that man and woman would unite to one another and become ONE FLESH. It is not just that they would have a ring, agreement, or witnesses to bind them to one another, but God Himself would bind them to one another into a single reality.

The Bible uses the same wording to describe the church. When we become part of the family of God, we are not simply connected to other Christians by nature of the fact that we believe the same thing. We are combined into a single body. We are part of one another. But this knitting is not done by us through some great bonding exercises and well organized events. We do not will ourselves to be knit together. This knitting is done by love. Not our love, but the love of Jesus Christ. So the knitting together in love is not something he wants to see happen, IT IS SOMETHING THAT ALREADY HAS. He just wants them to KNOW IT.

The love of Jesus unites us by first uniting us to Himself, then uniting us to His people, and then gathering us together in a local body of believers. So you are fused to the other people in this church. AND WE DON'T LIKE THIS! Because this means that your life is no longer yours to define on your own. You are now affected by others, responsible for others, and ultimately, ONE with the others in the church.

We push back on this. Because we don't want our great life to be pulled down by these people. I work hard, I do my daily devotions, I serve at the church...that guy is a failure, he deserves what he gets. But the reason why we don't want to make that sacrifice, the reason that we still want to believe that we deserve better is because we still don't really understand the treasure that we have received in Christ. Which is the third aspect that Paul is struggling for, he says:

Reach all the riches of full assurance

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.

The riches of full assurance. This is the big idea here. As our whole person is built up and strengthened in faith, and as we recognize our unity as the body of Christ, we will come to understand the wealth of the treasure that we have been given.

We have an idea of wealth, and that idea is based on accumulation. We have something, and then we buy something else, and then we get something else...and eventually we have gained enough that we are considered rich. But once again, God's idea of riches is different. God's idea of riches are in changing our understanding of what we already have.

The riches and the treasure in this verse are not about getting more. Let me make myself clear, I am not just talking about money and material things. It is not about gaining more of anything. It is not about getting more intellect and knowledge for the sake of collecting them. You will not be saved because of the wealth of your knowledge. Accumulating will ALWAYS lead us to a trust in ourselves. We have good theology. We have a working definition of the gospel. We have a resume of good works. But ALL of these things are an outworking of the treasure, they do nothing to earn or attain the treasure.

What is the treasure? *In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*, then outside of Him is nothing. If Christ is the whole thing, if in him are unsearchable riches, then we have already received ALL of the riches. We already hold the treasure. It is a treasure that we do not deserve. It is a treasure that we did nothing to earn. And yet we have it!

Unlike the idea of God as a cosmic party pooper that is sometimes painted, God wants you to be rich and wealthy. He wants you to have treasure, as a matter of fact, He has already given it to you. You might be getting nervous, thinking, when did this turn into a prosperity gospel church? When did we start equating wealth and faith? I am not making this claim, I am just telling you what the inspired word of God says. We are a prosperity gospel church, in that the gospel brings you riches and treasure. And this treasure has a name, JESUS CHRIST.

The gospel is not just something that was done for us. The gospel is not just what we have been saved from. The gospel is a person. Jesus Christ is still alive! The great treasure of the Christian life is that we receive Jesus. Not that we get to avoid punishment (though that is a great fringe benefit), but that we are brought back into relationship with our savior.

And our savior has a body, THE CHURCH. It is this body that God has given to us to bring us to full assurance. The role then of church is to help you to strip away everything that is not of Christ, to build you up in Christ, and to constantly reintroduce you to the person of Jesus Christ. Full assurance is not achieved by us becoming confident in our position, it is by being confident in the nature of our God.

We, as the church, forget this. We get sidetracked. Just looking at the fruit of the church that Paul has described for us here, we can see what happens when we deviate from God's plan for His church.

