

Eph. 3:7-13

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[0 : 0 0] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

We are in Ephesians chapter 3. Ephesians chapter 3 verses 7 through 13 we'll be considering this morning. Along with what Will said, I would encourage you to continue to prepare your hearts as we complete the Lenten season over the next week or so. Mark your calendars for those Easter Holy Week services. They are very special services. Please make plans to attend.

I'm excited about that. I hope you are too. I told one of our members this morning that God and His love and kindness gave us Easter. It happened, but it's also happening. We have a reminder every year we get to celebrate this amazing news of Jesus defeating death, rising from the grave.

It changed the entire course of history, and we celebrate it each year. It happened, but we also celebrate that it's happening in the coming weeks. So continue to prepare your hearts for that. Ephesians chapter 3 verses 7 through 13, Paul's going to continue to draw out for us what this mystery of the gospel is, what it looks like in our lives. He's going to help us to see more of what God intended as He reveals and works the gospel into our lives as believers. So look with me at Ephesians 3 verses 7 through 13. Paul says this, of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of His power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

This was according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with competence through faith in Him. So I ask you not to lose heart for what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. Let's pray together. Father, this is your word.

[2 : 2 1] This is your time. These are your people. And I ask that you would be present with us, that you would bless us in a unique and special way during this time, not because of what I say, because of anything that I might be or the way that this pulpit is represented, but only because of your truth.

May my words be your words. May the truth that is proclaimed here take hold in the lives of these your people. I pray these things in your heavenly and righteous Son's name. Amen. One of the primary philosophies of ministry when you work with junior high students is the managing and the organizing of chaos. The wiring of the brain of a junior higher is this combination of random attention levels, spurts of energy going in all kinds of different directions. There's this crazy cocktail of hormones that's constantly brewing in their bodies. And especially for junior high boys, this is true when we play games. We know, myself and Winnie, any staff member that we have, we train them to know that when you work with junior highers, when you play games with them, you've got to know that at some point chaos is going to ensue. Like all of your structure is going to fall apart. And if you like structure and rules in a game, forget about it with a junior higher. Chaos is going to ensue. Things are going to go crazy at some point. This is never truer than in the first 20 minutes of junior high life.

If you come across the street to the lodge on Wednesday nights, from six o'clock till about 620, is kind of a hangout free time for our junior highers. And you ought to sign a waiver before you enter the gym because it is chaos. There are dodgeballs, there are kickballs, there are basketballs, there are volleyballs, there are finger blasters, there's shoes flying, like whatever they can find is being thrown or shot or dodged, whatever it is. You really should come take a look sometime.

If the students are amped up enough, if they've had enough caffeine, the normal use for each ball will change. You can see it in the eyes of some of these junior high boys. A basketball will roll his way and he'll take it. And in his eyes you can see, I don't want this to be a basketball. I want this to be a kickball. And he'll do it. He'll turn a basketball into a kickball. There was one time when I entered into the gym and I was struck by one of those basketballs that had turned into a cannonball and I realized very quickly the importance of using athletic equipment for what it's meant to be used for, right?

You don't use volleyballs for basketball or basketballs for dodgeball. Each ball has their intended use. The instinct, my instinct is to intervene to remind the students of the intended purpose and plans for each of those balls, all of the athletic equipment that's there. The intent for Paul as he now speaks to the Ephesians is the same. It's almost as if he's refereeing a game, but instead of dodgeball or kickball, Paul's going to lay out for the Ephesians, he's going to lay out for us what the purpose and plan is for the church. You see, for many of us, our sinful tendency is to lose sight of or confuse why it is that we exist as a church. Our sinful tendency is to think primarily about ourselves, to focus on our own personal individual relationship with Christ. Paul's going to show us how our sin, the beauty of the gospel, and the resulting nature of our mission as a church, including even, Paul says, our suffering, is all for the glory and the growth of God's kingdom. Paul's going to frame for us the nature of his ministry, but he's doing so to exemplify, to point us and show us what the church should look like. So, with this loving, pastoral, but declarative voice, Paul's going to tell the Ephesians two things, two primary things regarding his ministry. So, if you're taking notes, start with this. Paul's going to tell them the purpose of his ministry, the purpose of the church, why it is that we exist.

