

# The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

---

## AN EXTRAORDINARY MINISTRY

We're continuing our series in Ephesians looking at the extraordinary in the ordinary. And today we are looking at chapter 3, and the first 13 verses, and come across an extraordinary ministry.

As we have heard a number of times already, it's artificial to divide this letter up into chunks and look at them separately, because that's not how it's written, and not how Paul intended his readers to understand it. He develops his points, and often refers right back to what he said previously, to build his argument. And that's exactly how this section starts: v1 'For this reason'. So, what reason?

This is a letter written to new Gentile converts in the growing and expanding first century church, people who Paul had not yet met. We saw two weeks ago how the religious landscape had changed. Not so much changed as undergone a seismic shift! There had been enmity, hostility between Jews and Gentiles. We heard about the lengths the Jews went to keep a spiritual divide between them. The massively thick dividing wall between the Court of Gentiles and the holy part of the temple. The laws that Gentile trespassers in the temple would be executed! And Paul had been telling the Gentiles that that's all over *'You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household.'*

And he starts this chapter off: *'For that reason'*. Because of all that Paul is going on to pray for the church, asking God that they would have strength and power, knowledge and understanding to grasp God's love in all that is happening. But that prayer starts in verse 14 – we'll get to that next week!

In this passage Paul goes off on one of his long and winding literary journeys to make his point! If Paul were doing this on TV he would probably switch camera shots at verse 1 and do a breakaway scene for 13 verses, then come back to camera one for his prayer. But this is not a diversion. Paul is ensuring the gentiles reading this letter really understand what a crucial part they have in the Kingdom of God. To make the point, four times Paul calls it a mystery, a secret, something hidden but now revealed. Verse 6 : *This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*

And as the Jews and the Gentiles began to come together into the one kingdom of God, they both had to radically reappraise their understanding of what God was doing in the church. The currency in Jewish economy was 'the law'. They knew what was expected of them, they knew what to do, they knew how to judge their religious performance. Most importantly, they knew what sin was and who was excluded. They were 'law keepers' even to the point of being legalistic.

The Gentiles, on the other hand, were 'lawless', sinners. They had no way of judging their religious performance. They were *'separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.'*

But the currency in The Kingdom of God was now Grace. If this were a boxing contest we might hear the umpire saying: “ladies and gentlemen, in the Blue corner we have the Jews – the law keepers; and in the Red corner the Gentiles, the lawless sinners.

Each of these groups had a dramatic and shattering message from Jesus. Jesus’ response to the ‘rich young ruler’ wasn’t to say “great law keeping my son”. Jesus said, “sell everything you have and give it to the poor”! In Jesus, the administration of God’s grace met head on with the religious keepers of Law – and turned their world upside down!

Jesus’ response to the rejected, despised sinner, probably a prostitute, who washed his feet in her tears and dried them with her own hair, and then poured on perfume, wasn’t “clean up your life you filthy law breaker, it was sweet words of forgiveness. In Jesus, the administration of God’s grace met head on with the sinful breakers of Law – and turned *their* world upside down!

Has Jesus turned your world upside down?

As the Jews and the Gentiles began to come together into the one kingdom of God, they both had to radically reappraise their understanding of what God had done in their own lives. They both had to radically reappraise their understanding of what God was doing in the church. This new church had a new currency – grace. This new church had new rules – inclusiveness. It wasn’t based on the principle of ‘you’re in, you’re out. It was based on the principle of ‘you’re in, you’re in, and you’re in - if you come to Christ.

Twenty-one centuries on, is this message still clearly ringing out in the church? As a vibrant family of Christians are we still reaching out to the lost, the hopeless, the untouchable, and the untouched?

In these verses Paul speaks with intense personal candour about his own ministry. He also confronts the church with their extraordinary ministry. Verse 8: *Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.* Paul says he is the least of all God’s people. We look back and maybe think that’s a bit of false modesty. Paul, the great theologian? Paul the great letter writer? Paul the pioneering missionary? Paul the first century martyr? Surely he’s not the least of all God’s people! But maybe Paul was thinking back to when he was the persecutor of the church. The Paul who incited murder of Christians, the Paul who did his best to wipe out the early church. Paul had a lot in his life that was dealt with by God’s Grace. Paul had learned first hand about the unsearchable riches of Christ. And now his personal mission was to pass it on to all who would listen – especially the Gentiles who had been outside Gods family up to this point.

Do you exclude ourselves from this ministry because of what we think of our pasts? Do you think we should leave it others because you think you are the least among all God’s people? Do you need to know afresh the transforming grace of God?

Paul identifies so closely with this ministry, but he doesn't claim it as his own. He explains that the mystery is to be worked out through the church. Verse 10: *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.* The term 'rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms' is used here to speak of where Satan dwells and it speaks of those who are opposed to God and his purposes. The church then, is to declare the revealed wisdom of God to a hostile and opposing world around them. This has always been the role of the church. We read about this commission to the church elsewhere too.