1. When hearts are not encouraged by the gospel of Jesus Christ, the focus is shifted from the spiritual heart to the emotional or clinical one. This is revealed in churches that aim to build people up for the moment, rather than preparing them for battle. Passionate people who are crushed at the first sign of struggle, because they had no strength to stand. This is the downfall of the emotional heart. Appealing to the clinical heart creates churches that are ordered, and do things, but are not as passionately devoted to Jesus Christ as they are to their model, structure, and sometimes they can even use theology as the tool to cut Jesus out.

2. When people are not knit together in love, attempts are made to unify people in earthly love. Glue is manufactured to bind people together, rather than allowing the love of Jesus to do the work of binding. So we see churches where people are bound together by style, music, charismatic preachers, programs, building projects, etc.

3. When the aim is not that people reach the full assurance of understanding, it becomes about telling people how they can have their best life now, that God wants us to all be fat happy and comfortable, OR they go the other way and deny the fact that we gain anything from Christ in this life. This leads to churches where the purpose is what I can get from Jesus, what bits of knowledge I can take away with me as I leave, what practical applications I can enact...instead of coming every week to search out the unsearchable riches of Christ.

I don't say this to pick on other churches, but to say that it is not hard for us to go there. We are not so safe from all of these errors. As Paul ends this section, he both commends them on how they are doing, and warns them not to forget.

The NEED of the Local Church

I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.

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.

Paul is encouraged by the order and firmness of the faith he sees in these churches. Order meaning that they had the right focus, that they were organized for the right things. They knew who they were as the Church. The word firmness here means that they are currently holding their position well. They know what they are fighting for, and they are currently doing a good job in the fight.

But here is the catch, here is where Paul punches us in the gut. I said last week that Paul is rallying the troops. This is still the case. And though the church is currently strong, and is holding its line, he knows how little it takes to break. He knows that lies and plausible arguments are coming. Paul is well aware that there is a storm on the horizon. And he knows that how this church stands will directly relate to how well they are braced, knit together and of full assurance. Because as he states here, the arguments thrown at us are not illogical ones. They are plausible. They are lies that relate directly to our sinful desires. The idea that we are important and need to do something to achieve salvation makes sense to us. The idea that Jesus alone will not satisfy is convincing. The argument that the church is flawed and simplistic and how can this be what God intended as His body is plausible. I get it. It seems crazy.

But what if we actually decided to let God define Himself. Let Jesus reveal the depth of His riches. Let the church function as the Holy Spirit is orchestrating it. What if, just for a moment, we were willing to let down that guard that we keep us all the time. That wall that we built up when we did go all in that one time and got burned. Because until we go all in. Until we allow our whole heart to be encouraged, until we really believe that we are knit to one another, and most of all, until we recognize that Jesus is our treasure, that EVERYTHING else is rubbish without Him, this, will always just be something we do. Church will be a thing that fills time on Sunday Mornings. A place where I please God with my attendance. A place where I go to get something I can possess.

If we never actually believe like this, if we don't fight to give up the idolatry that rules us, we will just be lukewarm Christians. And the phrase lukewarm Christians comes from the book of **Revelation 3**. It is contained in a letter written to the church of Laodicea, one of the very churches that Paul has addressed his letter to. It says, starting in verse 13:

Revelation warning to Laodicea (30 yrs later)

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

This was written about 30-40 years after Paul's letter. We see a very different picture of the church than being in good order and firmness of faith. We see a church that has fallen away from God as they have become dependant on themselves. We see a church

that goes through the motions, but doesn't really put much into it. We see a church who has replaced the knowledge of Jesus Christ with the plausible arguments of the world. If we look hard enough, I think we can see...OURSELVES.

So my challenge for you today is the same challenge that God gives here. Turn back to Him for the *gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.* Jesus holds all the treasure, and He freely offers it to us. May we actually trust Him so that we may see.

And as we come forward to receive Communion today, remember that Jesus sacrifice on the cross was not for some unknown quantity, it was for His people, His church. When we come forward and take the bread and dip it into the wine, we are identifying ourselves with His body. We recognize that He is the treasure, and we receive these riches with joy and gratitude. If you have not identified your life with Jesus Christ, than the table is not for you. This is the meal for His family.