

“MINISTERS OF THE MYSTERY” **(Ephesians 3:1-13)**

32 years ago I sat before a group of ten older pastors and church leaders to be ordained to the ministry. For the better part of a day they asked me questions on a variety of subjects from my views on creation to my views on end times, and everything in between, and by God’s grace these seasoned pastors felt I was qualified for the ministry and signed off on my ordination. My ordination certificate hangs on my office wall and says that am “solemnly and publicly set apart and ordained for the work of the gospel ministry.” It took many years of school, and a lot of study and preparation before I reached the official designation of being called a “minister.”

Not long after I was ordained a transient man stopped by the church looking for some food and lodging. He seemed very intent on trying to convince me that he was honest, and told me he was an ordained minister. He asked if I wanted to see his ordination certificate. It’s not often that someone carries their ordination certificate with them, and before I could say anything he opened up his wallet and pulled out a wadded-up piece of paper that was folded about a dozen times, and when he got it all ironed out, sure enough, it was an ordination certificate. After he left, I looked up the organization that ordained him on the internet and saw that anyone, for \$5, no questions asked, can be ordained. To think of all the schooling and work I went through when I could have written a check for \$5 and been ordained!

Since my ordination I have thought a little more deeply about what it means to be a minister. In the Bible the word “minister” refers to anyone who serves God, and biblically speaking I did not become a minister on the day of my ordination, but on the day I was saved. While God calls some to lead and preach in an official capacity at church – and it’s good for church leaders to go through a rigorous process of evaluation such as I went through – according to the Bible we are all ministers.

Today as we continue our study of Ephesians, we’re going to learn about being ministers by looking at the Apostle Paul’s ministry. None of us will ever be Paul or called to serve God the unique way that Paul did, but today as the church we carry on the same ministry to which He and the other apostles were called – a ministry that focuses on revealing a mystery to the whole world.

In the first two chapter of Ephesians, Paul has given us a grand, transcendent view of who we are in Christ. In a nutshell, Paul has described that we have been reconciled to God through the death of Christ on the cross and adopted into His eternal family. Being a part of His family means that we also belong to a worldwide family of fellow believers who make up the church. Our relationship with each other as believers cannot be separated from our relationship with God – the Christian life is not just an individual faith lived in isolation, but involves belonging to and being active in a local church.

Having said all this, in verse one of chapter 3 Paul begins to pray for the Ephesian church. He writes... “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles...” Have you ever been talking about something and then something else pops into your mind? Paul begins his prayer, but having mentioned that he’s a prisoner compels him to explain why he’s a prisoner, and he doesn’t stop explaining until verse 14 when he picks up where he finally resumes the prayer he began in verse one. In between verses 1 and 14 Paul explains five aspects of his ministry that apply to every believer’s ministry, and he begins in verses 1-2 with the **calling to the ministry...**

“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you.” Five years before he wrote these words Paul left the church in Ephesus which he started, and now he’s a prisoner in Rome. He’s a prisoner, we’re told in the book of Acts 21-22, because while in Jerusalem he was falsely accused of bringing a Gentile into the area of the temple designated for Jews only. Paul never did this, but nonetheless was arrested, and after a series of trials he was sent to Rome to stand trial, and was placed under house arrest while he waited. During these two years of house arrest, Paul wrote the books of Ephesians, Philemon, Colossians, and Philippians.

Notice Paul’s mindset... he says, “I’m a prisoner of Christ Jesus – not a prisoner of Rome, but of Jesus.” Paul’s life was completely given to Christ, and he viewed everything that happened to him – good or bad – through the lens of his commitment to Christ. “I’m a prisoner,” he says, “for the sake of you Gentiles. I’m in prison because of you. If I had kept my ministry limited to the Jews and not reached out to the Gentiles, I would not be locked up. But I remained faithful to God’s call to share the gospel with Gentile folks like you in Ephesus and many other Gentile cities, and because I didn’t keep my mouth shut, I am now a prisoner.”

