

A Stewardship and Philosophy of Ministry - A Message from 2 Corinthians 3-5

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Introduction

Each and every individual person in the Body of Christ has a part in the overall ministry of the church (Ephesians 4.11, 12), and each individual has “a ministry” for which he or she will give account to God. This simple truth is evident in passages such as Ephesians 2.10 where Paul straightforwardly declares that God has fore-ordained that we should walk in good works that He, in His sovereign will, has prepared for us.

Paul himself had no problem neither seeing that he had a ministry (cf. 2 Corinthians 4.1) nor saying so (Romans 11.13). In Acts 20.24, he told the Ephesian elders that he received his ministry from the Lord Jesus. Later, when he visited Jerusalem, he “began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21.19). He thanked God for putting him into ministry (1 Timothy 1.12; Greek word for “service” is the same word) when he wrote to his spiritual son, Timothy, and when he wrote to the church in Rome, he magnified his ministry (Romans 11.13).

But Paul did not just write about “his” ministry; to the contrary, he acknowledged the ministries within the Body many, many times. For example, when he wrote to the church in Colossae, he urged Archippus to “take heed to the ministry you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.” (Colossians 4.17). He urged Timothy to fulfill his ministry (cf. 2 Timothy 4.5). He honored Phoebe, calling her a sister in the Lord who is a minister or servant (same Greek word) of the church. (Note: this doesn’t mean she was a pastor, or even in leadership; it means she had a ministry in the church, probably a ministry of service.)

The point is, Paul taught that he and those with whom and to whom he ministered shared this commonality: they each had a ministry.

However, it is patently manifest that he really made a lot over the concept of ministry to the Corinthian church. You see, this was the “charismatic” church, and these people knew they had ministry, and they didn’t mind strutting their stuff. Perhaps that’s why the letters to these saints is mostly corrective in nature. In his first epistle, for example:

He had to remind them of the fact that there was to be unity in the exercise of these gifts; he had to remind them that they were to be in subjection to the Word of God in the administration of them (cf. 1 Corinthians 12.5, varieties of ministries, but the same Lord); he had to remind them that some of the lesser gifts were equally as important in the Body as the prominent and dominant ones (cf. 1 Corinthians 14ff).

Perhaps it is in the light of that that he commended the household of Stephanas because they had “devoted themselves for ministry to the saints” (1 Corinthians 16.15); in other words, maybe Paul wanted the others there at Corinth to see examples of those using

those “lesser” gifts –and doing it well—so he formally and publicly commended them for their ministry.

But when the Apostle gets around to his second letter to this church, he seems intensely focused on the concept of ministry. In this epistle, he uses the word ministry twelve times (3.7, 8, 9 -twice; 4.1; 5.18; 6.3; 9.1, 12, 13; also, the same Greek word is used in 8.4 and 11.8).

Transition

What did he say, and why did he say it? What has that to do with us?

Today, we are going to evaluate Paul’s concept of ministry as set forth in 2 Corinthians in an attempt to see his model for us and his mandate to us.

What he appreciated about his ministry

- It superiority to the ministry of the Old Covenant
- It changes hearts (1–3). The law reveals sin; it cannot renew the inner person. The Spirit wants to write His Word on hearts.
- It gives life (4–6). The law kills, but grace gives and sustains life. God’s children can have an ongoing relationship with Him through the Spirit (cf. Romans 8.2).
- It gets more and more glorious (7–16). The glory of Old is past. The temple, the priesthood, the rituals, and the pre-incarnate revelations of God’s power. But the glory of God’s grace remains and grows more glorious (v. 18; Proverbs 4.18).
- It brings freedom (17–18). The law brings bondage (Acts 15:10), but grace gives glorious freedom that makes us more and more like Jesus Christ. Each day, you can have your own personal transfiguration as you worship the Lord and yield to the Spirit.¹
- Its capacity to glorify God (4.15; 9.13). Paul focused on glorifying God, and he saw ministry as a means to that end.

What he accepted about his ministry

- He possessed it in an earthen vessel
- Now Paul is exactly right here; in his perspective, he sees himself as “an earthen vessel.” However, the Lord Jesus said of Paul after the Damascus

road experience: “He is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My name before the Gentiles” (Acts 9.15).

- And so it is with all of us; we are earthen and always should be in our own estimation. But we must balance that out with the reality that, to God, we are chosen vessels.
- Do you suppose, then, that perhaps we should be careful about whining and complaining to God (and others) because we seem to be shy of some of gifts and talents others possess since He Himself has both made us AND chosen us?! (cf. Psalm 139).

As Warren Wiersbe notes:

The important thing about a vessel is that it be clean, empty, and available for service. Each of us must seek to become “a vessel unto honor, sanctified [set apart], and meet for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work” (2 Tim. 2:21).

We are vessels so that God might use us. We are earthen vessels so that we might depend on God’s power and not our own.

As participants in the Body of Christ, we should focus on the treasure and not on the vessel, and we must also focus on the Master and not on the servant. If we suffer, it is for Jesus’ sake. If we die to self, it is so that the life of Christ might be revealed in us. If we go through trials, it is so that Christ might be glorified. And all of this is for the sake of others. As we serve Christ, death works in us—but life works in those to whom we minister.”²

But because he possessed it in an earthen vessel, he remembered this important truth:

He could disgrace (or discredit) it (6.3); there were two ways he could do this.

- He could adulterate the Word of God, literally, handle it with distortion so as to cause to be false for personal gain or convenience, or subtlety. In 2.17, he spoke of “peddling” the Word, and he was referring to being a huckster or, in other words, a false teacher with wrong motives.
- He could cause others to stumble by giving offense (6.3; compare I Corinthians 9.12)

What he acknowledged about his ministry

- His adequacy was from God (3.5).

- The surpassing greatness of the power is from God (4.7)
- It is as though God Himself “were making an appeal through us” (5.20)
- It is a fact that we are “working together with Him” (6.1)
- It is suffering makes the treasure spill onto others (4.11ff)

What he anticipated about his ministry

- Some successes
 - He had faith, so he spoke(4.13)
 - He had mercy, so he pressed on (4.1-4)
 - He had hope, so he did not quit (4.16)
- Some suffering (4.7-11)
- Some day:
 - An accounting (5.10)

He possessed his ministry always in the light of his mortality (5.1-9)

He possessed his ministry always in the awareness of God’s watchful eye being upon him (5.11; we are made manifest to God)

He possessed his ministry always in the light of his stewardship (cf. I Corinthians 4.1-5)

- This kept him from becoming a quitter
- This kept him from laziness or unpreparedness
- This kept him from self-promotion

At home with the Lord; it’ll all be over (5.8)

Conclusion

- Let’s be fearful:
 - “Cursed be the one who does the Lord’s work negligently, and cursed be the one who restrains his sword from blood. (Jeremiah 48.10)

Nadab and Abihu learned the hard way not to be flippant and careless in the service of our holy God.

- Let's be fervent:

“The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”
(1 Peter 4.8-11)

- Let's be focused:

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)

- Let's be faithful:

...It is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. (1 Corinthians 4.1)
