

## The Master's Minister, p. 2

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**Bible Text:** Ephesians 3:1-13  
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Ephesians 3, let's go there together this evening. Ephesians 3. What riches are in the word of God. Studying this again, I just was arrested in my spirit afresh over the wonders and the glories of God's wisdom and his power and his goodness to us.

Ephesians 3:1-13. Paul has come to this part of the letter where he's leaving the magnanimous, stupendous, I don't have the words, treatise on the doctrine of salvation and he shows the great work of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, and the sovereignty of God in it all, and that God's purpose is to save for himself a people will be perfectly fulfilled and actually he says, were prescribed and ordained before the foundation of the world and they are working out in time. So he gives us all of these glorious truths, if you will, from a God-ward perspective and then we come to about the middle way through chapter 2 and now through chapter 3, and we see some practical applications now. In other words, Paul is saying, "Now, here's how it works out in time and space history." And one of the key things there is God's ordained to work through his called ministers. So we begin in Ephesians 3, verse 1,

1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- 2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; 3 that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. 4 By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; 6 to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, 7 of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.

As if it's not like we've been drinking a fire hydrant already. Now verse 8, we continue on,

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God

who created all things; 10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. 13 Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.

We began some time ago talking about this text and we entitled it "The Master's Minister." The Master's minister. Paul comes to the point where he says, "Okay, God has ordained a means whereby he's going to save souls and build his church and the centerpiece of that means is he will call men to be his ministers, his preachers." Now, we've already talked about in verse 1, I. That God captures and calls his ministers. Paul talks there in verse 1 about being a prisoner of Christ Jesus and I think that has a twofold meaning as most scholars do that, 1, he is a prisoner in a Roman jail and he was a prisoner numerous times, actually, or in one way or the other apprehended; and he also feels that, "I have been apprehended and I'm the prisoner of Christ Jesus. I'm no longer my own man. I have no right, no authority whatsoever to do what I think is right or best. God has set me apart for this ministry. I didn't train for it. I didn't take courses to qualify for it. I didn't request it. It apprehended me. I'm the prisoner of Christ Jesus." And by the way, every man called to preach must sense deeply in his soul, "God set me apart to do this." You can't be momma called or church called or WMU called or brotherhood called or anybody else called. You've got to know God called you to do it.

Now, balance that: any God-called man should 100% yield the exercise of his call to the faithful elders of a good church. The last thing the church of the Lord Jesus Christ needs is another young, rogue, renegade preacher. If God called you, he'll make it clear to good and faithful men who oversee the church. We've had problems with that for 38 years, 37 years, I should say. Young man after young man after young man after young man and they look like they're called and they look like they have gifts but do you know the one thing a young man does not have, because I used to be a young man? Wisdom and character and there is a certain degree of that we need to see developed before we bless them to go out and minister. And by the way, if they're not willing to do that, mark this down, if they're not willing to do that, they'll go shipwreck down the road. Mark my words. If they cannot yield to authority on the front end, they will abuse their own authority on the back end. I've never seen an exception to that. But here's the sad thing: because they lack character and because they lack wisdom and they would not submit to the men whom God had placed over them to follow their guidance, they end up hurting a lot of people in the process.

Well, God captures and calls his own ministers. II now: God empowers his ministers. Paul talks in verse 2 of there's a stewardship of God's grace, now notice how he says this in verse 2, "which was given to me for you." In other words, God has given me special gifts and special empowerments to use those gifts for your benefit, the churches. And again, though he was an apostle and had authority over numerous churches and we do not believe the office of apostle exists anymore. There is no man that can pull up in Muscle

Shoals tomorrow and come to our church next Sunday and say, "Brother Jeff, sit down. I've got a word from God. I'm an apostle." That's the way these early apostles could function. We don't believe that, however, in like principle every man of God is given gifts by God and a spiritual enablement to use those gifts and I believe God gives men a specific touch for a specific task and even a specific time. I believe 100% with all of my heart somehow in the deep deep grace of God, I was given a special touch for the specific task of pastoring this church for this time. It might end this afternoon. If I wasn't convinced of that, I'd go somewhere else. I just believe that.

