

The Pastor's Labor | Colossians 1:21-29
The Rev. Dr. Sam Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican
Preaching Draft | April 26, 2026
Discussion Questions on page 7

The Pastor's Labor | Col 1:21-29 | Posting Draft

Paul draws attention to himself in our passage.

"I, Paul, became a minister" (v 23). "I rejoice in **my** sufferings" (v 24). "The church, of which I became a minister" (vv. 24-25). "I toil" (v 29). Christ "powerfully works in **me**" (v 29).

He goes on in chapter 2, verse 1, "I want you know how great a struggle I have for you."

It matters to Paul that members of the churches understand His mission and labor. It seems that in understanding the assignment of a pastor, people better understand God's work in their lives.

We all have people assigned to work for us—in different ways at different times. Teachers work for our education. Trainers for our health. Financial advisors, for our monetary security.

But who is assigned to work for our souls? For our spiritual wellbeing?

Jesus assigns pastors to this work—and Paul wants us to know this. The pastor's job description and struggle are right there in verses 28-29:

[Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me (Col 1:28-29).

Seeing the work of the pastor, helps people see the work of God.

I've been your pastor for seven years. This is my last Sunday with you before taking a sabbatical. I have been reflecting this week on the past seven years—they have been eventful.

So, in considering Paul's labor as a pastor this morning, I have my own labor as your pastor on my mind. As we notice **four features** of Paul's pastoral work in this passage, I'll also note how these features have been experienced by me. And I hope this window onto the labor of a pastor, helps us all better understand God's labor in our lives.

I. Labor for the church—not just individual

First, Paul was not assigned to labor for a city or a state or a business, but a church:

...the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship [**οἰκονομίαν**] from God that was given to me for you (Col 1:24-25).

The word "stewardship" here can carry two senses in this first century Mediterranean context: the **plan** for running a household or estate, or the **responsibility for managing** or executing that plan.

So Paul's labor begins with being thrust into the plan of God, and with a particular responsibility for how the church functions in the plan.

God has a plan for the universe, the world, all of history. It all eventually ties to Christ: "a plan [οικονομίαν] for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10).

Across history, and amid the rising and falling of nations, the church features as central to God's plan—it is heaven's embassy. Paul explains in Ephesians that his calling is

to bring to light for everyone what is the plan [οικονομίαν] of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things,¹⁰ so that through **the church** the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known (Eph 3:9-10).¹

As a minister, God laid on Paul a particular responsibility for care and management of God's household, the church—this was at the heart of his labor.

This tells us first something about each one of us, something I have thought about almost constantly these past seven years: *we are not ourselves by ourselves*. There is a corporate and communal nature to our self-understanding, our wellbeing, and our stability.

An individual's identity, values, hopes, opportunities—even accent of speech—are shaped (in part) by the networks of relationships and norms of behavior that surround them.

It should not surprise us, then, that God's design for saving and sanctifying us is relational and communal.

In these seven years I have come to believe the church is to be a unique habitat—an alternative ecosystem—in a spiritual desert. Not only must our gatherings on Sundays release heavenly nutrients into our atmosphere. Our relational bonds must continue as conduits through the week by which spiritual nourishment flows.

Notice the caution in verse 23,

if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel (Col 1:23).

All week long we inhabit a habitat calling us to shift away from Christ. A habitat that says this world is better, this ease is better, these videos are better, these institutions are better, these thinkers are better—better than what God has for us in Jesus.

The church is that alternative habitat, where a web of Christ-centered relationships connects you with the life of Christ throughout the week.

Part of my labor these past seven years has been to increase, strengthen, and ensure the health of this habitat—the Falls Church Anglican—for your spiritual wellbeing.

¹ And the church—so central to God's work in the world—is "the household [οἶκος] of God" (Eph 2:19). A minister's care for his own household is at times used to qualify him for care of the church: "...if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? (1Tim. 3:5).

[T] A second labor of Paul involves his goal for the people that make up this church. He is not merely to gather them—but to oversee their spiritual growth.

II. Labor to Make You Mature in Christ, not Successful in the World

Text: In verse 28 Paul spells out the goal of his labor:

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may **present** everyone **mature** (τέλειος) in Christ (Col 1:28).

Presented before God at the end of time

Jesus and His apostles operated with much larger horizons than leaders today. The *telos* of history was the presentation of people before God—that’s what they aimed at ultimately.

we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (Rom 14:10).

Christians say in the Apostles Creed: “Christ will return to judge the living and the dead.”

One of the central things happening in a church is its people’s sanctification. Like a bride readying herself for her wedding day, the church is being prepared for the wedding of Christ. Paul writes to the Corinthians:

I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to **present** you as a pure virgin to Christ (2Cor. 11:2)

So, Paul labors “to present everyone **mature** in Christ (Col 1:28).

