

The Master's Minister, p. 3

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Bible Text: Ephesians 3:1-13
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Ephesians 3, let's go there tonight and I think it's most fitting that we are continuing, actually this is part 3 of this section of Ephesians, Ephesians 3:1-13, and I've entitled the whole exposition of this section "The Master's Minister." As you know, the first two or so chapters of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul lays out the glorious wonder of conversion; how a sovereign God orchestrates it all, performs it all and it's all for his glory. Then as you venture from the end of chapter 2 through the rest of the chapter, he begins to tell us, "Now, here's how all this works out in time and in space history. Here's God's means and God's plan for how to function and do this great work which he has provided for."

The Master's minister, Ephesians 3:1-13.

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 [shock of all shocks to a Jew] 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. 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.

Now, briefly we talked about and reviewed that God captures and calls his ministers. The apostle says here, "I am the prisoner," verse 1, "I am the prisoner of Christ Jesus." And we must hold resolutely and dogmatically, even, that those called into the ministry must be God-called. Paul didn't put in an application or run for office. God made the initiative and God intervened in Paul's life and made him a man of God. God captures and calls his own ministers.

Secondly, the apostle said, "God empowers his ministers." Paul said, "There was a stewardship of grace given to me." Grace is giving a favor and in this case, the favor of a divine enablement that he had nothing to do with. If God calls you, God equips you and empowers you for the work. He gives you a grace for it. Now, it doesn't mean it's not a difficult work, it doesn't mean that there's not going to be some sleepless nights and difficult days if you're called into the ministry, but if you're called, you're God-enabled. That's why we have to be very careful who we give our blessing to because the church is the entity, the means whereby God identifies those who are called into the ministry and the Bible cautions us about laying hands on someone too hastily.

Thirdly, in review, God gives the message his ministers proclaim. Starting in verse 3, Paul says that this was given to him as a revelation. Listen: every God-called preacher is bound to the God-ordained message. He cannot, he must not preach anything other than what God has ordained for him to preach. He has not the liberty to be clever and creative where the word of God is clear. We must not tamper with, toil with, manipulate, scheme around a just God's truth. We must proclaim it. All of this foolish and even blasphemous nonsense that's coming out of pulpits today to try to make lost, sin-loving, world-loving, carnal, unregenerate people like our Christ and like the truth. I don't expect them to like our Christ or like the truth unless God apprehends their hearts. As Spurgeon said, we don't have to make him presentable. The Gospel and Jesus are like a lion, you just turn him loose, he'll do his work.

So God gives the message the ministers are to proclaim. And Brother James, as you now take the office of elder in the church, you're already an effective teacher but now your teaching carries a new weight and authority so you have to be that much more resolute because, as an elder, we're required to establish and guard doctrine for the body. So we have to be sure that we're exegeting the text properly and rightly dividing the word of God.

Number 4, new material now: God's purpose for the ministry of his ministers is to manifest his own glory. God's purpose for capturing and calling these ministers, God's purpose for specially gifting and gracing these ministers and then God's reason for having these ministers is that he might do a work through them, not them alone but through them, for his own great glory.

Now, let's look at this beginning in verse 9. Paul says beginning in verse 9 of Ephesians 3, "and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things." So Paul says, "My ministry is to bring some things to light." Literally it means to shine or to illumine. Paul says, "My calling as a minister of

the Gospel is to shine or illumine what was once a mystery." Now, "mystery" here doesn't mean that you have to be clever to figure it out, it means it was beforehand by God's divine intent hidden from men's understanding. The whole Gospel message and what God would do and how God would build a church and how he would do it through his promised Messiah, the Old Testament gave something of it but only in shadows and only in types. It was, for the most part, hidden but a New Testament minister gets to shine forth the light to reveal what God formerly had purposefully left hidden, and that is that God is making for himself a people. He calls them the church. Ekklesia is the Greek word. It means called out ones. That God is in the process of going out into the world and finding all these world-loving, worldly people, people that are happy in the world, who live like the world, who pursue the ends of the earth, who want the pleasure now, grab for all the gusto, but God does something to them through the Gospel whereby they are changed. They are changed from the inside to where they begin to dislike, abhor and be repulsed by the course of this world and they begin to be moved toward a love for Christ and the things of God which are eternal. So they are called out from their former loves and attachments and belongings to belong to and be attached to a new collectivity, a new group, the church. Called out ones.