[6 : 29] Paul tells the Ephesians, and he tells us that the church exists for a two-fold purpose. The first is to reach the world with the gospel of grace. The gospel that Paul explains that he is a minister of is one that is marked primarily by grace. He is first marked by grace. Paul is first a recipient of it, is what he tells us. In verse 8, he calls himself the very least of all the saints. The emphasis that Paul is placing is clearly upon God's favor and God's mercy. A more literal translation of this descriptor, very least of the saints, would sound something like this in the original language, that Paul would say he is the lesser least of all the saints. As he's known to do now in Ephesians, Paul's going beyond conventional grammar. He's going beyond conventional speech to make a clear point about where he stands before the Father. It'd be easy for us to assume, though, that Paul's just using some kind of pious hyperbole, right? That he's saying, well, this is what I used to be like. He's just being humble. How could we think that with all the great things that Paul has done, the churches that he's planted, the great obedience that he's shown, the suffering that he faces, how could he say that he's the lesser least of all the saints? Well, Paul's reminding us that he and each of us is members of

Christ's body. Although we grow in our obedience, we continue to be the least of all the saints. Paul knows that even our best, most honorable, most godly moments earn us nothing before the Father, that we continue to be the least of all the saints. The only thing that we add to our spiritual ledger before the Father is debt. For Paul, the great apostle, and for each of us, this must mean a posture of humility and a posture of brokenness. We must be constantly aware that we are servants of Christ. We live in this never-ending cycle, right, where we see our sin and we experience God's grace, and we see our sin again, and we experience God's grace. It's this never-ending cycle. It's in this cycle that we're constantly aware of our weakness. It's in this cycle that we are regularly dependent upon God's grace. Sinclair Ferguson said that it's in this dependence that we begin to see ourselves as servants rather than masters to our fellow believers. What does Paul say he dwells with? He dwells with the saints. He's the least of the saints. He's recognizing his place in the kingdom. He never separates the two, though. He recognizes that we are both sinners and saints.

We are simultaneously marked by our sin, but we're also reclaimed and made righteous by God's grace. This means that we must have an attitude of servanthood towards each other and those outside of the church. It's because of this truth that Paul starts with of our brokenness and our restoration that we live lives. We must live lives that are marked by love, that are marked by compassion, that are marked by gentleness and kindness. Why do we do all of it? Because Christ did it first.

When we sacrifice, when we give, when we serve, when we love, when we show compassion and kindness to our neighbors, we are giving and experiencing the kingdom as Jesus founded it for us.

Jesus, who was the greatest of all creation, became the least. The one true heavenly king took on flesh. He came to earth and he died for his people. Paul's purpose and our purpose is to model that same love. It's all because of that same love, because of the unmerited favor that God showed us in Christ.

[10 : 04] This is what Paul calls the unsearchable riches of Christ. They are unable to be tracked out, unable to be traced. The love of God which was displayed to you, Southwood, was unfathomable.

You can't understand it. It doesn't make sense. Your heart and your mind can't comprehend why God would love you in this way, but you respond in it and because of it. So, the first purpose of our ministry is to reach the world with this gospel of grace, to live out of our humility and our brokenness. The second half of our purpose that Paul tells us is to offer the light, offer light to the darkness that plagues all men. Chapter 2 told us about the dividing wall of hostility that existed between God and the Gentiles and how Jesus broke that down. But now Paul is telling us to go beyond that, to take the light of the gospel and carry it to all people and to all places. We've seen the light, we've experienced the light, now we go as light bearers into the world. We've been shown the glory of Christ. Now we get to take it to all of the world, to every part of our lives, to apply the gospel where we live and we work and we play. We get to partner with God. We get to join Him in this process of reversing the fall, of taking back what was His, taking back what was lost and damaged. So, this means some challenging things for you, for us. It means we don't just sit here in the pews, receive God's Word, and then go about our business. It means that the gospel needs to be taking hold in every corner of your life. It means that you should be on the cutting edge of reconciliation. It means that you should perform your work with utter integrity, that you should live honestly in your relationships.

It means that you should take up the fight against injustices. You should declare truth to your children and to your children's friends about the broken and cynical generation that they're a part of.

It means that you should honor others with love. You should work for social change. You should grow a garden. You should cook good food. You're bringing beauty and glory back into the world, into all the places that have been touched by the fall.

And while you do this, you're constantly remembering, constantly renewed by the humbling reality that God chose you to offer this light to first. You're carrying what you have first experienced. You are God's light bearers to the whole world.

[12 : 35] If you watched the national news or glanced at headlines this week, then you know Starbucks made the news. After starting in their home market of Seattle, Starbucks just this week rolled out a nationwide campaign called Race Together. The idea is for all of Starbucks baristas at all of their locations along with the cup of coffee that they serve to start a conversation about racial reconciliation. They can write a note on the cup. They can share a quote. They can offer a quick thought about the problems that are plaguing our country and our community. Now, as you can imagine, this has caused a lot of controversy. Some think it's a great idea. Some think it's a great way to get people talking, but there are other people who just want to receive their coffee or they don't want to have that conversation with Starbucks baristas. Despite the pushback, Howard Schultz, the CEO of Starbucks, is standing strong. He released a memo to his employees this week, and this is what the memo said.