The word “**mature**” that Paul uses in verse 28 can mean “**complete**” or “**perfect**.” It is the word “*telos*,” (τέλειος), which literally means “the ultimate aim or purpose of something.”

The pastor’s goal is to present you before God complete, matured to your ultimate purpose.

Maturity in Christ speaks of **character** or **virtue**: we are to love even our enemy, Jesus teaches, because we “**must be perfect** (τέλειος) as our heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48).

It speaks of **knowledge** and discernment, wisdom in understanding ourselves and our world: “discern what is good and acceptable and perfect (τέλειος)” (Rom 12:2); “in sin be infants, but in your thinking be mature (τέλειος)” (1 Cor 14:20).

It speaks of **devotion**: “if you would be perfect (τέλειος),” Jesus tells the rich man, “sell all you have and follow me” (Matt 19:21).

A few things come to my mind as I think of the past seven years in the light of this feature of pastoral labor.

First: you are not trivial to God. There are at least four actors at work in this passage: Christ, who dies for you; God the Father, who sends Christ and appoints pastors for you; the church itself who surrounds you; and Paul—and all other ministers—toiling and suffering for you. And all this action is aimed at *saving and sanctifying you*. The passage begins “And **you**...” (1:21). Its

most memorable verse is “Christ in **you**” (1:27). The goal of Christ’s work and Paul’s work is perfecting and presenting **you** (1:22, 27).

A person does not sacrifice and labor to fix up something they don’t cherish. All this work tells us that you—*you*—matter profoundly to God.

Second, God changes people—but it’s important to understand the change He’s after. God is not mainly at work to make you successful in this world, but holy in His sight. God is after spiritual growth, spiritual maturity. And this type of growth is often counterintuitive.

Spiritual growth is often slow and imperceptible. We want instant, exciting, dramatic. But the biblical images of growth are more often organic and mundane: the kingdom of God is like a tiny seed that grows imperceptibly at first—yet eventually becomes significant (Mark 4:26-29). The growth of a church is likened to a farmers field or construction site with a building—where growth is slow and laborious (1 Cor 3:9). Growth is likened to the maturing of a human being, from infancy through youth to mature adulthood (Eph 4:12-15). The fruits of the spirit develop slowly.

But over time, God changes people. And God plans to change you.²

I have asked myself after these seven years—have I grown? Am I a more mature Christian? It’s a tough question—we all should be asking it.

Third, it has so often forced me to view the present in light of the end. How we do missions as a church, and how we pastor individuals, must always bear in mind this calling: *to prepare people to stand before God*. The call upon Christians is to be salt and light. We are to be of service to our neighbors and work for good in the world. We do a good job with this and have room to grow, too. But church is about more than producing good works—it is about preparing a holy people to stand before God at the day of Judgement—even, to be His Son’s bride.

[T] A third toil of Paul’s highlights the chief *tool* of his job: the Word of God.

III. Labor to Teach God’s Word, Not Man’s Wisdom

What a hammer is to a builder, a scalpel to a surgeon, a violin to a violinist, so is the Word of God to a pastor. It is not the *only* tool we use. But it is the decisive one—without which, we can’t do our job.

Verse 25 not only states the stewardship God gives Paul for the church, but this tool by which he’ll carry it out:

...the church, ²⁵ 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 (Col 1:24-25).

Making the Word of God fully known is *how* Paul exercises this stewardship.

² * e.g., God changes people—Autobiography example: Augustine’s *Confessions* versus *The Education of Henry Adams*

God works in the world in a unique way by His word. The Colossians came to faith by “**the gospel that they heard**” (Col 1:21). Back in verse 6 Paul wrote how they

heard before in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth (Col 1:6).

The Word of God is decisive in pastoral work because it is through the Word that we hear God speak—not man.

The Word is decisive in pastoral work because through the Word the Gospel of Jesus Christ is set forth for people to believe in: the news that God sent his Son into the world to bear the judgement for our wrongdoing, so that God can then extend us forgiveness, upholding both his mercy and justice. All the promises of God meant for our comfort and guidance are held out to us *through the Word of God*.

The Word is decisive in pastoral work because God’s Spirit moves in power through His word. The same way human breath is part of human speech, so too, God’s spirit is part of God’s word.

“The sword of the Spirit ... is the word of God” (Eph 6:18).

The Word of God is decisive in pastoral work because God creates by His spirit working through His Word. In Genesis 1, God creates the world with His spirit hovering over the waters as God speaks, “**let there be light**” (Gen 1:3). God calls Abraham and Moses by speaking to them, and Abraham and Moses live by trusting what God says. God founds Israel by giving them His promises and Words in the wilderness. And faith comes, Paul says, by “hearing the Word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

The Word of God is decisive in pastoral work because by the Word God sanctifies and grows people: “**Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth**” (Jn 17:17), Jesus prays for his followers.

This is not to say that Christianity is only a bunch of words, or that all God does is speak. Far from it. God acted to deliver Israel from Egypt. God came in the person of Jesus—lived, healed, died, rose.

