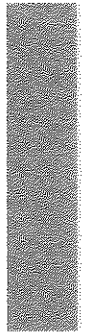


SESSION 4

Christ's ministers



SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Colossians 1:24–29

BUILDUP THEME



PREPARE TO SERVE

God expects and empowers believers to help one another to mature spiritually.

MEASURABLE RESPONSE

The learner will determine three steps he or she can take to help another believer toward spiritual maturity.

MEMORY VERSE

“Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily” (Colossians 1:28, 29).

Teacher Preparation

- ☐ Read Colossians 1:24–29. What kind of effort did Paul put into his ministry? Would you expect such an effort from someone who suffered because he served God so intensely? How do you think Paul would be serving God if were a part of your church? What freedoms would he enjoy that he didn’t enjoy in first century Asia?
- ☐ Consider what your effort in serving God would be like in first century Asia. Do you think you would serve God to the point of being arrested, stoned, shipwrecked, and otherwise abused?
- ☐ Despite growing opposition to Christianity in the U.S., our opportunities to serve God are nearly unrestricted. Challenge your students to consider Paul’s effort in a hostile and dangerous world. Do their efforts match his? Are they taking advantage of the freedoms to serve God?

Session Summary

The apostle Paul suffered gladly for the sake of others because he considered his sufferings part of the afflictions of Christ. He believed God had given him the privilege and responsibility to reveal the truth that in Christ Gentiles and Jews are one; together they enjoy the hope of glory. Paul committed himself to the goal of presenting every believer perfect in Christ, and he worked tirelessly in cooperation with the Lord to accomplish this goal.

Session Starters

Option 1—Modern Martyrs

Gather

- Access to a website such as The Voice of the Martyrs.

Steps

1. Before class, access a website that gives accounts of how Christians are experiencing persecution around the world. Identify a story or two to share with your class. Or read what it means to be a follower of Christ in some of the nations that are hostile to Christianity.
2. Transition to the Bible study.

The persecution of Christians around the world today is a continuation of the affliction Paul endured. And Paul's affliction was a continuation of the affliction Christ faced. The apostle taught about the connection between ministering for Christ and suffering for Christ. Paul's connection to Christ's suffering is part of a larger section on Christ's ministers. This session will present Paul's teaching and challenge us to be busy in the ministry Christ has called us to do.

Option 2—Working Hard

Steps

1. Discuss putting effort into jobs.

ASK: When have you worked harder than at any other point in your life? What task were you completing? (Q1)

ASK: What motivated you to work so hard? (Q2)

2. Transition to the Bible study.

The apostle Paul talked about his striving to exhaustion to serve the Lord. We will examine his testimony and the challenges he faced that didn't deter his effort. His example helps us see what is possible when we take God's work for our lives seriously and learn to depend on Christ's power working in us mightily.

Bible Study

Gather

- Access to a website such as The Voice of the Martyrs (optional).

Paul ended the previous section (Col. 1:23) by assuring the Colossians that he had been made a minister of the gospel. His work as a minister for Christ is the theme of the next passage. While Paul had a personal calling and specific mission from God, much of what he says about his ministry translates to us today. We are all called to be Christ's ministers to some degree.

I. The Minister's Sacrifice (Col. 1:24)

Getting involved in helping others normally exacts a toll. It certainly cost the apostle Paul something when he became personally involved in meeting the spiritual needs of the Gentiles. When he preached Christ to them, enemies of the cross persecuted him. Eventually the Roman authorities seized him and placed him under house arrest. But his sufferings did not cause him any regret.

A. Suffers for Christ's Body (1:24)

Paul suffered for the sake of Christ's Body, the church.

READ: Colossians 1:24. **ASK:** What was Paul's attitude as he served other believers (Col. 1:24)? (Q3) *He rejoiced that He was able to serve God for the benefit of the church.*

Paul listed his sufferings in
2 Corinthians 11:23–33.

Paul rejoiced in his sufferings for the Colossians. He was glad that he had played a role in their coming to know Christ. Their salvation made every affliction he endured worthwhile.

