

What is Christian maturity?

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[0 : 0 0] Colossians chapter 1, and we're going to begin at verse 15, having finished at verse 14 last week, and we're going to read to the end of chapter 1.

So Colossians chapter 1, beginning at verse 15, now hear God's Word. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross. And you, who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing even deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless, and above reproach before him. If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of his glory and of his mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy, that he powerfully works within me. Amen.

Well, we're going to... Well, if you have your Bibles with you, please open them again to Colossians.

As you're making your way back there, or you're already there, you might remember the question that Jesus asked his disciples. He asked them two questions. The first was, who do people say that I am?

And then he turned the question on them and says, well, who do you say that I am? It's important that we know who we follow. It's one thing to say, I follow Jesus. It's another thing to be able to tell you about the person I follow. Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am?

[3 : 4 5] Well, the passage here is about growing up, and the way that we grow up is that we grow up into Jesus. That means we know more about him, and that the relationship between us and Christ improves the longer we live by faith. It just can't help but get better. But at the same time, we live in a world where faith can be incredibly difficult at times, but nevertheless, the call is to continue to keep following Jesus. And of course, we slip in our following of Jesus whenever we slip in like the spiritual disciplines, such as simply reading your Bible. If you don't read your Bible, you find it hard to understand the Bible because you're spending less time in it.

Same with prayer. If you're finding prayer difficult, it could be because you're finding it difficult to pray, and you're not really built up any type of praying life. And so things are difficult because things, you find them difficult. And so there's never any type of progress. And so when we talk about growing up in Jesus, it has to be understood properly. Now, I had a pile of books in the back room of the manse, and they were about five or six high. And over the weeks, those that were on the leadership class would come in and notice that the pile of books were getting higher and higher, to the point where they were almost touching the ceiling. And everyone was incredibly fearful that they were going to fall over, you know, and sort of damage someone. I don't think they were worried about the books getting damaged. That was the only thing I was worried about happening. Not that I love books more than my children or anything, but, you know, in fact, my mother-in-law, or outlaw, as I like to call her, yeah, sorry, it's all in Christian love that I call her that, once decided to babysit the children while me and Susan went away for a night. And she says, out of all the fears that she had, was the fear of these books falling over and crashing on her watch, as it were. What was she going to have, what was her response going to be? Anyway, somebody said to me to get back to the books, my, your books are growing. And yet they hadn't grown, they'd only accumulated. If I brought a book each week and stuck it in the corner down there, and each week you looked at it and go, my, that pile's growing. Well, the pile isn't growing, it's only accumulating.

It's getting bigger, but it's getting bigger through accumulation. It's not getting bigger through growth. And if you think that when you actually get that day where you stand before God and you reel off a list of, well, I did this one in my 20s for you, I did this in my 30s for you, I did this in my 40s for you, I did this in my 50s, 60s, and 70s, look at everything that I've done.

You know, I helped out here, I helped up there, I served you, and we run this list off of accumulation. Well, that's not growth. God isn't looking for how much you do for him, he's really looking for how much you grow in him. And so, if you can imagine for a moment that the future judgment is not really going through a checklist of what you've done and not done, but actually cutting through a tree.

And as you cut through the tree, you look down into its trunk and you count the number of rings. And I'm told that the number of rings shows how old the tree is. I'm also told, I hope this is right, that depending on how close the rings are to each other and how far apart they are, depends on what type of growing year that they had. They could have grew really fast that year, or really slow over a period of years. And so, that's the type of thing that God is really looking at when he's looking at Christians. You know, we talk about serving God, but the one thing that God wants more than anything else is that if we grow in God, the service takes care of itself.

[7 : 57] The trouble is, the trouble is, is that Christians tend to get it the completely, the other way around. That we tend to think that if we keep ourself busy, that somehow this is a wonderful protection to keeping our faith strong. And actually, while it may help, it isn't the very thing that builds up our faith. What builds up our faith, more than anything else, is us being able to answer the question, who is Jesus? Who is this person, Jesus? And the way that we get to know Jesus, according to Paul, as he is laid out, is that heaven has a qualification. And that qualification has to be passed by anybody who wants to enter in to the heaven, to the glory, to the future that God has.

