

Ephesians 3:1-13 — Ministry is Worth the Sacrifice

February 16, 2014

Good morning CrossWinds. This is an exciting and busy time in the life of our church. We have a new name and a new logo. We have a new website, that we are working hard to finish. In addition to all the work on the Spirit Lake campus, we have a another campus ready to launch this spring in Spencer. Agreements are signed. The sound system, lights, instruments, nursery, Christian education materials and a host of other equipment are purchased. Everything is getting assembled in Michigan for delivery four weeks from today. We are approving signs, choosing colors and double-checking measurements for a new stage in Spencer.

Pastor Jordan has a well laid out plan to reach the Spencer community but it will involve a fair amount of work from the young Spencer congregation. A number of you are acting as missionaries and marines for the new campus. Missionaries are those who moved down to Spencer permanently to support the campus. Marines are those going down every few weeks to help get things started. All the energy we are putting toward Spencer places an expected stress on the Spirit Lake campus. We have vacancies in our hospitality team, the worship team, the outreach team and a host of other places. Many of you are working long, hard hours to help reach two communities for Christ.

This is one of those seasons when serving in the church is hard. Sometimes you wonder if it is worth it. This is just a church. When ministry is

hard, is it worth the sacrifice? It is with that question in our minds that we open our Bibles to Ephesians 3.

We are in a series called, “Who Am I?” It is a study through the book of Ephesians. So far we have learned how incredibly good God is to us through Jesus. While we deserve to be some of the most punished beings in the universe because of our sin, what God has done for us through Jesus has transformed us into the most blessed beings in all of God’s creation. It is the ultimate stretch. The spiritual splits. We don’t deserve any of it. Jesus saves us from our sin completely by his grace.

Last week, we learned our sin doesn’t just separate us from God but it separates us from one another. Sin is why marriages go sour. Sin is where the fighting between Arabs and Jews comes from. The fighting between Republicans and Democrats is because of sin. Sin is the reason for wars, factions, fighting and hatred.

Jesus didn’t just bring us back to God when he took away our sin, Jesus brings us back to one another in the church. Having our sins forgiven by Jesus is such a big deal that it is bigger than any of the differences that tear us apart. While racial divisions, cultural divisions, age and style divisions still exist, in the church, they don’t matter that much. They are secondary. The Jesus that joins us together is greater than the divisions that divide us. The church is a living picture of redeemed humanity working together.

As we come to Ephesians 3, Paul took a break from these themes. Paul started to say something in verse one, then got off track for 13 verses. He picked

up his thoughts again in verse 14. Reading the beginning of these verses will show you what I mean.

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles...
Ephesians 3:1 (ESV)

Then he took a rabbit trail that we will study this morning and returned to what he was talking about in verse 14.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father... Ephesians 3:14 (ESV)

What we have in these 13 verses is Paul taking a little aside to talk to the Ephesians about his heart. He talked to them about what to do when ministry gets tough.

What brought this rabbit trail to Paul's mind? As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he was writing from a Roman prison. He realized people would be discouraged to hear he was in prison. People would wonder if they could trust his credibility. He had to talk about it.

This wasn't the only time working to plant churches was hard work and sacrifice for Paul. In 2 Corinthians 11:5ff, we learn what Paul went through for planting churches. He was put in prison multiple times. Five times he was beaten with 40 lashes less one. Three times beaten with rods. Once stoned. He had many sleepless nights and was often hungry and went without food. Working for Christ and the health of the church was a hard job.

As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he was writing from a prison in Rome. How did he get there? The back story of that comes from Acts 21 and 22. Paul was in Jerusalem worshipping at the temple. Folks saw him walking around town with an Ephesian named Trophimus, who was a Gentile. Do you remember the

dividing wall of hostility we learned about last week? It surrounded the temple beyond which no Gentile could go on pain of death. Some folks assumed Paul slipped Trophimus beyond the wall. In an act of mob justice, the Jews tried to kill Paul. Thankfully Roman soldiers stepped in to save his life. As they were bringing Paul into the barracks, Paul asked to give a defense to the raging crowd. He simply shared his story of how Jesus had appeared to him on the road to Damascus and changed his life. Everybody listened intently until he got to one sentence. The sentence where he told them that Jesus said, "Go, I will send you to the Gentiles." At those words, the crowd went berserk saying, "Get rid of Paul. He is not fit to live." (I told you there was deep hostility between the Jews and Gentiles. That shows the arrogance the Jews had for being God's chosen people and the hatred they had for everyone else.) Even the thought that God cared about anyone else beside the Jews was totally repulsive to the them.

In the judicial proceedings that followed, Paul appealed to the Roman emperor to hear his case. As he wrote to the Ephesians, he was in a jail in Rome, chained to a Roman guard, waiting for the emperor to hear his case. He was in jail for two lame reasons: 1) He was falsely accused of bringing a Gentile into the temple; 2) He taught that through Jesus both Jews and Gentiles are both able to come to God.