Suffering for the sake of the gospel was expected for leaders of the first-century church. At one point the Sanhedrin jailed and then beat the apostles in Jerusalem before releasing them. The apostles rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for Christ's sake (Acts 5:41). Paul and Silas sang praises to God at midnight from the bowels of a bleak prison (Acts 16:25). They had been scourged, but they weren't discouraged. Their hands and feet were fastened with chains, but their hearts were free. No jail on earth could have restrained their joy!

Is it any wonder the early church turned the world upside down? A gospel that creates joy and sustains it, even when persecution strikes, is a gospel worth believing. The so-called health and wealth gospel is certainly not the gospel of Christ. Those who profess faith to gain a healthy body and a bulky bank account will likely abandon ship when the first wave of adversity strikes. Jesus warned that in the world His followers would have tribulation. But He also told them to be of good cheer because He had overcome the world (John 16:33). Paul and other first-century believers followed Jesus and experienced the good cheer He spoke about.

ASK: Describe a believer who has willingly sacrificed a lot for the sake of Christ and His church. What did he or she sacrifice? What was his or her attitude? (Q4)

ASK: Do you feel sorry for those who sacrifice for the Christ, as if they have missed out on something? Or are you challenged by their sacrifice? (Q5)

B. Suffers like Christ's body (1:24)

Jesus' incarnation meant He had a body of flesh that felt pain when afflicted. When Jesus suffered for the Colossians and all sinners, including us, He, being made sin for us, bore the full weight of all our sins on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21). He was made an offering for sin (Isa. 53:10). Forsaken by God and humanity, He shed His blood to redeem us (1 Pet. 1:18, 19).

Though Paul could never have experienced the depth of pain and anguish Jesus experienced on the cross, he could identify with Jesus' suffering. He even expected to suffer (Phil. 1:29). He understood that the world's hatred for Christ did not cease when Jesus died; it continued beyond His death and extended to His followers. So when Paul said he filled up what was lacking of the afflictions of Christ, He wasn't teaching that believers must suffer for their sins and add to Jesus' suffering on the cross. Jesus paid the full penalty for our sins. When He died, He announced, "It is finished" (John 19:30). There remains no more sacrifice for sins (Heb. 10:26). But since the hatred for Christ, as we noted, didn't go away when Christ left the earth, Christ's enemies attack Christians.

ACTIVITY: If you didn't use Option 1 of the Session Starters, then pause the study here to read testimonies from a website like The Voice of the Martyrs. If possible, read some testimonies of people who suffered physically for their faith. Most believers in the United States are unaware of the persecution Christians face in hostile countries.

ASK: What examples of the hatred for Christ do you see in the United States? (Q6)

Few Christians in the United States have experienced physical pain for their faith. The law still protects religious freedom. But there is no guarantee that will always be the case.

II. The Minister's Stewardship (Col. 1:25–28)

A. Fulfillment of God's Word (1:25, 26)

READ: Colossians 1:25.

Paul didn't go to a recruiting station to sign up to become a minister for Christ. God called him to be His minister and to an apostleship. Several words for "minister" appear in the New Testament. In verse 25, Paul used *diakonos*, from which we derive our word "deacon." It means "a

servant.” Although Paul held the authoritative office of apostle, he had a servant’s heart.

Paul had received a sacred trust from God to preach the gospel. He wrote that God had given him a dispensation or stewardship, a term that comes from two Greek words that mean “house” and “manage.” It was common practice in Bible times for a wealthy person to place the management of his household into the hands of a steward, or manager. The lord of the house depended upon his household manager to carry out his responsibilities faithfully and wisely in his stead. Ministers for Christ, both pastors and church members, serve on Christ’s behalf on earth.