Now, it doesn't mean I'm special. Don't misunderstand. Paul says in here that he's the chief of sinners. He's the least qualified of the saints, and I think every truly God-called man feels that. As a matter of fact, when we preached on the qualifications of elders a while back, about every elder said, "Man, I don't know if I'm qualified or not." We talked to Brother James about the church has given you a majority of nominations. Do you feel led? About the first thing he said was, "God, I'm humbled. I just don't know if I'm qualified or not. You know, I struggle like other men struggle. I'm no better than anybody." Well, we all are but as a matter of fact, God will often take vessels that you wouldn't think he would take. The least and use them the most.

You would be 99.99999% accurate if you went to my high school and said, "Would you list 100 boys in this school that you believe God might use in the Gospel ministry." 99.999% of my classmates would not have put me on the list. I wouldn't have made the list but I was on God's list because God likes to take failures and weak vessels and blundering sinners and change them and empower them and use them so he can get the glory. As a matter of fact, I still have classmates to this day when I see them say, "Nobody can deny that there is power in the Gospel of Jesus Christ because I've known your life."

Do you remember Mike Thompson? I told you about Mike Thompson two or three times years ago. Do you remember Mike Thompson? Mike Thompson was a boy I went to school with and he had polio as a young boy and he had just very limited use of his legs, but he had enough strength that he could ride one of those three-wheeled bicycles and he went everywhere on that three-wheeled bicycle. And in those days, our school class hallways were, the classrooms too, were wood and they'd put oil on those floors every so often. Do y'all remember that? I think it was burnt motor oil or something. I don't know what it was. Now by the way, they really did that in the old days. I don't know but it was greasy. But Mike had a chair with wheels on it and we would run Mike up and down the hallways of the elementary school. I bet we'd get up to 15-18 miles an hour and Mike's sitting in that chair going down the hallway. Mike was known, though, to sit in church, First Baptist Church of Lawrenceburg, and there wasn't a whole lot of life there a lot of times but Mike would hear something about the grace of God, the word of God, the power of the Gospel and old Mike would yell out, "Amen!" and often he was about the only one who ever gave an amen.

One of our church members, I don't know if you're here anymore or not or still a member. I have no idea. But they were traveling through Lawrenceburg, TN and they pulled into a

gas station and Mike Thompson was sitting over there on his three-wheeled bicycle and our church member said to Mike, "Hey, how are you doing?" He said, "Fine." He said, "Are you from here?" Mike said, "Yeah, I've been here my whole life." He said, "Well, do you know our pastor? He's from here. His name is Jeff Noblit." And immediately Mike said, "Yup, I know both of them. I know the one before he was saved and I know the one after he was saved."

God delights in taking the least likely vessel. Trust me, I was minding my own business when I got in my car on a cold and icy February night my freshman year in college and was traveling back to Columbia, TN when I turned on the radio in the providence of God and heard a Presbyterian minister share the Gospel and that night without question of a way to describe it, this is the way to describe it: I was apprehended by God and I came to a crushing realization of my need and a glorious wondrous assurance of Christ's love for me, a sinner. And then over the next few weeks, the way the conviction of sin built in my heart, I just felt so wretched and worthless and vile but I knew Christ had forgiven me and saved me. I didn't know if I was going to be in the ministry, as a matter of fact, I didn't think at all I'd be in the ministry. The only problem I had was I just couldn't stop telling folks about what God had done for me. And so it was kind of like you might ought to try to get paid for this because you're not doing much of anything else. And then it wasn't really long after that, just a few short months after that, I walked in the door of this church. It was one metal building with a gravel parking lot with the pews about halfway back, about 120 people on a good day, and I've been here ever since. God empowers his ministers to do the work. It's not the minister, it's not his gifts, very often it's not the way he was raised. It's not any of these things, it's God working in and through them.