In verse 2 he says, “Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you.” The Greek word administration – *oikonomia* – refers to the stewardship or management of a household (*oikos*). Joseph was a steward in Potiphar’s house – he was put in charge of his house and property, and was responsible to take care of everything that belonged to Potiphar. Likewise, as believers everything we have belongs to the Lord, and we are entrusted to be faithful stewards of all that He’s given us. Paul’s stewardship – his responsibility – was to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul’s calling to the ministry was a little more dramatic than most of ours – in his pre-conversion days he was an ardent enemy of Christianity, but one day as he was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, he was knocked to the ground by a bright light and dramatically saved by God’s grace. God also gave him a specific assignment that Paul talks about in Galatians 1:15-16a... “But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles.” Wherever Paul went, he preached to anyone and everyone – Jew and Gentile alike – but his specific calling was to take the gospel to Gentiles – the non-Jewish people – who knew little, if anything, about the true and living God, and it is for their sakes that he is a prisoner.

Secondly, after explaining his calling to the ministry, Paul goes on in verses 3-6 to further describe the **stewardship of the ministry**. In verse 2 he says, “I was given a trust to oversee and protect,” and now he tells us what that was. Verse 3-6... “That is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

The word “mystery” catches our attention. Who doesn’t like a mystery? A mystery in the Bible is something that was hidden by God in times past, but is now revealed. It reminds us that the only way we know anything about God and His plan for the world is through revelation – His Word communicated to us in the pages of scripture. The Bible doesn’t tell us everything we’d like to know about God and His plan – as Deuteronomy 29:29 says, “The secret things belong to the Lord” – but God has chosen to reveal some of His secret things with us.

Paul used the word “mystery” 21 times in his writings, and each mystery – or new revelation – has to do with some aspect of Christ’s coming to earth and his death on the cross – truth that was largely hidden from the Old Testament prophets. They received bits and pieces of prophecy about the coming Messiah, but they couldn’t put all the pieces together like we can this side of the cross. Even Jesus’ disciples before the cross did not fully understand why He came.

Paul first used the word “mystery” back in 1:9 when he talked about the mystery of God’s plan to bring history to a conclusion and unite all things in heaven and earth under Christ. Now in Ephesians 3 Paul talks about the mystery of Christ bringing Jews and Gentiles together to form the church – two groups of people who for centuries were enemies. Today we are used to church being a place where everyone is welcome – male and female, young and old, rich and poor, black and white – we’re all one diverse family called out from the world to form the body of Christ.

But Jewish people never imagined that they would be spiritually united with non-Jews – they were God’s chosen people and all His plans revolved around them. It was through the Jews that God promised to send the Savior into the world, and it was to the Jews that God revealed His will and plan through the Old Testament scriptures. As far as the Jews were concerned, all of God’s plans and purposes pertained to them alone. But God’s intention from the beginning was for the Jewish people to be a light to the Gentile nations, and draw them to God through their distinct lifestyle and testimony. But instead of being missionaries to the Gentiles, the Jews began to look down on them and have nothing to do with them.

But now Paul reveals that God is bringing Jew and Gentile together. Listen again to what he says in verse 6... “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” The mystery that the Old Testament prophets could not see, but is now revealed by Paul, is that God is bringing Jewish and Gentile believers together in Christ to form the church. The Old Testament prophets could see a future Jewish Messiah and a Jewish kingdom, but they could not see the church – they could not see God bringing people from every nation, tribe, and language together in Christ.

For centuries the Gentiles were on the outside looking in – as Paul explained in chapter two they were foreigners and aliens excluded from God’s covenant promises to Israel, and without any hope of salvation. But the good news of the gospel is that through Christ’s death, everyone can be saved and forgiven, and when they do, they are made part of God’s universal church.

- 1) Now through Christ Gentiles are made heirs together with Israel – by being adopted into God’s family, they share the same rights and privileges spiritually as do their fellow Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ.
- 2) Now through Christ Gentiles are members together of one body. Before the cross, Gentiles could not enter the temple and were excluded from citizenship with God’s people, but now they are full-fledged, equal members in the church.
- 3) And now through Christ Gentiles are sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. Before Christ the Gentiles had no hope of a Savior as did the Jews, but now they share equally in the hope that Christ brings.