And the way that you get that is by the same way as how you get to know Jesus. And Paul says at the end of verse 13 and 14, that it's this Jesus who's delivered us from darkness and transferred us into his kingdom, in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins. And so the only reason you'd be interested in what Paul has to say this evening, is if you listen to what he says, as someone who's had their sins forgiven. In fact, it seems to me that the only reason you would find Jesus interesting, is if you've come to realize what Jesus has done for you. That seems to be the way that Paul is laying it out for us here. That the only reason why you have an interest in the Word of God, the only reason why you sit here this evening and listen to the Word of God, is actually goes back to the fact that this God through Jesus has reconciled you to him, has removed the scales from your eyes, has removed the deafness from your ears, has brought you to him, and now you find him interesting. Now you love him. Now you want to know more about him. Everything boils down to the fact that Jesus had to remove something in us before we could get close to him. And so when it goes on to say that this Christ is the one who will reconcile all things to himself, the way that Jesus sorts out the world is by not by getting rid of the world and starting with a new one, but it's very similar to the way you see council workers, or whoever they may be, trying to get graffiti off a wall.

Now I don't know if you've ever been in the position where you've had to do this, but it's incredibly difficult. That when a nice wall or a nice building has been made an absolute mess of, you can't get rid of the building. Let's just put a new one there. You get rid of the stain.

But to get rid of something in order to keep what you have is much more difficult than just getting rid of it and getting a brand new one. But God, through Christ, wants to keep what he's created, even though it's ruined. He wants to keep what he's created, even though it's a real mess.

But he keeps it in order to clean it up. He keeps it in order to get rid of the stains and the damage and everything like that, that we don't like about the world either. That's the type of God that we have, and the way God does it is through Jesus. So God saved us to give us an inheritance, God saved us in order that our sins may be forgiven. But God has also saved us in order that we grow up, in order that we become mature. And so it says in verse 22, one of the reasons why Jesus died is so that he has reconciled us in his body of flesh by his death in order, this is why Jesus died on the cross in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him. In other words, I don't stand before God based on what I've done or not done in the Christian life alone.

[12:17] I'm able to stand before God and stay standing before God because Jesus died on the cross to make me holy and blameless so that I can stand before God. See, Jesus lives with the work in his life on earth in order knowing that there's a future coming. What are you doing that for, Jesus? Well, believe it or not, I know what's coming. I know what's coming. And as Christians, we cannot afford to lose the fact that we've got a future that we're yet to walk into, that we've got a time where we are actually going to meet God and all this guessing of what it might be like will disappear and we'll stand before God. And we won't have to give an account in the same way that those do who reject him, but we will have to give an account of what we have done or not done in the body. But the thing that makes us stand before a holy God is being made holy by his Son. We can't do that on our own. So, Jesus died on the cross not simply to take away our sin, not simply to get rid of the graffiti and the stain and to keep us, but to get rid of that in order to make us holy and perfect to stand before God.

Paul then says, this is the reason why I became a minister, that he can go out under God and proclaim the message of the gospel, which is how Jesus cleanses people, how Jesus makes people grow up, simply by proclaiming the gospel over and over again, keep proclaiming the word of God.

And then he says in verse 28 that it's Jesus we proclaim. We don't proclaim any means, we don't proclaim any methods, we don't proclaim any ideas, we don't proclaim any self-help strategies, we don't proclaim any visualization or wishful thinking, we proclaim Jesus.

We warn everyone, we teach everyone, we do it in wisdom so that they may be presented mature in Jesus. And then he says, verse 29 at the very end of chapter 1 that is, this is the reason why I toil and struggle. And so the greatest struggle for the minister, Paul is the minister here, the greatest struggle for the minister is one, proclaiming the word of God, whether it be to Christians or to non-Christians. It's hard work, it is very hard work, and I'm not just laboring this because I just so happen to be the pastor, but it is hard work. And you toil and struggle because the one thing that you look for more than anything else as you look at Christians is that they would grow up in Jesus, because you know that the cross is central to making them holy and blameless.

The one thing that you want more than anything else as a pastor is for people to grow up. And I don't mean that you're childish or that you behave in childish ways, but there is a certain level of commitment that comes with maturity. There's a certain level of devotion that only comes with maturity. There's a certain level of self-sacrifice that can only come with maturity.