At this point, most of us would not be happy campers as we rotted in jail. We would be angry at God for not protecting us from false accusations. We would hold a pity party because life wasn't fair. We would say ministry stinks! We would want to tell God to take this job and shove it. Who wouldn't be angry

at God in a time like this? When ministry gets tough, most of us would either pack our bags or whine. Many of us would do both.

What we find in these 13 verses is what sustained Paul when ministry was tough. He gave us six reasons that ministry is worth the sacrifice. They are things we need to hear as we face a tough season at CrossWinds Church, when everyone is serving long hard hours.

1. God has a good purpose in the tough times.

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles...
Ephesians 3:1 (ESV)

Paul was a prisoner of Nero because he committed his case to the emperor. The emperor had him chained to a guard. The emperor was large and in charge. It looked like the emperor is in control. Paul's life appeared very much out of control.

Paul looked at jail time a little differently. He said it was Christ that had him in prison. Prison was Christ's chosen way of bringing Paul to Rome to share the good news of Jesus Christ in the city. Things were not out of control. Jesus put Paul in prison to take him to Rome to share the gospel. Jail evangelism is not the way Paul planned to tell people in Rome about Jesus, but nothing was out of control. Just as Jesus was the one who put Paul in prison, he eventually released Paul from prison. Why would Jesus allow hard times in our lives and ministry as a church?

Jesus is not in the business of giving us comfort. He is in the business of building our character. He uses tough times to shape our character and grow our love for Christ. Hard times realign our priorities. We learn to rely on God in

tough times much better than in easy times. In easy times we drift from Christ.

Tough times mature us in Jesus. God has a reason for the tough times that come our way. James talked about this.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2-4 (ESV)

If you want terrible kids, pray they never face adversity. You want great kids? Pray they would face adversity in God's time and that their faith in Christ would grow through it. God has a good purpose in tough times.

So when Paul is in prison, and ministry is hard, he didn't lose hope. He knew that those tough times were God's chosen way of moving the ministry forward. If God wanted him to start preaching in jail rather than the public square, that was God's choice. Rather than freaking out and losing hope when life looked like it was a mess, he knew it was in God's hands and all God wanted him to do was be faithful. God had a good reason for tough times. It maybe was to grow his faith. It maybe was to teach him to depend on Jesus more than himself. God is in charge. Life is not out of control. God has a good reason for tough times in ministry.

If this morning, you are in a tough season of life, if you are a Christian, know God has not abandoned you. He has not forgotten you. God has you where he wants you to be to mature you and to be a witness to him. Be faithful. That is all God is asking. When ministry is tough, don't lose heart. *Ministry is worth the sacrifice.*

2. I am getting the gospel to others like someone did for me.

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you... Ephesians 3:1–2 (ESV)

Ministry, by nature, is other-centered. Here is the problem. We, by nature, are self-centered. You hear it all the time among Christians. We talk about personal quiet time. What is God doing in my life? I don’t want to come to church. I don’t feel ministered to. It is all about me. We are very narcissistic. When it comes to ministry at the church, it is not about me and meeting my needs. It is about serving others and meeting their needs.

Why was Paul in jail? Why was his life threatened? What had Paul done wrong? He wasn’t caught having an affair. He wasn’t embezzling money. Paul was suffering in ministry so the Gentiles could know they could be forgiven of their sins and be part of God’s church through Jesus. Just as God had reached down and supernaturally changed Paul’s life on the road to Damascus, Paul was now reaching into the lives of the others around him, specifically the Gentiles, that the Jews hated, and telling them about Jesus. Ministry would be easy if it was about meeting my needs. Ministry is about meeting the needs of other people. That is what makes it hard. That is what makes it costly.

I want you to see the way Paul looked at sharing the gospel with the Gentiles. He didn’t see ministry in the church as a burden. He saw it as a privilege. He was stewarding God’s grace that was given to him to be given to others. It is a privilege to serve others in the name of Jesus so they know the gospel. Sometimes it is easy to forget this! Sometimes ministry is late nights

and early mornings. Sometimes it means working on your days off. Why do we work hard and sacrifice in the church? We do it because God's grace was given to us not to be kept to ourselves but to be given away to others.

Do you see the mindset change? God has entrusted us with the gospel. He entrusted us with the gospel not to keep it to ourselves but to give it to others so they would have it.