This mystery of Jews and Gentiles coming together to form the church, Paul says in verse 5, was not made known to previous generations, but “now has been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.”

Just as God used Moses and David and Isaiah to reveal His will in the Old Testament, He now used men like Paul and Peter and John to make known His will in the New Testament. All 27 books of the New Testament were written by the apostles or those closely associated with them.

Paul and the other authors of the New Testament were entrusted – given a stewardship – to reveal God’s will and plan for the church. In 1 Corinthians 4:2 Paul writes, “This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.” “We’re nothing special,” Paul says, “We’re just ministers entrusted by God to reveal His mysteries.” Once Paul and the other apostles faded off the scene, each new generation of Christians is entrusted with the mysteries of God – to guard, protect, and proclaim the revelation given to us by the apostles. Like the early church, we are to devote ourselves to the apostle’s teachings – to study the Word, believe the Word, and do what the Word says. Our ministry must be built on the foundation of God’s Word, and despite the changing winds of time, we must not be moved from the Word.

Moving on to verses 7-8a Paul talks about the **source of the ministry**. Being called of God to reveal His mysteries is a pretty big deal – a calling that could easily go to Paul’s head. But Paul never lost sight of where his ministry came from. He writes, “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me...”

God gives each believer spiritual gifts to minister to others – like gifts of teaching, leading, serving, and encouraging – and one of the great temptations is that we depend on our natural strengths and gifts rather than on God’s power. The temptation is to use our gifts to promote ourselves rather than to glorify God – and seek the applause of people rather than the applause of the Lord.

Paul knew this temptation better than anyone. Before his conversion Paul was proud, arrogant, and egotistical – he gloried in his heritage, his knowledge, and his accomplishments. But on the road to Damascus God knocked him off his high horse, and from that point on he saw himself as a servant of God, and acknowledged that any gift or talent he possessed was given to him purely by God’s grace. John the Baptist saw himself the same way. Although he a powerful, charismatic leader he knew the source of his power. He said, “A person can only receive what is given them from heaven.” Whatever gifts, talents, or abilities we have are given to us by God.

Many times in his writings Paul downplayed his importance... “I’m just a servant... I’m no one special, I’m just on assignment from God.” In 1 Corinthians he referred to himself as “the chief of sinners.” He was acutely aware of what He was before Christ, and was humbled that God would use such a person as him. Here he says that “I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people.” Take the least qualified person to serve God, he says, and I am even less than that... I am ‘leaster’ of them all.”

Over and over Paul returns to the theme of God’s grace – everything we are or do is because of God’s underserved kindness towards us – we are saved by grace – we are called to the ministry to grace – we are given gifts by grace – and we serve God by grace.

Paul goes on in verses 8-11 to talk about the **purpose of the ministry**. He’s been called of God and given a stewardship of God’s mystery, and now he explains what God wants him to do with the mystery that’s been revealed to him... “Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.”

“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul was commissioned by God to do three things. The first was to “preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.” The boundless riches of Christ refer back to chapter one where Paul described all the spiritual riches we inherit through faith in Christ – our salvation, our adoption into God’s family, our forgiveness, and our new life in Christ. The “riches of Christ” is another way of talking about the gospel, and Paul has been appointed to preach the good news of Christ to the Gentiles who haven’t yet heard the gospel.

When we think of preaching, we usually think of what I’m doing right now – an ordained minister giving a public, formal sermon. But the word preach means “to proclaim openly.” You don’t have to be behind a pulpit to proclaim the good news of Christ. Preaching can happen informally over coffee or around the dinner table or chatting with someone online. The gospel can be proclaimed by a child or adult, by a new believer or someone who has known the Lord a long time. At the heart of evangelism is the verbal proclamation of the gospel.

Secondly, Paul was commissioned to “make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery.” God wanted Paul to reveal – to bring to light – the mystery that was once hidden but now made known to Paul... “This is not just a secret between you and me – I want the whole world to know the mystery of who Christ is and what He came to do, and how people from every tribe, tongue, and nation can be a part of His church. The world is in the dark concerning these things, and your job is to turn the light on for them.”