There's something rather significant about the first and the last things that people say. The first and last recorded words of Jesus' public ministry on earth were about establishing the Kingdom of God. Matt. 4:17 *From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near".* And the last words to his disciples were recorded at the end of Matthew's gospel. Matthew 28:18-20 *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

This is often called the Great Commission. The church has for centuries seen this as its call to spread the Gospel, and so it is. But it is helpful to see exactly what Jesus was asking of his disciples, and by extension – of us.

This is not *primarily* a command to 'Go' anywhere! The main verb in this command is the word translated as 'make disciples' which, above all, in its original means make 'learners' or 'pupils'. The way they are to learn, Jesus said, is by 'teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you'. And when are we to do this? In our going out and coming in! The subordinate phrase "Go" is not strictly a command to leave where we are and go somewhere else. It has the sense of – as you are going *out* – make disciples (make learners, make pupils) teach them all you know about Jesus and the Kingdom of God. To whom were they going out? Jesus says 'all nations'. Are we to take that as an instruction to go abroad – to foreign lands? The word used here for 'nations' was *Ethne* - a regular Greek term for Gentiles: or non-Jews. This was entirely consistent with everything Jesus had taught them. The kingdom of God had come firstly to the Jews and now in Christ it was extended to the Gentiles as well! This was an extraordinary idea for the disciples to get their heads around. This broke all the taboos and expectations they had held dear for so long. The messiah was supposed to restore the Kingdom to Israel. And what is he doing? Restoring it to the whole of mankind!

So Jesus was saying something like this. "As you are going out to the next village on your work as a carpenter make learners, and not just the Jews – go to the Gentiles as well. You traders as you are going out on your trips further afield with donkeys loaded down with merchandise – make learners and pupils of the kingdom. And don't only go to the Jews, you share your life with Gentiles – the people you never felt you could relate to". Jesus' great commission to the church wasn't a command for expeditions; it was a command for inclusiveness. It wasn't based upon a new geography; it was based upon a new theology.

As the commentator R T France puts it about this Great Commission: 'This then is the culmination of the theme we have noted throughout the Gospel, the calling of a people of God far wider than that of the Old Testament, in which membership is based not on race but on a relationship with God through his Messiah.'

We can connect this now to what Paul was saying about this mystery: the previously hidden but now revealed truth about Jesus. The Kingdom of God is all-inclusive. And Paul tells the Gentiles in this Ephesian letter that this ministry is given to the Church to do. Not, the church is to work is to support mission – although we probably should. Not, the church is to commission evangelists – although we probably should. But the manifold wisdom of God should be made know through the church.

This is an extraordinary ministry and it's to be done by very ordinary people. We're it! I'm it! You're it! Jesus told his disciples to reach out to those around them wherever they go and make learners and pupils of God's love, especially among those who, for so long, had been spiritually excluded.

We have a Vision Statement that concludes with the words 'reaching communities with God's love'. That's exactly what Paul is talking about in this letter. That's exactly what Jesus was talking about in Matt 28. That is the extraordinary ministry of the church. That is your and my extraordinary ministry. Its personal and its corporate. Yes we have a personal responsibility to reach out to those around us but this is not about 'going it alone'. The mystery is that God intended his manifold wisdom to be demonstrated by the church, the vibrant family of Christians. We are dependant on God but we are also inter-dependant on one another in this family - the body - that's the way god planned it.

The first century Jewish Christians had to radically change the way they looked at the Gentiles – those they had excluded because of their religious world-view. What about twenty first century Christians? Have we slipped into religious comfortableness? Have we created no-go zones for the lost around us? Does our language or attitude or rituals exclude anybody? How we live, what we are like, the way we behave together, how the vibrant family lives and loves together makes known the manifold wisdom of God!

Last time I stood here I quoted Marks and Spencer's advert: This is God's Plan A, because there is no Plan B! The hope of the world is Christ. If *we*, the church, as we are going out don't tell those we meet - of all races and backgrounds, about the love of God and make learners and pupils of them, they *wont have a hope in hell!* I'll say that again – and don't be too shocked, because it's theologically sound. If *we*, the church, as we are going out don't tell those we meet - of all races and backgrounds, about the love of God and make learners and pupils of them, they *wont have a hope in hell!*

How do we bring hope to those who feel so far from God? Those with Fragile hearts, the meek and mild, the reckless and the wild. How do we tell the unreconciled that there is peace in Christ? How do we share the joy of life with those who fear death? How do we tell the rich and the poor that God loves them? The princess and the whore that they are special, and that God loves the unborn child, the pure and undefiled just as much as the outcast and reviled. How do we

show God's heart for the junkie and the priest, the refugee, the prisoner and the free, those with doubt and those with certainty? How do we share Joy and grief, with the lawyer and the thief? The wounded, the dreamers, and the lost world – all need to know God's love, and it's through us.

Let's listen to those words I've borrowed from Paul Field's song – *The God of the Moon and Stars* – and as you hear the words and see the images think about how you can reach out to these people in the communities around you. Some of you may like to walk through a door this morning 'Reach Out' and commit yourself again to reaching to those with whom you go in and out each day.

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church by Colin Guest  
on Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2008.