He said, I'm asking you to perform the small gesture of writing Race Together on a cup, and if a customer asks you what this is, try and engage in a discussion. Tell them that we have problems in this country with regard to race and racial reconciliation, and that you believe that we're better than this. We believe the country is better than this, and if this makes you have a conversation with a customer about the need for compassion, the need for empathy, the need for love for others, if you can do that with one customer one day, you're making a significant difference as we move forward. Now, I'm not here to give you the official position of Southwood's leadership on Starbucks on this move that they've made or mine and Will's official position. I'm not here to criticize or challenge Starbucks. I'm here to criticize and challenge you as Christ's church.

Listen again to the last part of what Howard Schultz said. He said, if this makes you have a conversation with a customer about the need for compassion, the need for empathy, the need for love towards others, if you can do that with one customer one day, you're making a significant difference as we go forward. My first thought as I heard about what this coffee company was doing was, forgive us, Father. Forgive us that we have coffee companies doing what we should be doing as a church. Forgive us for not starting better conversations. Forgive us for not having compassion, empathy, love, cultural awareness, and sensitivity. Forgive us for missing the purpose of your church and the reason that you have placed us in this world. Now, Southwood, you need to know that you are doing lots of great things. I believe in you. You are engaged in the city. You're engaged in the lives of your neighbors and your friends. But until we have spread the light to everyone, what is the glorious, amazing gospel of grace, until we've spread it everywhere, coffee companies are going to do it in our stead. Lead the way in your workplace. Lead the way in your children's schools. Lead the way in your friendships and in your neighborhoods. Love what God loves by bringing it into the darkness. Don't let others do it for us. Step in. Lead the way. Be light bearers. Paul has told us that the ministry, his ministry, his ministry and the ministry of the church, has this purpose of advancing the kingdom by reaching the world with the gospel and taking light into the darkness. He answers for us this second question then of what is God up to then when He works? Why are we doing all of this? What is God's plan? So the second thing that Paul tells us is what God's plan is for the church and for ministry here.

Ultimately, Paul tells us that God is, His plan is to display power and to raise up glory in our midst. God is working to display power and to raise up glory in our midst. To better understand this idea of power and glory being proclaimed, we need to look back and remember this principle that Paul's been building upon of the heavenly places. Look with me at Ephesians chapter 1 verse 20 where God, Paul told us this about God. He says that God worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places. It was emphasized at the beginning of Paul's letter that God is firmly established in heaven and that Christ upon His resurrection was seated in His right place with God. He was seated in the heavenly places.

The second chapter of Ephesians in verse 6, we are told that God did what? That He raised us up and He seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. So just as God was faithful to raise up Christ, we were merited with all of Christ's obedience. We were merited with His resurrection and His conquering of death. So we were seated with Christ in heaven. But the idea continues.

[17 : 43] Look at verses 9 and 10. They say this, To bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and the authorities in where? In the heavenly places. Do you see this repeated theme of the heavenly places that first we're told of God's dwelling, Christ's dwelling, and our dwelling? But now that we're told that as the church, we are to proclaim back to the heavenly places the glory of God, that His plan the entire time was from earth as citizens of God's kingdom here, we are to proclaim back to the angels and God Himself what is the glory, the majesty, the holiness, the mercy of God.

This glory, we're told, is seen in the manifold wisdom of God, and it's shown even in our suffering as God's people.

A few important applications that I want us to draw out from this plan that God has for His church, three big applications. The first is this, is that the church, the church by its very nature exists in what one commentator calls colorful hues. The church exists in colorful hues. The proclamation of the gospel that Paul has been spreading is not just intended to bring individuals in the kingdom, but to actually create this ever-broadening, ever-expanding, always-diversifying place called the church.

We as the church are the theater in which God displays His manifold witness, wisdom, excuse me. The wisdom of God is this most wonderful counsel of God, His sanctifying power, His predestinating will, His sovereign election. And how has it worked out? It's worked out in manifold ways, in diversity, in many facets. This means that if we as the church are properly reflecting the wisdom and the revelation of God that we claim to have seen, then we must embrace what it means to belong to a people who are diverse, what it means to belong to a people who don't look like us sometimes, who do different things, who have different interests, who look and smell a little bit different than us. There are two major ways that Paul wants to see diversity in his church. The first is through our sin and our brokenness. This means that there's no filter, no type or degree of sin in which you or I or any other person may not struggle with. It means that we welcome anybody who's sick into this place. A hospital doesn't turn someone away because they're too sick or because of some particular illness, right? So too, should we never turn our attention and our hearts away from the brokenness, the sinfulness, the doubts, the messiness, the worry that relationships with the world will bring us.