So that's the mystery that's being unfolded, that God is calling for himself a people and these people are called out based on their faith through Christ alone, and shock of all shocks, wonder of all wonders, he's even calling people to be his own outside of Israel. Even Gentiles are a part of these people. Now, Paul's a Jew and so he is really a powerful pronouncer of shocking information to the Jews of this day. So in Paul's terminology here, this shining, this light is actually knowledge. "I'm preaching the knowledge of this work God's doing here in the last days."

Now, technically the last days are from the New Testament until kingdom come, or maybe just say the rapture would be better. And so we're in this last days period, so ministers are to teach everything we can about Christ and about redemption, and as we preach and teach the whole counsel of God concerning these things, this knowledge illumines the minds and the hearts of many who will come to repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ and become a part of that group of called out ones.

Now, just a reminder here of application: God will save many but God's ministers must be prepared, there will be many who will reject the message and reject the man bringing the message. As Paul said to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 2:16 and, you know, Paul had a lot of opposition among those who were a congregation with the Corinthian church and Paul said to them, "to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life." Paul is basically saying, "I don't know which one it's going to be but I know when I faithfully preach God's message of the Gospel, the word of God, there are some that it's just life upon life to them. Yes, give more of this life. And some, it's a dead message and it just leads them to further death and their spiritual deadness."

Now, we must as God's ministers with compassion coupled with boldness, shine the light of the Gospel and many over time will come to faith in Jesus Christ, but many over time

will reject both the Gospel and us. But God is glorifying himself through the faithful ministry that we perform.

Now, verse 9. He's talking about he's shining the light, unfolding or unveiling better this mystery that was hidden, that God is saving for himself a people through his Gospel to be his own called out special people and he said, "to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages," I'm in verse 9, "has been hidden in God who created all things." God designed redemption and redemption's purpose – now mark that down – he designed how he's going to save men, redeem men, and also the purpose for which he's going to redeem them from eternity past. He's the Creator of these things. He created the means of salvation and he created the reason why he's saving men the way he's saved them, but he hid all of this from man until his own time. It was this plan of redemption long hidden, now made known through the Gospel, that Paul said he was sent to preach about or to proclaim and be a guiding light to all men. He said it was hidden in God who created all things. The Creator is the Redeemer. Just as he created all things his way, in his own way and in his own timing and for his own purpose, he redeems men and this brings him the glory. So he says, "We're doing all of these things. We're God's ministers." All of this had been somewhat hidden until this dispensation occurs.

Now he's calling ministers to proclaim this truth to bring this light and what are they bringing to light? One way of saying it, verse 10, "so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church." The manifold wisdom of God. "Manifold" means "multi-faceted; all the shades and colors; all the facets and dimensions." God's wisdom is so multi-faceted and complex and beautiful and wonderful, it's beyond comprehension but we get to proclaim all of it that we can grasp while we're here. He says, "We're proclaiming this Gospel and what it does, like nothing else, when we proclaim this Gospel, God saves people. He builds up his church. It begins to show forth the manifold wisdom of God."

So his method to show forth his wisdom and glory is by calling to himself a people, redeeming them, assembling them, called out ones, sanctifying them, growing them up together, and then one day glorifying them to have the glory and righteousness of his own Son and he performs all this through the merits of his Son, Jesus Christ, and the agency of the Holy Spirit. Now there is so much we could preach on right there but I'm not going to do that.