Nor is it to say that a pastor’s work is only preaching and teaching. Far from it. Our work includes prayer, counseling, discipling, leadership.

It is to say, however, that the Word of God is central to all these other things—it reveals to us who the God is we are praying to, what His purposes are for those we counsel, and where our leadership should be leading His Church.

Paul has been given a stewardship from God, for the church, to “make the word of God fully known” (Eph 6:18).

What has this meant for me in the past seven years?

I have worked hard to **preach the Bible**, and to make the point of my sermon the point of the biblical passage. I really do believe that what God has to say is the most important thing for you to hear.

It has meant that when it comes to the vision or mission of our church, I have not looked to modern church growth books. I have instead spent my time in the Bible—I **have asked how God defines the church and its mission**. How does God envision growth and change. This has led me to passages like John 17 (where Jesus prays for the church and describes its unity) and Ephesians 4 (where Paul speaks of the divine design and growth plan for the church).

And this has been profoundly helpful in **drawing lines around my responsibilities and priorities**. I have not prioritized commentary on social events or politics. I have instead given the best of my intellectual energies and prayer to God's Word. I believe that the work God wants to do in you—and to do through you in this world—will be best served by your pastor laboring to let God speak to you, from His Word, Sunday after Sunday.

[T] There is one more feature of Paul's labor to note—it may be the most moving, certainly the most convicting for me.

IV. Labor through Suffering to Help You Experience God's Love

Verse 24,

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up (**ἀνταναπληρῶ**) what is lacking (**ὑστερήματα**) in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church (Col 1:24).

This verse can confuse—is Paul suggesting that there is something lacking in Christ's suffering on the Cross of us.

No. That's not what Paul means.

What Paul means is that the Colossians cannot see Jesus. They were not there when he died for them on the cross. Jesus has now ascended to heaven, and in his bodily form, is absent from them. This absence is painful.

But Jesus calls pastors to come to these people—and not only to preach and teach, but to suffer for them. And like an ambassador suffering in a foreign land on behalf of his king, the pastor's suffering lessens the distance between Jesus and His people. Through the suffering-love of their minister, the gap between head knowledge and heart experience is lessened.

On a recent Sunday after church, I learned one of our associate pastors was headed to the hospital. He was visiting a dear church member who has had a stroke. Knowing this man loves music, our pastor was going home to get his guitar to bring it, to play for him. He was giving up a Sunday afternoon with his family to be with this man, to sit with him, to play music and pray.

Often a pastor's job is to help Jesus' people feel His presence—even while Jesus is physically absent.

A few weeks or so before I was installed as your rector, I sat in on the vestry meeting. I believe it was John Yates final vestry meeting as rector—he'd served from 1979 to 2019. I wrote the following in my journal the next morning:

“At last night’s vestry meeting (6:30-10:15pm!) John read from his journal from May 2012—when we lost everything. It was a window into the man’s private counsels and pleas with God during what likely was the most trying and confusing season of his life. Things that struck me:

- John lived every morning before God, in God’s Word. God met him there
- It was the story of Moses and Israel in the wilderness, and the Psalms esp. that carried him (and his understanding of what God was doing for this church)
- John was tired, so tired back then, overwhelmed at times, unclear about where exactly we were headed, but NEVER dismayed our doubtful
- Thankfulness was all throughout
- He is holy.”

It was a window into how a pastor care and suffering for Christ’s body, the church.

Here, at the seven-year mark, I am so deeply thankful I get to be your pastor—for however long the Lord has me here. Looking back over these seven years, I feel my imperfections greatly. But I do hope, that as was the case with Paul, and those pastors after him, that through the pastoral ministry at our church you know and experience more and more of the love of Jesus Christ for you. And that you are made more like him, as each Sunday, each year, goes by. For it is

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me (Col 1:28-29).

Amen.

Discussion questions for Colossians 1:21-29

1. Paul describes the goal of his pastoral work in Colossians 1:28, “that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” Over the course of your life, can you identify a pastor or two who has been committed to “presenting you mature in Christ”? What has that pastor’s work looked like?
2. Paul’s appointing as a minister of the Gospel (Col 1:23) is further explained as an appointment as a minister of the church (Col 1:24-25). What role has the church played in your life with Christ? What does this corporate and communal aspect of Christian life tell you about yourself? What alternative communities are shaping you?
3. The aim of Paul’s pastoral work is to “present you mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). What are some marks of Christian maturity? How does maturity involve knowledge? Character? Devotion?

This is a preaching draft.

4. Paul's chief tool in ministry is the Word of God—"...the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known" (Col 1:25). Why is the Word of God so central to the pastor's work? How does the Word of God become functionally powerful in a believer's life?
5. Is there someone in your life to whom God is calling you to labor—"toil," "struggle" (Col 1:29)—so that they are presented mature in Christ? What will that labor look like this week?

DRAFT