Now let's go to III. I'm not going to be long tonight. III. New material: God gives the message his ministers proclaim. God gives the message his ministers proclaim. We don't get to choose if we're going to do this. We're not in charge of it. We don't achieve some rank and God says, "Oh, there's a good one. I'll use him." Nope. God just captures his own ministers. He empowers his own ministers. And then he says, by the way, I don't need your cleverness, I don't need your creativity, I don't need your ingenuity, I don't need to know what sociology says and psychology says and community demographics, I don't need to know about generation X or the lost generation. I'm going to give you the message you're to preach, period. And here's where you are, minister: if my Spirit does not accompany and empower my message, your ministry is going nowhere. So our job is to keep preaching the message and proclaiming the message and sharing the message that God gave us to share, imploring God to use it to change men's hearts so that he will get the credit and the glory for the wisdom of his message, not for the cleverness of the pastor's methods.

Look at what he says there in verse 3. He says, "that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief." That by revelation. Paul is saying that as an apostle, he received direct revealed truth from God. He could not function on secondhand hearsay. As an apostle, to write divinely and authoritatively he had to know God directly, divinely revealed the message to me. Now, for us preachers today, we're not receiving divine direct revelation, we're taking the divine direct revelation record, the New

Testament, and we're preaching what God gave to the early apostles. The same doctrines. That's why the Bible says the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles. "Wait a minute, I thought it was built on Jesus?" It is but Jesus has revealed his truth through the apostles penning sacred Scripture.

And you say, "Well, scientifically or intellectually, how do you believe that?" I don't have to think about it scientifically or intellectually, it's faith. I've immersed myself in this book and somehow something has arisen in my heart to say, "Yes, that's true!" And there we stand by faith.

So Paul says, "This came directly to me." You see, apostles were to be witnesses of the truth and this is an indispensable qualification for their apostleship. So Paul is letting them know, "I may not have traveled with Jesus bodily while he was on the earth, but he has communicated to me directly and given me the truth of the Gospel."

Now, he uses the word "mystery" and we see this quite a bit in the Scriptures, particularly in the New Testament where he says there, "He made known to me the mystery." Here's the idea behind the word "mystery": it is a secret that is undiscoverable by the human mind. Every scientist in the world can study and research and theorize, they can go and talk to that so-called brilliant physicist in the wheelchair. Do you know who I'm talking about? The so-called brilliant physicist in the wheelchair that's supposed to be this super-intellectual and he has now admitted that there had to have been some intelligent being that started life so he just says it's an alien. Alien to him, for sure.

Here's the problem with those guys. Why do these guys...and you're going to hear a little more of this. They're coming out now and saying, "Okay, intellectually and honestly, we would have to conclude in our philosophical evaluations and deductions that there must have been an intelligent being of some kind to have begun human life on planet earth," but they're not going to at all come within a million miles of even suggesting of being open to the fact that that intelligent being was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Do you know why? Because the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is moral, he's upright, he's righteous and he holds his creatures in accountability for his morality and his uprightness. They don't mind there being an original benefactor, as such, some thing, some living thing that started it as long as they don't have to submit to the authority of anybody. "Don't tell us it's the God of Scripture because he requires something of us. He's an authority. He's Lord. We want to be our own authority and our own lord." Brother, nothing has changed since the Garden of Eden. Satan and Eve and then Adam said, "We'll be our own god. We'll make our own rules. We'll run by our own authority. We don't have to submit to him." And every time you see these so-called intellectual sophisticates come up with their great verbiage of how everything is, you just boil it all down at the end of the day, here it is: we love ourselves, we love sin, keep this moral God away from us. That's their deduction. Well, how did I get on all of that? That's not anywhere in my notes.

The mystery. The mystery is a secret that's undiscoverable to the human mind. No sage, wise man, learned scholar would ever – listen – ever ever ever find it. Do you know why?