Now, to extol and explain the manifold wisdom of God even to those who are regenerated and have ears to hear it and grasp it to some degree, to explain it fully would be impossible. If you could combine hundreds of the most anointed preachers of all the ages and take all their preaching and all their teaching collectively, it would fall so woefully short of fully proclaiming the manifold wisdom of God involved in building his church. But Paul said, "That's my job, to preach the Gospel and show as much of the great wisdom of God and how he designed all this to work." I hope you're to the point in your life where when you contemplate how God did all of this and is doing all of this, you marvel and you say, "What a Savior! What a God! What wisdom! What power! What beauty in doing this!" Now, you don't really see it the way you need to see it if you

haven't been a part of a healthy church because that's where it's seen most clearly and that's why the church is so important.

Every preacher should pray and study and meditate and strive to present the wisdom of God through the Gospel, just touching on, I mean just barely touching the hem of the garment of some of the manifold wisdom of God displayed in the Gospel. Think about the truth of reconciling justice and mercy. How is a holy God of true and holy justice going at the same time to show the kind of mercy and compassion to fallen unworthy sinners who justly should be condemned? How are those going to be united? At the cross. Jesus dies in the place of the unjust and there justice is satisfied and mercy is satisfied and God is satisfied. We could preach for hours on that, the wisdom of God to bring that about, to pull that off, if you will. You'd never even thought of that, much less been able to perform it. What about how the Gospel takes sinners who are woefully unworthy as Amos told us this morning, who are fallen and corrupted in the totality of their being, yet he takes these unworthy creatures and by the merits of his Son Jesus Christ, he imputes into those unworthy creatures the very righteousness of his Son so they go from the lowest and woefully depraved to the highest and glorious, co-heirs with Jesus Christ, to be co-regents, as he says, over his future kingdom. What an exultation? Yet in grasping what he did to save us, we have the exulting joy of how he's raised us but the every abiding humility of what he did to save us. Who would ever put those two together? Who could have ever thought of that, much less performed it? Just touching the hem of the garment of the manifold wisdom of God in our salvation and our conversion.

What about the person of the Redeemer? We were so fallen, we were so bankrupt, we were so corrupt, we were so woefully deserving of judgment and wrath. Only a divine salvation could fix us so God himself in love incomparable comes to save us. But God couldn't just save us, God had to be man to save us. So God performs the miracle of the virgin birth and God becomes man. As God he can redeem us and as man he can stand in our place. Who would have thought of that? That the Savior, the Messiah, the promised Savior of the Jews, would be the God-man, 100% God as if he were not man at all, and at the same time 100% man as if he were not God at all. You can't comprehend it. Great is the mystery of godliness. You could have never thought up such a thing, much less performed it. Oh, just the hem of the garment of the manifold wisdom of God.

What about the operation of the Spirit of God that when the Gospel is preached, which is God's primary means of conversion of the soul, somehow the Spirit of God, Jesus said it's like the wind, it blows this way and blows that way and you don't know where it came from and you don't know where it's going next, John 3, but it lights over here on a 12 year old boy and he's broken about his sin and he turns to embrace the glorious promise of God through his Son, Jesus Christ, and a man over here is sitting there yawning, wondering what he's going to eat while he watches the ball game tonight, bored. How do you explain that? The operation of the Spirit of God? It's a mystery. Who can touch these things? Paul said, "That's what a minister does. He preaches the whole counsel of God so that the church, those enabled, can begin to marvel over the manifold wisdom of God and all the dynamics, all the manifold facets and dynamic aspects of God's great infinite wisdom."

The redeeming of his church and the sanctifying of the church is to all intelligent beings the brightest display of divine perfections. Notice it there in verse 9, no, let's go down to verse 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." Now what does that mean, through the church? That means God's work in saving those, calling them out, making them local churches, and if they're walking as a true church or a biblically healthy church – listen now, listen, don't miss this – that is the highest and brightest display of the wisdom and glory of God that will be seen until Jesus returns to planet earth. Did you get that? Not a beautiful sunset over the ocean. That declares the glory of God but not as much as the church does. Not a precious newborn child and we see the miracle of it and that declares the glory of God, but not even to be compared with how God manifests his glory when the church is the church.

