

Staying Encouraged in Ministry

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Ephesians 3:1-13

Today I want to talk to you about ministry and not just ministry itself, but today I actually want to talk to you about the topic of discouragement in ministry. Most of us are doing ministry here at Perry Creek, but I have to say there are times when ministry can be discouraging!

In January, Kelley and I are getting ready to head to Zimbabwe to speak at The Evangelical Alliance Mission's annual conference for the region. As I thought about this topic of discouragement in ministry, a snapshot of discouragement came into my mind from one year when we were serving there and we were at that Annual Conference. I remember things were rough in Zimbabwe. At the time, the college I taught at was short-handed, and our church members were facing mistreatment. The Karanda Mission Hospital, the Hospital that our Mission ran on the eastern border of the country, was really having it rough. They were having trouble getting medical supplies through the border. They needed another surgeon and couldn't find one. There was a 40% HIV infection rate in their part of the country, so lots of sick people. In the midst of all that, the Government Hospitals basically just shut down, and all the sick people in the district were funneled to Karanda. They were absolutely inundated with patients.

I remember we kind of knew what was going on, so we were watching those nurses and doctors from Karanda. When they first arrived, they seemed OK, but then someone asked them how they were doing. I just remember watching those nurses, who had not allowed themselves to emote, one by one just start to cry. They were so tired, so stressed, that they couldn't even speak. And they didn't need to. We just watched them cry and cried with them. What they were doing at that Hospital was so good, so Christ-like, so meaningful. It was true ministry. But it was so hard. And they were discouraged.

It was a reminder of the fact that ministry can sometimes be discouraging! It's not just big dramatic moments like that where we face discouragement in ministry. Discouragement can come in smaller moments too:

- * Moments where we are criticized for our service or feel our shortcomings
- * Moments where we get less of a response for our efforts than we had hoped for those can also be discouraging
- * Moments where we experience the grind of working in ministry week in and week out and we wonder if anyone is noticing

It's certainly not all the time but there are times when ministry can be discouraging. So how do we handle those times? How do you stay encouraged in ministry? Well today we are going to look at a surprising passage and a passage that talks about encouragement in ministry.

We are continuing in our study of Ephesians 1-3 called "Foreign to Familiar." Today we are going to look at a surprising passage. It's surprising because of the content. Up til now, Ephesians has been a lot of third person, objective, big-picture theology. But in this passage, Paul focuses on himself. It's very first person and very practical. So it's surprising in that way. But if the passage is surprising because of its content, it's even more surprising because of its origin. Paul is going to talk at length here about encouragement in ministry. He's going to talk about the importance of his ministry and what a gift it is. He's going to tell the Ephesians that they should be encouraged about the prospects of his ministry. And he's going to do all that from prison!

If you were here last week, remember how we talked about the "Dividing Wall of Hostility" at the Temple? The wall that Gentiles were not allowed to go beyond? Remember how Paul said that Christ had destroyed the need for that wall? Well, Paul had gone to the Temple in Jerusalem and, while he was there, some Jews from Ephesus accused him of taking Gentiles beyond that wall into the court of Israel. Now Paul had not actually done that, but the accusation landed him in Rome where he was on trial for his life. That's where he writes this passage on encouragement. So it's a surprising passage!

It's a great passage about encouragement in ministry, because Paul is going to give us four encouraging truths about ministry. He will give these in terms of his own ministry, but as we will see, they apply to your ministry! They apply to any ministry we do in the church.

Here's my goal as we look at this passage today. For those engaged in ministry, I want you to be truly encouraged to keep at it. What you do is so important! I want you to know that and be encouraged! And for those of you who are not engaged in ministry, I hope this passage encourages you to find what it is that God wants you to do to find the ministry that he has prepared for you and serve in it.

So we're going to see four encouraging truths about ministry today. Let's read Ephesians 3:1-13. Paul has just talked about how God is building the Jews and Gentiles into a holy Temple where he dwells by his Spirit and then he speaks these words. Just like last week, these verses are going to have lots of content, but we will see our encouraging truths about ministry:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. 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. I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 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. 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, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

- Ephesians 3:1-13

We're going to see four encouraging truths about ministry. Before we jump into the details of that and of the passage, let me just state a couple of assumptions here that I start this message with. I won't go into detail here, but let me just state these assumptions:

1. Every Christian should have a ministry. If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you should have a ministry. I don't mean that you should be a Pastor, but you should be serving somewhere! Maybe leading something. Maybe serving in All Pro Dads. Maybe directing people in the parking lot. You should be serving somewhere. I thank God that the majority of you are doing just that! We really are a serving church! But if you're not serving, let me just say that you really should be. When Jesus gathered his disciples, he didn't just have them soak in his teaching for three years and then serve. He put them to work immediately. (Not ready!) So my first assumption is that every Christian should have a ministry.