[15 : 37] And so when you don't find yourself being committed, and you don't find yourself loving others as Jesus loved them, you don't find yourself forgiving others as Jesus forgives. All that's pointing to is the fact that you're not like Jesus yet all that much, and you've got a lot more growing to do.

And so as a pastor, I feel the struggle, not only as a pastor, wondering whether or not if God has really given me this weight for the entire congregation, and whether or not I'm actually managing to grow up myself. You know, there's the issue that everyone here is to grow up, because Jesus died, not just to remove the stain, but in order that I might grow, that I might grow. And so the question is a simple one, but it's one that I think we need to address, and that is, do you believe Jesus is sufficient for the task?

Not the minister. Do you believe Jesus is sufficient for the task? Now here's why I say this, and I say this with a great deal of caution, because I know that churches will want to say, yes, we believe Jesus is sufficient for the task, but then a lot of church practices seem to suggest the opposite. I've got a good friend who went to America several years ago. He did like a part ministry traineeship in the church. He grew up largely in America because his dad worked for BAE, and, you know, the building airplanes and stuff like that. And so he spent a lot of time living in Texas, and he decided that even though he'd spent some time in the church, and he was serving in the church, preaching, teaching, we were working together, he decided that he wanted to go back off to America and actually go to Bible college. He went to Bible college, and since he's come out of Bible college, he's been appointed in about four churches now. He's now going into his fourth appointment. And of course, I always struggle with this. I know that the average turnaround for appointments in American churches, especially down in the south, it shocked me, was actually 18 months.

Imagine that. I wouldn't even get any of the boxes unpacked. What, you want me to go again? And so, you know, he didn't really want to speak to me because he would know what I had to say. And so I always put this question to anybody who feels as though they feel that God doesn't want them to do anything anymore, or he wants them to do it somewhere else. Because I'm not so sure it's God, I think it's more the minister's infancy rather than his maturity. So, you know, all these weeks I've been sort of going on at the congregation, here's a time to bash the minister legitimately from the text. So, people who believe that churches need different ministers in order to do different tasks are telling something about what they think about Jesus.

That's a possible problem here at Colossae. Epaphras has done a good job, but now we need somebody else to teach us something else. Now we need someone different in order to give us something different.

[18 : 54] And so there becomes this need in churches, even today, in order for ministers to move around, feeling that they have taken the church as far as they can, and now somebody else has to come in in order to take the church further. But who are you trusting? Are you trusting in men, or are you trusting in Jesus? See, it's very, very simple to move your focus from Jesus, who you say we trust, onto men. Men are not fit for the task which only Jesus can complete.

And so what happens, it's this very sort of man-centered methods, ideas, we need a different person, that actually keeps people in their infancy, especially the pastor. Because the moment things get tough, the pastor says, let me find somewhere where it's easier. Right? And who wouldn't do that?

Now. And it's that very attitude of, let's make an easier life for us, that causes us to not grow. It causes us to not face what we have to face. And so that's not just a reality for pastors, it's a reality for anybody in the church who doesn't want to see things through.

And so when you're a congregation that doesn't want to see things through, what you're really saying is, is I'm not really trusting in Jesus Christ, I'm relying on myself a whole load.

But do you believe Jesus is sufficient? And this is exactly what Paul is trying to get across to the congregation. Jesus is the one we proclaim. Jesus is the one who makes us holy and blameless.

[20 : 35] Yeah, I toil, I struggle, but Jesus is the one who does it. In fact, he even says in verse 29, that all the toil and struggling that he does is actually done in the strength of Jesus.

Not done in his own strength, you'll notice, but it's done in the strength which is powerfully works in him. In fact, he's just a vehicle to what God is doing.

And so who do you say that I am? Who is Jesus? Well, he says, verse 15 through to 20, that he is the preeminent one.

He is the preeminent one who has made everything in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities. All things were created through him, and all things were created, most importantly, for him. Verse 17, he is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body of the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

In other words, Jesus is all that you need, because Jesus is everything. He's the preeminent one. He is Lord over all. He is God himself. He has both the position to rule, and he has the right to rule.

[22 : 06] He is, verse 17, the one who sustains everything. And the tense here is that he's holding everything together all the time. Do you know what I find amazing? I mean, there's a lot of different things that you can find amazing. Caterpillars that become butterflies. I mean, it's really quite amazing that you have this little green thing that crawls along a leaf that then turns into a soup, and then all of a sudden sprouts these beautiful identical wings, and off it goes.