Are you listening? Because God hid it and when you play hide-n-seek with God, you always lose. He hides things in a way nobody can ever find them and the only way you're going to ever know the great mystery and truths of God is if he exposes it to you. That's what Paul says, "He turned the light on for me to see a mystery, something that human minds could have never come up with. They could have never figured it out." It's a knowledge which can only be attained by divine direct revelation. In grace God chose to favor Paul with the capacity to receive divine authoritative truth of what the truth of the Gospel is and the truth of salvation is and the truth of how God is going to build his church and have his people. So this revelation, Paul says, is entrusted to him as a stewardship, that means a grace, a favor conferred on him as one who is in the office of apostle.

Now, let's talk about some components of the mystery. First of all, part of the mystery that had been hidden and now God is beginning to make open, now generally speaking we're talking about it was hidden to the Old Testament saints. Now, they saw glimmers of it, they saw parts of it, they saw shadows of it but it didn't become clear until God revealed it through Christ and now through the Apostle Paul in the New Testament era. That is, 1: the way of salvation, that salvation is not by law, it's not by ritual, it's not by ceremony, it's not by blood heritage, even though you are the descendant of Abraham. That does not make you God's child. That does not make you saved. Salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone. The way of salvation was a mystery that past ages never were really able to get their hands on. Do you know why? Because God hid it. He wouldn't let them see it until he was ready for them to see it.

Secondly, not only was the way of salvation unfolded, it was a mystery until this point, the scope of salvation was unfolded, was made apparent. That is, that Jews – strap in, this would have blown everybody's mind in this day; in this first century, this was radical – Jews and Gentiles are a part of God's eternal family. Now, here's what the Jews, well, they just, "I don't know if I can handle that. These dirty dog Gentiles are part of God's kingdom? What about all of us who are the blood descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? We're father Abraham. We're God's children." So to hang onto at least a remnant of their pride, here's what they came up with, "Alright, salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus, but you've got to become a Jew first." Just add a little something on there. "I mean, yeah, we believe salvation is by faith in Jesus." Have you ever met anybody like that? "Yes sir, I believe salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus plus baptism. Plus being in the right church family. Plus taking these sacraments. Plus doing penance. Plus, plus, plus." Every cult group you ever want to talk to will tell you salvation is by grace in Jesus plus what Joseph Smith found out you have to also do. Plus what Judge Rutherford of the Jehovah's false Witnesses wrote we also have to do. Plus what our Seventh Day Adventist fathers said we also have to do. Are you realizing there's nothing new? The same errors of the first century or even back to the Garden of Eden, are the same errors men walk in today. They just package them up and dress them up a little differently.

So they said, "Alright, you can be saved," but they were called Judaizers. "You can be saved by grace through faith but you have to be a Jew first." And they, of course, had a process by which a Gentile could become a Jew and then you could believe on Jesus and

be saved. Of course that's wrong, but that's what they were talking about. Now, he's already said that, "I told you a little bit about the mystery earlier in my letter," and that was in chapter 2, verses 11 through 22.

Now look at verse 4, if you will, he said, "By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ." Here's what he's saying, "You want to debate whether or not I'm a true apostle and God has revealed truth to me divinely and directly? Study Ephesians 1 and 2 and get back with me." That's what Paul is saying. "If you'll read, if you'll read honestly what I just wrote to you, you will come to an overwhelming conclusion." I mean, it's overwhelmingly clear only God could have given that to the Apostle Paul. Nobody could have come up with that. That's what he's saying. He said, "It's self-evident. It's axiomatic. It's just self-evident, only God could have given me this."