ASK: What are a few marks of a steward who is faithful to God?
(Q7) *A faithful steward checks in with God, the Owner, often; waits to act until he or she is sure God is leading; looks for opportunities to better his or her level of service.*

Paul’s stewardship of the gospel carried a primary responsibility: God had commissioned him to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13; 1 Tim. 2:7). The Colossians, then, were a target audience for Paul’s ministry. As God’s faithful steward and apostle to the Gentiles, he labored to fulfill the Word of God (Col. 1:25). Fulfilling the Word of God simply means that God intended for the gospel to go to everyone. That God had a plan to reach the Gentiles was a “mystery” in the Old Testament days.

READ: Colossians 1:26.

Normally we consider a “mystery” a story with a secret that becomes clear as the plot unwinds. We speak of whodunit mysteries and suspense mysteries, but Paul used the word “mystery” to mean a truth previously unexplained in the Old Testament but presently revealed and understood. God had revealed to Paul the truth that Gentiles could participate in the blessings of salvation on an equal standing with Jews. In Christ, saved Gentiles and saved Jews comprised one Body—the church. By His death, Christ reconciled Jews and Gentiles to God, presenting both to Him as one new man and granting both equal access by one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:15–18). Jews and Greeks (Gentiles), those enslaved or free, and both male and female are all welcome into the Body of Christ (Gal. 3:28). That truth is apparent in many Old Testament passages, but the prophets who recorded them didn’t fully understand the implications of what they wrote (Gen. 22:18; Isa. 49:6; Luke 2:25–32).

READ: Isaiah 49:6, 7; Luke 2:25–32. **ASK:** What did Simeon understand about Isaiah’s reference to the light to the Gentiles?
(Q8) *That Jesus, the Messiah, is the promised light to shine for both Jews and Gentiles.*

It wasn't easy for first-century Jewish believers to accept the fact that saved Gentiles shared equal status with them in the family of God. Centuries of prejudice had pushed them away from associations with Gentiles. This prejudice scarred the face of the early church. Even Peter, who preached so powerfully at Pentecost about God's grace in Christ, dragged his feet when God called him to present the gospel to Cornelius, an Italian centurion. At Antioch he exhibited prejudice. He was enjoying a fine "fellowship dinner" with Gentile Christians until his Jewish friends showed up. Upon seeing his friends, he left the Gentile table in a hurry (Gal. 2:11–14).

B. Focus on God's Son (1:27, 28a)

READ: Colossians 1:27.

The mystery God disclosed through Paul portrayed Christ as present in the Gentiles, giving them "the hope of glory." Faithful Jews from Abraham to the time of Jesus anticipated the arrival of Messiah and His Kingdom. They believed God's promises about the glorious Kingdom that He would give to His people. Even Solomon's glorious kingdom will pale in comparison to Messiah's Kingdom. Old Testament prophecies state that Messiah's Kingdom will be peaceful, productive, glorious, and righteous (Isa. 60:18–22; Ezek. 36:24–35).

ASK: What problems in today's world rob people of hope? (Q9)

READ: Colossians 1:28a. **ASK:** How do you know our church focuses our ministry on Christ? (Q10)

Neither trials nor persecution deterred Paul from preaching Christ. He was committed to the gospel of Christ and to the Christ of the gospel. Even in prison he shared the gospel with others and wrote letters that encouraged believers to proclaim Christ. He preached Christ, "warning every man" (Col. 1:28).

Christians must always keep Christ central in their message. He is the only Savior (John 14:6). Forgiveness, peace with God, and lasting joy are found only in Christ. If people seek these qualities in pop psychology, philosophy, New Age teachings, asceticism, legalism, or libertarianism, their quest will fail. Quality life now and for eternity comes to us from God through Christ.

ASK: What blessings from Christ give you the greatest sense of hope? (Q11)

C. Perfection of God's people (1:28b)

READ: Colossians 1:28.

Paul presented a perfect Savior to the Gentiles, many of whom responded by believing on the Savior. But Paul's goal for the Gentiles

extended beyond their coming to know Christ; he wanted them to be like Christ. He had presented a perfect Savior to them, and he wanted to present them "perfect" to Him. Therefore, he taught every man in "all wisdom."