What about a dragonfly? I think dragonflies are amazing. Do you know how they work before they become dragonflies? Is there tadpoles or whatever they are in the water? They take a big gulp of water in through their mouth, and they push it literally out of their bottom, and they zoom through the water.

And then all of a sudden, they decide to climb out of the water and get onto these rocks. And all of a sudden, these beautiful wings appear, and these piston engines, and they just start flying. It's just incredible.

I think another thing which I find incredible is gravity. I can't see it. I can't understand it, but I felt it several times. Being a roofer, you're all too aware of gravity. I'd fallen off several roofs with great pain. God invented this thing called gravity, and you only feel it when you're falling. In fact, you don't feel it when you're falling. You feel the weight of it. You know, I fell off one roof once, and I can remember saying on the way down, I'm all right so far. But the earth, just held where it is, rotates around this big ball of fire in the sky.

And the moon, this thing that sets its light by night, just hangs in the same place, just rotating. And it's held there by gravity. Nobody knows. How does it do it? How does it do it? We call it gravity gravity because we don't really know what it is. That Christ, we're told, holds all of this together.

[24 : 21] But Christ holds you together. Christ holds you together. He keeps you who you are. That this Christ, who can hold the universe together and hold the moon at the same distance around the earth as it has always been, and the earth the same distance around the sun. That it is that person who holds you with great delicacy, great, in a great delicate way.

That's who he is. He sustains and upholds all things and holds all things together. It's this Jesus, who is more than capable of making you holy and blameless and mature before God.

It's this person. So who do people say that I am? He's the preeminent one. He's the only one who could do it. He is my Lord and he is my Savior. And then Paul says, verse 23, that even though Christ be the preeminent one, even though he is sufficient to do all that he can say and do through his death and his resurrection, so that we are able to stand before God, verse 23 is the caution warning to the Christian, if indeed you continue in the faith. Stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope in the gospel that you heard. And I want to ask the question of what does Paul mean about if indeed we continue in the faith? Because here's the question I want to ask, well who does it depend on?

Me or Jesus? Does it depend on me continuing? Or does it depend on Jesus alone? And there's a couple of ways of explaining this. Here's the first way. If you continue in the faith, what are you doing?

You're continuing in the faith, so you've got nothing to worry about. If you continue in the faith, then you're continuing in the faith. The question becomes irrelevant. Because if you're living in the light of what Christ has done for you, if you're living by faith in the light of what Christ has done for you, the question doesn't even matter. You're continuing. You're living to live the life that Christ has given you. But there's another way to answer this, and it's from a story, a true story, in Acts 27.

[26 : 47] In Acts 27, Paul has been told by God that he's going to be shipwrecked. He's out on a ship with several sailors. They're sailing from one place to another, and God tells them that they're going to be shipwrecked. And so over the course of the days, the storm is getting worse and worse, and so the question arises, can God be trusted when things are getting worse? Can God be trusted when things are getting worse? And God has told Paul that not a single life on the ship will be lost, not a single one, but the ship is still going to be wrecked. Okay, not a single life will be lost, but the ship is going to end up in a shipwreck. Now, as the days go on, you can see, as you read the story, that the sailors begin to doubt what Paul says. They begin to doubt whether or not God is actually going to keep his word. He said that the ship is going to wreck, but will everyone keep their life? And they begin to see the ship gets closer and closer to land, to at one point, the sailors think, we know what we'll do.

We'll jump ship because it's a short swim to shore. And just as the sailors are about to do this, Paul says, no, don't, for if you get off the boat, you'll die.

If you get off the boat, you'll die. He says, unless these men stay on the ship, they cannot live.