Now in verse 5 he continues and said, "which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men." That's the Old Testament era. They did not receive in the Old Testament era, I wouldn't use the word "dispensation" but it's used in so many different ways, I try to stay away from it. But they did not receive the full revelation of the way of salvation and they did not receive the full revelation of the scope of salvation as God, Paul is saying, as God is now revealing to his apostles and prophets. Now he says "holy apostles and prophets" there in verse 5, "has been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets." "Holy" means "men that are set apart, inspired by God." Now the office of an apostle we hold was a permanent office for that man's lifetime, but the calling of a prophet would not necessarily be that. We find evidence in the New Testament that before the New Testament canon was complete, that God would occasionally use a person in a prophetic way but it wasn't necessarily an office; that wasn't their full-time vocation. Even there were some prophetesses mentioned in the Scriptures. But again, there were many many things God did in miraculous ways until the canon of Scripture was complete.

Now, there are different brothers who differ on this. For example, there are some in the charismatic movement who are good brothers and sisters and I can have good fellowship with them and they would say, "No, God is still speaking today," and they would actually use some of these phrases like, "We're like prophets or we're like apostles," but the brothers that I really talk to that I know really know the Lord, they'll say something like this, they'll say, "What we mean is somebody will be in the worship service and we'll be preaching and they'll feel led or impressed by the Spirit that maybe the church needs to pray for the President or maybe the church needs to reach out to Sister So-and-so." And I said, "Well, we do the same thing. We're just not going to use the verbiage that God told me because when it's not Scripture, we're just real careful to say the best we discerned, God is leading us this way." Like at Covenant Life Church in Maryland where C. J. Mahaney used to be pastor, I visited that church and they were very gracious and what they would say is if somebody feels like they've gotten a prophetic word, then they must come to the church elders and the church elders will pass judgment as to whether or not this should be shared with the body. They said if you don't do that, you'll have just chaos in your worship service. All kinds of people taking control of the service. I'm going to tell

you, that will never happen in my ministry. You mean I'm going to study for 20 hours a week and pray and seek God for you to pop up here and just chatter for a while?

Now, look, you may come to us and say, "Pastor, you know, So-and-so is going. I believe we need to pray about the North Korean thing." Do you know what I'm probably going to say? "Well, amen. I'll lead us in prayer during the service." Now, you know, if you'd come and say, "My parent is sick, will you pray and lay hands on him?" we're probably not going to do that and any other thing that we think is out of line. But anyway, I'm saying all that to say even brothers and sisters who are different about the spiritual gifts, if they love Christ and are following the Scriptures, we find that we're not really that far apart on the actual functioning of these things.

Well, anyway, in the New Testament era, I believe generally the folks we trust their Bible scholarship believe that these offices were for a season of time until the New Testament was completed.

Now look at verse 6, he says, "to be specific." Now what he's saying is God has revealed these things to these holy apostles and prophets, this mystery that was hidden before, verse 6 now, "to be specific," what the mystery, "that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." So this is a powerful and most penetrating point and that is the keynote point of the mystery, the keynote aspect of the mystery that's now being revealed is not the way of salvation, though that's a part of it, grace through faith, but the fact that and not even the scope of salvation that Jews and Gentiles are going to get in on the household of God, it's even more than that, it's that Gentiles can become members, full-fledged members of God's household and they do not have to come through Judaism to get there. That was mind-boggling. That was mind-boggling. It was so upsetting that they wanted to kill the Apostle Paul for preaching it, or at least lock him away somewhere all that they could.

Charles Hodge, the Presbyterian theologian who was an eminent theologian, said this, "It seemed never to have entered into any human mind until the day of Pentecost that the theocracy," which is Jerusalem and Judaism, "that the theocracy itself was to be abolished and a new form of religion," Christianity, the local church, "was to be introduced, designed and equally adopted for all mankind under which the distinction between Jew and Gentile was to be done away with."