The Gnostics, who were trying to infiltrate the Colossian church, must have recoiled at Paul's teaching that a Christian could become "perfect," meaning spiritually mature. They insisted that access to God came through an elaborate system of secret knowledge. People needed to be initiated into that system, learn passwords, and progressively reach up to God through a series of spirit beings.

Unbelieving Jews, too, must have recoiled at Paul's teaching, because they believed acceptance with God depended upon ritual and strict adherence to the law of Moses. They argued that a person must be in Judaism to be acceptable to God. Paul, however, taught that in Jesus every believer is acceptable to God regardless of ethnicity.

When someone trusts in Christ, God accepts that person into His family as a member in good standing. From God's eternal perspective, that person is perfect in Christ. Theologians call this perfect standing "positional sanctification." But the Bible also presents God's perspective of a believer's daily living, in which He views the believer as growing spiritually toward perfection. This perspective focuses on the believer's spiritual progress, and theologians refer to this phenomenon as progressive sanctification. Paul taught faithfully to help believers progress toward the goal of spiritual maturity.

ASK: Whose has the job of helping believers toward the goal of spiritual maturity? (See Eph. 4:11–16). (Q12) *The job belongs to every believer. God gives believers spiritual gifts to use in helping people spiritually mature.*

III. The Minister's Striving (Col. 1:29)

Paul included a personal note about his effort in carrying out his ministry. Perhaps he wanted to be an example to the believers in Colosse.

A. Committed to working hard for Christ (1:29)

READ: Colossians 1:29.

Paul was so committed to the goal of discipling believers that he labored (Col. 1:29). In Paul's day, the word "labor" often described the rigorous discipline an athlete followed to prepare for competition. It suggests preparation and training and working hard to the point of exhaustion.

ASK: Is Paul's commitment to hard work for Christ expected of us?

Explain. (Q13) *God expects all believers to be committed to working hard for Christ. It is our primary focus in life.*

Paul understood that Satan was hard at work too. If Paul failed to take his ministry seriously, he would lose ground to the enemy. Paul wanted Colosse to fight back those promoting the heresy infiltrating the church. He wanted them to match his diligence and effort, for the future of the gospel witness in Lycus Valley was at stake.

B. Counting on Christ's work (1:29)

Paul was quick to give God the credit for working to exhaustion. He labored according to Christ's mighty work in him. He painted a word picture of an athlete stretching and straining every nerve as he put forth his best effort to reach a goal. Our English word "agonize" comes from the Greek word Paul used for the striving and struggling Paul showed.

ASK: Name a fellow believer who has worked to the point of exhaustion for the Lord. What was the fruit of his or her labor? (Q14)

ASK: When have you learned the value of depending on Christ's might? (Q15)

Although Paul depended upon the Lord to equip and energize him for ministry, obviously he poured all his energy into cooperating with the Lord. He wasn't a preacher who buried himself in his office with a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the doorknob. He mingled with people and ministered to them. Nor was Paul a preacher who filled his calendar with appointments with everybody but the Lord. He knew He needed to spend time in the Lord's presence and to draw upon His power. His labor was always according to Christ's working.

Each of us has a ministry to perform. We will do it well if we follow Paul's example. We can be people willing to labor sacrificially to fulfill our stewardship.

Session Application

Steps

1. Present a change of circumstances that would challenge us as believers in the U.S.

ASK: Suppose our country suddenly changed and our government began to hunt down and persecute believers, and you maintained your current level of commitment to the Lord. Would the persecutors have any reason to suspect you are a believer? If so, why? (Q16)

2. Challenge the students to consider their preparedness to help other believers spiritually mature.

ASK: How are you prepared to help another believer mature in the Lord? (Q17)

ASK: What steps could you take to be better prepared to disciple someone? Consider that you might need someone to disciple you first. (Q18)

3. Have each of the learners choose someone he or she could help toward spiritual maturity.

ASK: What could you do to help that person? Write two or three action steps you can take. (Q19)