If you have children, you will understand this. Kids cost money. They just do. If you have kids, add up the food bill, the doctor bill, the college costs, the gas for sport events and gymnastic lessons. What is it costing you a year? \$30,000 plus. Add up all the time you spend encouraging your kids and teaching them. If you didn't have kids, you could live quiet comfortably and take plenty of vacations. Once you have kids, most of the self-centeredness is over. We now live other-centered lives. We get up in the middle of the night to change diapers. We sacrifice. We scrimp and save to make ends meet so there is enough money for our kids' braces. The reason we do it is for them, because God entrusted our kids into our lives, so we pour our lives into them.

Paul and God entrusted the gospel into his life to share with the Gentiles just as he entrusted the gospel into our lives to share with others. Paul told the Ephesians that he loved them like he loved his kids. Even though ministry is hard, he joyfully sacrificed for them, just like we joyfully sacrifice for our kids.

In this season, where ministry is tough, and ministry at CrossWinds is, we sacrifice joyfully. We won't lose heart in ministry. Just like we joyfully sacrifice for our children, we joyfully sacrifice for the men and women who will meet Jesus

through both campuses because we are not self-centered but other-centered.

Ministry is worth the sacrifice.

3. The only way people can know Jesus is if the church tells them.

...how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Ephesians 3:3–6 (ESV)

Paul began talking about a mystery. What is this mystery? Was Paul talking a CSI mystery? Is this an X-Files mystery? Maybe it is a Scooby-Doo mystery? What does the Bible mean when it talks about a mystery?

A mystery is a fact about reality that cannot be discovered by investigation and research but it needs to be supernaturally revealed by God.

The fact that Gentiles and Jews are now equal members of the same body and both have access to God through Jesus Christ is something nobody could discover on his or her own. Nobody has a big enough Bible brain to figure this out. I don't care how many ancient languages you can read or how amazing your intellect. It just would not happen. This is a mystery that God kept hidden, and he supernaturally revealed it to Paul and the apostles by his Holy Spirit.

In Ephesians 1, when we learned about God's plans to make us the most blessed beings in the universe and to unite Jews and everyone else together through Jesus, this is something that was supernaturally revealed by God to Paul and the other apostles. It wasn't written in a book or in a magazine at the Wal-Mart checkout. There is no way anybody could discover that on his or her own.

The only way for people to know that everyone can come to God through Jesus Christ, be forgiven of their sins, and through Jesus, become part of a new family called the church is if God tells them supernaturally, like he did to Paul, or if we tell them. This is why we send missionaries overseas. Nobody will know the gospel unless we tell them the gospel. This is why we tell people we meet at the YMCA and in the community about Jesus. They are not going to find Jesus on the weight machine. The only options for anyone to know the truth about how much Jesus loves them and that God will forgive them is if God supernaturally does his thing, like he did to Paul, or if we tell them. People will not go walking in the woods and find Jesus. They will not milk a cow and find Jesus.

What this means is the mission of the church is super important. The only way people can be brought back to God is through the mission of the church.

All other religions are based on speculation. They are people guessing what God is like and what we must do to please him. Eckard Tolle is all speculation. Oprah is a speculator. Mohammed was a speculator who didn't like anybody to disagree with him. They are all guessing. The good news of Jesus is not speculation. It is revelation. It is God telling us what he has done for us.

When ministry is tough and you think you would rather watch football than serve on Sunday, remember what is significant in life. Apart from the work of the church, nobody can know God. It is a mystery that can't be discovered any other way than us telling people. Do you want to do something significant with your life? Get involved in the ministry of the church and stay involved when it gets hard.

Ministry is worth the sacrifice.

4. It is a gift to serve in the church even in the most humbling ways.

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. Ephesians 3:7 (ESV)

Paul looked at serving in the church as a gift of God's grace. It was a privilege to serve. as he in jail? Yes! Would part of him have liked to be sunning himself at a beachside resort in Corinth rather than sitting in a cold Roman pit? Of course! He looked at what he was doing as a gift from God that he could serve Jesus, even the most humbling of ways.

The word *minister* in the ESV is sometimes translated as servant in other translations. If you do a little word study on this word, you discover it means an in-the-dust laborer. It means a guy with a shovel digging a pit in the dry dirt on a hard day. It is what you see on the road crews in the summer except instead of standing around they are actually working.

Paul said that working in ministry is a gift of God's grace even when God calls you to serve in the most humbling ways. It is a privilege to serve others in the church. Some of you think that is nuts. You think it is an inconvenience. It is a nasty obligation. You are screwed up.

As I was thinking about this, I remember six years ago there was a clog in the toilet of the youth basement. Apparently the clog was in the pipes. Delmar Phillips set himself to work on it. Later in the day he came to my office to tell me it was repaired. As he told me about it, he began shaking my hand. As we were shaking hands he told me the clog was down the pipe and he needed to take the sewage pipes apart and reach down them to get the clog out. As he told me, his

smile got a little bigger and I said, “Delmar, did you use rubber gloves?” He just kept shaking my hand and his smile got bigger. I ran to the bathroom with my hand in front of me to use some soap and water.