We must have diversity in our sin and our brokenness. The second way that we should have diversity is in our racial and social makeup. Paul tells us that the church is going to be filled with people from every tribe, every tongue, every nation, every life stage, every personal history, and varied financial backgrounds. And this is something that we should long for, that we should celebrate, we should praise God for. It means that we should champion and embrace ways to diversify where and when we can as a community. I want you to think for a second about the people that are sitting next to you in the pew. It's okay to judge them for a second because I'm going to ask you some questions, okay? Do you think that they live a similar lifestyle as you? Do you think that they desire the same things as you? Do you think they have the same general needs that you do in your life?

[21 : 44] I would expect you to say yes, that's okay. I would expect us to be a group of people who are generally like-minded, who have similar interests, similar needs, similar desires. But I want you to think about your next-door neighbor now, or the parents of your son's friend at school, or the people on the sidelines of the soccer field, or who are in theater practice with your kids. Are they a little different? Do they talk a little different? Do they come from a little less pedigree than you do?

And do you feel like we're missing something at Southwood without them? You should. There should be a hole in your heart, there are empty places in our pews, and there should be a desire within the life and the body of this church for a more diversified group of people. Because this, Paul says, is one of the infectious implications of the gospel, that you're so amazed by the fact that you were saved that you can't help but get more people in here. You can't help but get more people who would also be amazed by the fact that they were saved, that you would desire to show God's manifold witness to the world.

The second application of this plan of God to display His power and His glory is that we might see in the face of our suffering our need and the glory of heaven. I don't intend to give a full explanation or a great thesis on the topic of suffering this morning, but I think it's necessary for us to recognize what Paul's saying. This primary point at the end of our passage, and it's this, that our suffering is ultimately intended for the glory of God and His church. There are all kinds of mysteries, uncertainties, frustrations, hurts, and scars that result from our suffering. But God's promise is that nothing else, if nothing else, that they would cause us to long and desire more for heaven, that they would cause us to long and desire more for God's healing grace. Look at what Brian Chappell says about Paul's suffering.

He says, From an earthly perspective, his, that is Paul's suffering, hinder his ministry, they endanger his life, and spoil his reputation. But from heaven's perspective, he sees that God uses even suffering for the great glory of bringing us together for the praise of our Savior. Listen to this.

This is the ultimate sign of our genuine calling. We are so enraptured by grace that we would be willing to die to self and live for God so that we might bring together many centers of many kinds to be a witness to the Savior in heaven and on earth. This is the infectious implication of the gospel.

[24 : 39] That we would desire so greatly for God's kingdom to expand that we would recognize God's purposes and even embrace the suffering that we have in our lives so that more might be added to the number of God's kingdom. But this is foolish and unwise. The world looks at us and is confused. They laugh. Why would we embrace our suffering? Who would embrace their suffering? The Easter story that we're going to celebrate in the next few weeks tells us that there was one person who did. Jesus embraced his suffering.

He said, though he desired for the cup to pass, his desire was that his father's reign would increase, that his father's kingdom would increase, and Jesus would endure the greatest pain, that Jesus would endure the greatest suffering on our behalf. His pain and suffering, his torture and torment, are what now give us hope. They give us hope that God is actively working in our suffering, that God is drawing us to himself in our suffering, and he is advancing and growing his kingdom through our suffering. Suffering, Paul tells us, results in the growth and the glory of God's name and God's kingdom.

Ultimately, Paul's message as he describes the purpose and the plan of God in the life of a believer in the church is that our faith, this church, is not about Jesus and me. It's about Jesus and us, that we exist as a corporate gathered group of people. Our chief desire should be for the glory of God and the gathering of many types of people to God, people of different tastes and interests, backgrounds and struggles.

Faith, Paul tells us, is not an isolated, one-time transaction with God, but rather an engaged, regular, integrated relationship where many different people come together for one common interest, and that is the glory of God. By showing love, by showing grace and favor to all those that Jesus died for, we are displaying the manifold wisdom of God. And we are proclaiming to those on earth and to our Father in heaven what is his glorious and mighty reign. God's desire is that we would be willing to die to self and to live for the sake of God's glory and the others of this community.

The greatest implication of the gospel is not just that God died for you, but that he died for us, for the entire world. May we worship God, may we live as his followers and embrace his mission to this end. Will you pray with me?

[27 : 40] Father, this doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense that you would die for people like us, that you would choose to display your glory in this way through weak, through broken, through messy people. But Father, it's what you chose to do because that's how you are going to receive the greatest glory. So I pray that you would prick the hearts of these people and that you would help them see the greater body that they are connected to, that you would also prick their hearts and lead them to share the gospel with others, with their neighbors, with their friends, and with their family.

And Father, would you give us a perspective on our suffering? Give us a perspective on what it is that you're doing, not only in our hearts, but in the life of your church. And grow in us a desire for your kingdom, for lost souls, that people might know you as we know you. Thank you, Father, for your love and for your grace. In Jesus' name, amen.

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