It's through the church and you wonder why I'm so passionately, unrelentingly dogmatic about being a true church. Because it's the centerpiece of all that our God is doing on the earth. God forbid a man be in a pulpit who's not passionate about the church. Do you know why? Our God is passionate about the church so we must be passionate about the church. If it's not everything, it's almost everything. I'm telling you what, if our Savior loved it enough to die for it, we ought to love it enough to live for it and be absolutely abhorred with righteous indignation when we see people tampering with, toying with, manipulating and scheming to make the church acceptable to men. It's not man's church, it is Christ's church. It's to honor him. It's to manifest his manifold wisdom.

God forbid you go out in the community and say, "Boy, you just wouldn't believe what old slick Jeff Noblit, what old slick Tom Clay and our slick elders are doing. It's the coolest thing in town." God forbid such a vile and blasphemous message to our community. You should go in the community and say, "We have determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified." If we preach this Gospel and proclaim this Gospel, we trust it will change men's lives and that's all we've got. Period. And we stake our lives, our hope, our all on that. Let me tell you something: the coolest stuff, the faddish stuff, the gimmicky stuff, the exciting stuff, it won't save your grandbaby's soul but the Gospel will. Amen? The Gospel will. It won't heal your troubled marriage but the Gospel can. That's why we're staying with the Gospel, amen? Staying with the old stuff established 2,000 years ago.

This manifold wisdom of God comes through the church. This gives us the highest conception of the dignity and the value of the church. So you ask yourselves: if God has ordained that until he returns in his great glory, his greatest manifestation of himself on the earth will be through the church, then what do you think Satan is going to work to destroy the most? The church. And he's not going to come in and get us all to put on red suits and have Satan sacrifices. No, he's going to do just what Jeroboam did in Bethel, he's going to clothe it up with a lot of orthodox looking stuff but make sure it's full of dead men's bones on the inside, rottenness and worldliness and fleshliness, built on gimmicks and excitements and sensuality instead of the Spirit working through the truth to convert men's souls.

Now, this is interesting. Look at it in verse 10. I'm about to wrap up here, alright, in a few minutes? "So that the manifold wisdom of God," now look at it, "might be now known through the church," it was hidden before, but through the church in God's work of making the church, forming the church, sanctifying, growing up these local churches God's manifold wisdom is shown, to whom? Last part of verse 10, "to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places."

Now what does that mean? Well, one of the things it means is the angels in heaven are looking down on God saving people through the merits of his Son, Jesus Christ, and through the agency of the third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, and the angels are saying, "Wow! Do you see what's happening?" They're marveling over it. You see, angels are mighty and glorified beings but they're not infinite. They do have limited knowledge so it's unfolding to them too, you see, but the difference is they have perfect minds to take in more of the depth and the greatness of God's wisdom in doing this work. Right now, some of you are too stupid to appreciate how great it is. Is that too strong? Well, repent. I'm too stupid to appreciate how great this stuff is but the angels are not stupid. They have perfected glorified minds.

They are greatly intelligent beings and so as they see God's great wisdom in this great plan of the ages to save for himself a people, and by the way, he's going to save exactly who he's going to save and he's going to keep them all through time and he's going to glorify them all together in eternity and he'll not lose one for whom Jesus died. Jesus is not saving for himself a people on some happenstance chance game. It's a perfect precise plan because not one for whom he came to die will be lost. Can you imagine Jesus being in heaven for all eternity and having his head down in his hands and saying, "There more that were supposed to be here and I couldn't get it done." Banish such a blasphemous concept. Jesus said, "Of all that the Father gives Me, I lose not one." Woo! Not one. Not one. "Pastor, how do I know I'm one of those 'one'?" Do you feel drawn to him? Do you feel like you need him? Do you feel like you're a sinner and apart from him you have nothing? Then you're on good ground.

Now, he's making this known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. I think one of the main aspects here is that fallen man can't get it and it's too glorious not for somebody to marvel over it so God's going to let the angels marvel over it and until the church gets glorified so even we can finally appreciate it to a degree like we ought to be appreciating it and marvel over it and glory over it.