Imagine that you’re a research scientist and one day you happened to discover a combination of drugs that cures cancer. Imagine having the knowledge of something so powerful – a knowledge no one before you has had – what are you going to do with that knowledge? Naturally, you’re going to want to share the good news with the world, and hold a press conference to disclose your discovery. What on earth would keep you from doing so? Well, you say, what if people don’t believe me? What if they think I’m a quack?

Paul said, “I’ve been given a mystery that will revolutionize the world, and I’ve got to proclaim it regardless of the cost. I’ve been divinely commissioned by God to tell the world what they don’t know. If I don’t tell them, millions will die in their sins and be forever separated from God.”

Likewise, God entrusts each generation of believers with the responsibility to preach the gospel and make known to a lost world the truth of God’s Word. If we don’t tell the world, who will? Paul writes in Romans 10:14, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”

Paul fulfilled his responsibility to preach, and now that responsibility falls to us – not just to me the “ordained” minister, but to all of us. You have people in your life – friends and family and neighbors and co-workers – that are unique to you, and God wants you to look for and seize every opportunity to share with them good news that will save their life.

Third, Paul says in verses 10-11 that the purpose of God saving sinners and forming them into the church has a broader, more cosmic purpose... “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God’s plans and purposes for the world are being played out before a grand theatre – not only are people in the natural world watching what’s unfolding, but so are the spirit beings in the unseen world – the angels in the heavenly realms.

While God’s angels have supernatural powers, their knowledge is limited and they’re not privy to God’s mysteries. 1 Peter 1:10-12 says that like the Old Testament prophets who longed to know the mysteries of what they were prophesying, angels also “long to look into these things.” Angels are curious, and here Paul says that they learn about God’s plan by watching the church. When they see God save people from every people group and background and bring them together as one body representing Christ on earth, they marvel at the manifold wisdom of God.

Angels not only marvel, they get excited. Luke 15:10 says the angels in heaven rejoice each time a sinner repents and trusts Christ. “Wow!” they say, “How exciting it is to see a person eternally doomed be forgiven and redeemed by God.” Each person who is brought into the church is an audio-visual display of God’s “manifold” wisdom, showing the variety and diversity of the people who make up the church.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wants believers to have a high, lofty view of the church. Christ loves the church and gave His life for her. The church is not just another club or group, it represents Christ on earth. As a church we serve as a light to a dark world, making known to them the good news of the gospel, and as a church we display God’s glory to the entire world cosmos. Church is not something we do once a week if we have time, church is who we are. Church is God’s Plan-A to make Him known to the world. The higher view we have of the church, the stronger we will be as a church.

In verses 12-13 we lastly see the **motivation of the ministry**. Paul wraps up his digression he’s been on since verse 2 with a strong word of optimism. Ministry to broken people in a hostile world can be discouraging, but Paul clung to a couple of truths that kept him strong and confident.

First, in verse 12 he says, “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” Before Christ, people had to go through priests to gain access to God, but after the cross the ways has been opened up to all believers – Jew and Gentiles alike – to directly approach God without fear. This was something else the angels surely marvel at – that former sinners could come before God’s throne with complete freedom and confidence.

In verse 13 Paul says, “I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.” Paul felt the need to explain why he’s in prison. If ministry results in you being thrown in jail, then why do it? Paul says, “Here’s why – because you and I as the church have been entrusted with a mystery not known before now to anyone in history. We have the good news of the gospel – we have the cure for sin – and it’s our responsibility to make known to people everywhere how they can be saved and be made right with God.”

“Don’t be discouraged that I’m in prison – the reason I’m here is because I obeyed God in proclaiming the gospel to you. If I had kept my mouth shut, I’d have an easier life, but you would still be lost in sin. Don’t let my circumstances get you down. If one soul is saved because of my sufferings, it’s all worth it.”

You may not carry an ordination certificate in your wallet, but God has called each of us to be ministers – we're all in the gospel ministry – you may not be called to give a sermon, but every ministry in church contributes to the proclamation of the gospel. The church is at the center of how God wants to change the world, and we have the privilege and the responsibility to be ministers of the mystery, and by God's grace may we be faithful to fulfill it.