And so we begin to understand that the promise of God is true, but the promise of God is understood in the circumstances and the conditions that come with it. There is no loss of life because nobody got off the boat. The boat run aground, run ashore, it was wrecked, but every life was saved exactly the way God said it would be. But if they got off the boat beforehand, they would have died. And so in the same way, the person who trusts God and who trusts what God is doing is continuing to rely completely on what God has said. And so what happens when someone starts following Jesus? Do the promises continue to apply? If every promise that we have in Jesus comes with following Jesus, trusting Jesus, having faith in Jesus, does it then apply to a person who doesn't trust and follow and believe in Jesus? Well, it can. So it's not a condition of you're safe if you do this, but it's simply saying that in

Jesus you're safe, in Jesus you're not safe. In Jesus you will remain faithful, outside of Jesus you can't remain faithful. And so if we want to continually be acceptable before God, we can only be acceptable before God if we remain in Jesus. If we want to be holy and blameless, we can only be holy and blameless in Jesus. If we want to be able to stand before God, we're only going to be able to stand before God in Jesus. The whole point here is to say that Jesus is so incredibly important that your standing and your maturity and your holiness and your position in life and before God depends entirely upon your relationship with Jesus.

[30 : 14] verse 22 is the key verse that Jesus died in order to make us holy and blameless so that we could stand before God. And so to bring this to an end, to bring this to a conclusion, Paul says, verse 28, that I'm a minister and I'm a minister to proclaim this message. Verse 29, it is for this reason, this is the reason that I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

And so what is the maturity? What is the maturity that Paul is speaking about here? What is the maturity, what is it to be a mature Christian? Well, I think it comes down to this one thing.

It's not only to know that God created you through Jesus, but it's to know that you're created for Jesus. That I'm for Jesus. That the reason I stand here, the reason I do what I do is for him.

When I go back to the manse and do the things that I do, all of it's for Jesus. When I go out into the world, it's all for Jesus. So wherever I am at any time, all of it is for Jesus. Why is it for Jesus?

Well, that's probably a little bit beyond me. But everything's for Jesus. And so here we are living the Christian life that we have, and true maturity is found in the fact that I am what I am, and I do what I do, because it's all for Jesus. It's not about me. And it's not about you. It's all about him. And so true happiness, true contentment, I mean real contentment, where you are actually content with Jesus. And you walk down the road, it's like you haven't got a care in the world, real contentment. And when you get this, when you get it, it's nothing better than that. You don't care what you have, you don't care what you don't have, because you have everything in Jesus. When you have that real contentment, then that is mature. Then you begin to understand what it is to be for Jesus. And Paul says, I'm your pastor. I proclaim this message to you, and I do it, and it's hard work, but I do it because the one thing Christ wants to happen in the church is for everybody to be that mature, is for everybody to grow up, because everybody is going to meet God in the future. And everyone needs to be holy and blameless in order to meet

[33 : 07] God. And so there's a twofold ministry. Here are the two things that we as a church need to do. The first is this, to make the Word of God fully known, and to make Christians fully mature. And how do you make Christians fully mature? You make them fully mature by making the Word of God fully known.

Okay? Make the Word of God fully known. Make Christians fully mature. How do they become mature? By knowing the Word of God. That is what Paul says is authentic Christian ministry.

That's authentic Christian ministry. Doing everything that you do for Jesus so that people may come mature. And this is the bit that I like, and with this I'll close. Verse 29, I wake up in the morning, and I can't be bothered. Because there's too much to do, and I haven't got the strength to do it.

And I tend to run sort of a, you know, a sort of a deal with God. Never works, but I'll just let you into my private prayer life right now. It goes something like this. If you give me this, then I'll do that. You think, hang on a minute, you've been a minister for 15 years. Haven't you learned anything?

Well, not every day's like that, but I have my moments. And then I'm convicted and challenged, but also encouraged by verse 29. Because what verse 29 is saying is that, do you know what? It's possible to toil and struggle. It is absolutely possible to have those type of difficulties.

[34 : 47] But Christ's strength turns up when you decide to continue. Continue. You don't get the strength to continue before you continue. You get the strength as you continue. You don't get the strength to do the work. You get the strength as you're doing the work.

And so if you're ever thinking, I don't know if I can do it, and yet for some reason you make it to the end of another day, and for some reason you make it to the end of another week, and some reason you've done the youth group now for 15 years, and you were intending to give it up eight years ago, and yet you're still doing it. Do you know why you're still doing it? You're doing it because of verse 29. Because as you continue to do it, Christ gives you the strength to continue to do it.

That's the point. That's how important Jesus is. And that is what it means to be stable, and to be steadfast, and to not shift from the hope that is in you. Him we proclaim, Christ is in you, the hope of glory. Amen.