Well, I want to turn to Revelation 5 but I don't have time. Revelation 5:8-14 you have the angels marveling over the Lamb. Marveling over the Lamb. Now listen: what specifically are they marveling over? That he spoke the worlds into existence? Well, that's worth marveling over but that's not what the text says. No, that the Lamb was slain and with his blood did purchase, past tense emphasis, purchase for himself people, men from every people, tongue, tribe and nation. Do you know what that is? That's the church, him saving his church. The angels are just fascinated over the great wisdom of God and the power of God and the beauty of God in doing this.

You see, the church is the center and the purpose of all history. Listen: the church is the center and the purpose of all history. Secular historians miss it completely. Secular historians view history as centered around Presidents and Kings and countries and Empires and wars and conquests and peace treaties. No. The Bible shows us that history's center and history's purpose is about a group, a little group, to the world an insignificant group, a problem group to them, the church of Jesus Christ. Unknown in the world but well-pleasing to God as their conversions, their sanctification, their unification, and their ultimate glorification on the earth – now listen – is the reason and the purpose for all the other events that ever happen on the earth. Did you get that? Everything that has happened or ever will happen on the earth is to the end of God building his church. It's centered on us. Everything else is just kind of sideshows. The church is the center of what God's doing.

Two of the most distinguished historians of all time, Germany's Oswald Spengler, and England's Arnold Toynbee, both concluded that the overall pattern of history is this endless cycle of birth, growth, decay and death. Just pick it, kings, kingdoms, whatever, birth, growth, decay and death. The Greeks taught the same thing 2,000 years before Toynbee and Spengler ever wrote these things, but unseen by the eye of sinful man is the diamond of history. Diamonds are produced when pressure, heat and time transform carbon into a precious gem. Listen: all the kings, all the kingdoms, all the Empires, all the treaties, all the motions of man throughout history are but the carbon to the end of producing God's diamond, the church, that in her his manifold wisdom and glory would shine forth. Hitler was for the church. Mussolini was for the church. The Islamic terrorists are for the church. Somehow, some way, everything in history is to the end of God's church. He's not worried about anything that's going on anywhere right now. Not in the least bit.

The angels see all this unfolding from heaven and they are so rejoicing. Look at verse 11, "This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord," and then verse 12, "in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him." No wonder Paul said, "When I think about my calling and my responsibility as God's minister, this is a calling of grace. It's a grace gift to be the Master's minister." He calls and captures his men and then he gifts those men and then he gives those men to the church as a gift to the church. Not because those men are special, but because the work they will perform on his behalf is valuable and he's just chosen to do that in the most magnanimous of works, the saving of eternal souls and the building of his church through fallible, weak, puny vessels like me and like these elders. Do you know why? So the surpassing riches of the glory might be him, not us. I mean, you can't look at me very long and be very impressed. You just can't do it. Ask my wife. You just can't do it. You say, "Doggone, you're as ornery as I am. You struggle like I do. You like Tennessee Volunteers, good heavens. You're just weak and fallible." Yeah. Yeah, and God's letting me be a part of building a solid church so he gets the glory. He gets the glory. And by the way, he has a pattern of calling the most unworthy looking vessels.

I'm going to close with this. Years ago, Billy Graham was on the Johnny Carson show. Y'all remember Johnny Carson? That's back when comedians could be decently clean. I'm not saying 100% but decently clean. Red Skelton, they asked Red Skelton one time...have any of y'all heard of Red Skelton? They asked Red Skelton one time, "Why don't you tell dirty stuff in your jokes?" He said, "If you're talented, you don't have to be dirty." That tells you about this world that we live in today.

Billy Graham was on the Johnny Carson show and they were just cutting up a little bit and Johnny said, "Billy, Dr. Graham, you think I could be a preacher?" He said, "Oh yes." Billy Graham said, "Oh yes, God calls some of the worst sinners to be preachers." Well, the apostle who wrote this said, "I'm the chief of sinners," so all the glory goes to God.