So Paul says, "Here's what God's doing. Here's how he's working it out. He's calling his ministers. He's giving them a stewardship to preach his Gospel. He empowers them to do this work. It has nothing to do with them. It is not they're special, not that they're better, not that they're godlier, God just calls some to do it. He sets them apart for this task. He's made known to the first ministers of the New Testament era, the church era, the great mystery that he intentionally hid beforehand, that God is saving men by grace, through faith in Christ. Not by the law. Not by Judaism. Not by the ceremonies or the rituals or the rites or the performances of the things that made up the Judaistic theocracy. No! God is saving them by grace through faith in Christ and he's saving them among the Jews and



among the Gentiles and a Gentile does not have to take one tiny step into Judaism to get home to God." Radical. Just out there radical.

Look at verse 8, Paul continuing to talk about the means God's ordained, ministers, and he's referring to himself. Verse 8, "To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ." So in another writing to Timothy, a young man he was discipling to help take over his ministry, he says Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners among whom I am foremost of all. So Paul says, "Far from me having some special qualification. I'm just going to be honest with you, I'm about the worst sinner I know anything about. I'm about the most vile man, the most ungodly man that I've ever run across." It wasn't just the weight of his sinfulness in general, though studying the New Testament one would assume that a lot of the legalistic men of the Jewish religion were very immoral men, but it was the sin of unbelief, the sin the apostle lived in when he persecuted Christ and persecuted Christians.

And to the Apostle Paul to have walked in such sin, then to be converted, and then to be captured and apprehended and commissioned to be a preacher of the Gospel, was love and grace and forgiveness beyond comprehension and he says, "I have been apprehended, me the worst sinner of all, to," what? "To preach to the Gentiles, the non-Jews, the Ephesians, the unfathomable riches of Christ." Unfathomable means you can't trace it down. It's too big. It would be like you're tracing something and you just kept going forever. You can't get to the end of it. It's a mine of treasures that you just can't get to the end of. It's unfathomable. You just can't get to the bottom. That's why I asked you earlier how deep is the love of Christ? And you said right: it's infinite. It's beyond finding out. The riches he has bestowed on us in saving us through the glorious dimensions and wonders and marvels and beauties and powers all contained in Jesus Christ, the wonders of all that are beyond examination.

Now, what we can examine is true but when we think we've about figured it out... I've told you before, you've been gracious to let your pastor study. You don't call on me to do dozens of other important ministries because you've asked me to do the most important ministry so I've been able to spend a lot more hours than most men get to spend preparing sermons and lo and behold, I flip over to the book of Amos and get my mind blown again at the unfathomable riches of God's truth. It's like we're going down a hallway in a giant infinite warehouse and corridor after corridor after corridor, our God has laid up for us from eternity past treasures and they all center in Jesus. And it's like we get through with one corridor and thought, "Wow, that was unbelievable," and then we walk around the corner and we start in another one and we don't get about two steps in and think, "Oh my goodness, look at that." That's what it is when you go to another verse and the next verse and the next verse. A new dimension. A new dynamic. A new principle. A new insight. The unfathomable riches of Christ.

Hodge said, "It's the riches of Christ that includes all the fullness of the Godhead." Do you know how long I could preach on the role of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit and saving his people and building his church? It's the vastness of divine glories and perfections. Do you know how long you can contemplate and preach and

meditate on the infinite wonders of the Triune holy God? A lot of churches not preach the word. Why would you raise your children in a church where they do goofy silly stuff when you can take children and begin to teach them the unfathomable riches of Christ Jesus? This will last if the Communists take over. This will last if the progressives get the Supreme Court. But that silly nonsense won't make it. Now, we don't have any of this and I mean it, we don't have any of this, but if any of you daddies take your kids and join some silly church, I'm going to come and burn your house down. You mean to tell me we can bond together to learn these unfathomable riches and you're going to go play games somewhere? Are you kidding me? As if all we need to know about Christ we learn by the fourth grade and now the goal of church is just to make it fun? Are you kidding me? Are you reading this stuff? If you're listening, you're learning new stuff tonight. It's just too good. It's just too good.

Hodge concludes in summary and says, "Everything which renders him the satisfying portion of our souls is the unfathomable riches of Christ."