What I love about Delmar is his attitude. He considered it a privilege to serve Christ’s church even in the most humbling of ways, like unclogging the toilet. It is a privilege to change the diapers in the nursery. It is a privilege to come early and stay late in God’s house serving God’s people for God’s glory. It is a privilege to do even the most humiliating jobs.

This was Paul’s attitude toward ministry. It is the way we need to view ministry. I know some of you think you would be comfortable serving in the church if it was something important. Every job in the church is a privilege.

Ministry is worth the sacrifice.

5. The privilege of serving is the opposite of what I am deserving.

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... Ephesians 3:8 (ESV)

Paul looked at himself in the mirror and what he realized was he did not deserve to serve. He remembered he wasn’t just far from God when he was born but he heaped up a mess of sin in life. He was filled with pride. He was arrogant. He was boastful about being a religious stud in the Jewish community. He was the coat boy for everyone as they stoned Stephen to death. He cheered as Stephen’s head was bashed in. He was the Osama Bin Laden who hunted down Christians from town to town. If he deserved anything from God, it was to be struck with a bolt of lightning and incinerated on the spot then sent to an especially hot region of hell. That is what he deserved.

Instead of a bolt of lightening frying him, Jesus blinded him on the road to Damascus and saved him. I like the way Paul described himself. You can't see it in English but it is fun in the Greek. Paul invented a word to describe himself. He called himself the less of the leastest. He absolutely did not deserve the privilege of telling the Gentiles how much God loves them. I do not deserve the privilege of serving in Christ's church.

When ministry is tough, this is something each of us needs to remember. Remember what we were before God saved us. Think of what we were. If we deserved anything, it was to be fried.

This is not just true of our lives before Christ saved us but it is also true of our lives after Christ saved us. Many of us came to Christ as kids then we proceeded to make an absolute mess of things and live like fools and rebels even though we loved Jesus. God is rich in mercy. He never let us go. Even though we ran the line and tried to spool out the rod, God kept reeling us in with his love. He brought us back and gave us the privilege of serving him by serving others in the church.

The privilege of serving in God's church is the exact opposite of what we deserve. Ministry is worth the sacrifice.

6. The church has cosmic significance.

...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 now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Ephesians 3:9–10 (ESV)

When Adam and Eve sinned, brokenness between man and God became a reality. Not only did we lose our relationship with God but men and women

began fighting with one another. Adam blamed Eve for the forbidden fruit. For the first time a husband and wife put on clothes so they could hide themselves from one another. The children of Adam and Eve lived out their brokenness between themselves and God and between one another. Cain killed Abel. The first set of brothers killed one another when they should have been the closest of friends. That is what sin does to people. That is why we have war and crime and rape and locks and police and jails and guns. It is all because sin ruins relationships.

The mystery that God kept hidden for eons is Jesus Christ. He wasn't just restoring our relationship with God but he was restoring our relationships with one another. In the church, for the first time, people who used to fight together hang out together. People that are different from one another see each other as part of their own family.

We talked about this last week. In the church, we don't just talk to people for a few minutes at the coffee bar and then move on but we try to treat everyone like family because when the church meets, it is a family reunion of the redeemed who are brought together through Jesus.

Here is what you need to remember. What God is doing at CrossWinds church is not just something we see. It is something all the angels and cosmic being in the universe are fascinated to watch. They cannot believe what they see happening at CrossWinds. People that should be fighting together are hanging out together. People who are single are welcomed into a family. People

who are struggling in life have friends to help them. People are encouraging each other in Jesus.

All the angelic beings can't believe what they see and how the curse of sin is broken through Jesus. In the church we approach God with boldness and confidence, not fear. In addition, the human race that was known for splintering and hatred is now one big reunited family with members that love each other.

CrossWinds Church doesn't just have local significance, it has cosmic significance. Right now fallen angels and cosmic powers from around the universe are watching and are fascinated by what they see happening at CrossWinds Church.

Don't lose heart when ministry is hard. It is worth the sacrifice.

Conclusion

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. Ephesians 3:13 (ESV)

Paul said, "Don't lose heart over what I am suffering for you. I am suffering so that you would know and love Jesus. It is worth my sacrifice. If a being in a Roman jail is a sacrifice I need to make so you can know Jesus, it is worth it."

My friends, as we get into this busy season of ministry as CrossWinds and you find yourself working late on a church project, you find yourself skipping a weekend away so you can be in church on Sunday to serve others, you find yourself canceling family vacations so you can serve in the church, that is OK. When you find yourself needing to reach extra deep into your pocket with your

giving, and you feel like church is hard work so you begin to wonder if it is worth it. *Don't lose heart in ministry. It is worth the sacrifice.*



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