2. If you have a ministry, you will face times of discouragement. You just will, if you serve in a ministry for any length of time. The day will come when you are tempted to be discouraged. It may be that you take criticism, and it's disheartening. Or it may be that you really pour into someone, and they walk away. It may be that the novelty wears off, and it gets to be a grind! We've been going for several months now. I'm guessing it's not quite as much fun setting up chairs as it used to be! Although I should say that I told Pastor Dwayne that, and he told me that no one is allowed to get tired or discouraged for five years!

So it could be one of those things or it could be that after a while you really start to see the toll ministry takes and count the cost, and you wonder if it's worth it. I think that's the background of this passage. As we come to this passage, Paul had been ministering as the Apostle to the Gentiles for several years. He had been carrying this message that the Gentiles, non-Jewish people like you and me, can become God's people just as God had told him to do. Paul had paid a great price for that ministry. He had been beaten, stoned, and ostracized by the Jews imprisoned by the Gentiles and even criticized by some Christians! Now he had landed himself in real trouble. He was in Rome about to go on trial before Caesar for his life.

All for this message! So you can imagine that just like. It's easy for us to become discouraged with the cost of ministry. This was a moment where Paul could have felt that and where the Ephesians might have been discouraged by the news that Paul was imprisoned. So Paul writes this passage about his ministry to show them four reasons why they should not be discouraged by this - four encouraging truths about ministry, and the first is this:

Your Ministry Is a Stewardship

Look at how Paul begins this passage:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles. Surely you have heard about the administration (or literally “the Stewardship”) of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.

- Ephesians 3:1-3

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.

- Ephesians 3:6

The first thing Paul tells us about his ministry and the first thing that is true about any ministry is that it is a stewardship. Now stewardship is not a term that we use a lot in our day to day living. Chances are you haven’t used the word “steward” in the last week. So it’s not a word we use a lot, but Stewardship was an important concept in the Bible. There are parables and stories about Stewards throughout the Bible.

The concept of stewardship basically always involved two things:

1. Stewardship always involved the entrusting of a resource. A steward was given some type of resource to work with: maybe it was money or material goods - that’s probably the most obvious thing that would be entrusted to a Steward. But it could also be authority that was entrusted or maybe knowledge. But there was always some resource entrusted to a Steward.
2. There was a responsibility to invest that resource wisely. A steward was to put what had been entrusted to him to use. He was to grow the Master’s wealth, increase his estate. He had a responsibility to invest what the master had entrusted to him for the sake of the Master’s kingdom.

So that’s Stewardship. In the church, we often talk about giving as a stewardship, and it is. There is entrusting and investment. When we give financially, we are taking the money that God has entrusted to us. We are investing it in the church and its ministries, so that his Kingdom will grow. Giving is a Stewardship.

Well here, Paul says the stewardship is ministry. And again, we see these two elements of entrusting and investment. God had entrusted Paul with certain resources. Paul says here that God had personally revealed to him the mystery, the secret, that the Jews and Gentiles were fellow heirs, that we are part of the same spiritual family. God had entrusted Paul with that truth. God had also entrusted Paul with an awesome biblical education. Paul studied under one of the most famous Jewish Rabbis ever. He knew the Old Testament like the back of his hand. So he could explain to people from the Old Testament how it had always been part of God’s plan to bring the Gentiles into his family. God had entrusted that education to him. And God had entrusted Paul with something else. Wounds. Paul had spiritual wounds from his past. As a

Pharisee, he had murdered men and women for following Christ. He was a murderer and a persecutor of the church. That's why in verse 8 here he calls himself "the least of all the saints." Paul had a wound from his past.

All those resources came together to give Paul a ministry. Did you know that? Paul understood, in a way that almost no one else could, what God was doing with the Gentiles and how that fit with what the Bible had always taught and how awesome and complete God's grace and forgiveness were! Through Christ, God could forgive even a murderer. Paul knew that. And that made Paul the perfect Apostle to the Gentiles. He wouldn't look down on them. He understood what God was doing, and he knew he had to invest that knowledge, those skills, in God's Kingdom. Paul understood that ministry is a stewardship.

We have a perfect example of that here today Jane Higgins! Think of all the factors that caused Jane to work on hurricane relief. God gave Jane a family in Houston, so she would have a heart for that area. God gave Jane a background in education, so that she would think about the needs of those schools. When I heard about the hurricane, I didn't think about the schools. Did you? But because of her background, Jane did! God placed Jane in Raleigh, a place where people have the potential to give generously. I don't know if you know that, but Raleigh has one of the highest potential charitable giving ratios in the US. Apparently, God gave Jane mad organizational skills! I don't know how she got all this done, but the girl has skills! About two weeks in, Kelley got off the phone and said "Jane Higgins is a beast! In a good way!" All of those resources, all of those experiences, all of those gifts came together to give Jane a ministry. She recognized that something needed to be done and that she could do it! She saw what God had entrusted to her as a stewardship.

Can I ask you a question? What has God entrusted to you? What resources has God blessed you with? What abilities has He given you? What knowledge do you have that can impact others or you? What wounds has God allowed you to experience? Those wounds can make you able to help people in a way that no one else can. They can give you a passion to stop something that God wants to see stopped! Or to do something he wants to see done. What has God entrusted to you? Ministry is a stewardship. Secondly:

Your Ministry is a Gift

Your ministry is a gift from God. It's important that we say that because often times we don't think that way.

You may have heard about the man who just laid in bed one Sunday morning. His wife came to him and said "You need to get up and get dressed for church." He said "I don't want to go." She said "You need to go." He said "I'm not going, and I'll give you two reasons: (1) I don't like the people there and (2) They don't like me." She said "You are going, and I'll give you two reasons: (1) You're 47 years old and (2) You're the Pastor." Sometimes we don't look at ministry as a gift! But look at what Paul says:

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 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,
- Ephesians 3:7-8

Notice that Paul doesn't just say "I'm a minister." He doesn't just say "My ministry is a gift." He says "My ministry is a gift that I don't deserve." I have to say when I read that and thought about it, that jarred me! I have to be honest. I often see my ministry as something that I give to God (and don't we all see it that way sometimes?) But Paul sees it as the opposite. He sees his ministry as a gift that God gave him!

That surprised me. It especially surprised me when I thought about what Paul had gone through. Here's Paul: He's been rejected, beaten, stoned, imprisoned. Now he's on trial for his life, all because of this ministry. And he's calling it a gift! Now, that's what you call optimism, right? That is "the glass is half full." That's like "Look at me! God gave me this ministry and then I got a free trip to Rome! They tell me if the trial goes just right, I might get to see the Coliseum!"

Why would Paul be so optimistic about his ministry? Why would he see this ministry, that brought him so much pain, as a gift that was so great he didn't really deserve it? One reason - look at what he says:

this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,
- Ephesians 3:8

Paul was optimistic about his ministry, because he got to share Christ with people! In his ministry, Paul got to share Christ with the Gentiles, with people who had never known the true God, with people who were on the outside, with people who were far from God. Paul got to share with them the riches of Christ's forgiveness, the riches of Christ's love, the riches of Christ's purpose for their lives. Paul was so excited about his ministry, because he got to dispense Christ to people!

There's a film that came out several years ago called "Ee-Taow" that documents a missionary going way back into the jungle in Papua New Guinea and telling the story of Jesus to a tribe that had never heard about it. The guy was very careful. He took several weeks to sit down with them in the evenings and explain the whole story of the Bible from Adam to Abraham to Israel to Jesus. It actually took months. But you should see it when he gets to the part of the story where Jesus was raised from the dead and explains how they can have eternal life. It's incredible! The whole village starts jumping up and down and shouting Ee-taow, which means "It's true!" They forgive one another. They hug one another. They lift the missionary up on their shoulders. They dance. They celebrate, and it went on for three hours!

Paul is excited about his ministry, because he's saying "I get to be that guy! I get to share Jesus with people who need him!" That's what ministry is all about! Every ministry! It's about sharing Jesus with people who need him. That's why we do missions. That's why we do children's ministry. That's why we serve here at River Bend. That's why we do tech ministry. That's why we greet people and set up chairs. It all works toward that goal of giving Jesus to people who need him or need more of him!

Think how you would feel if what we were dispensing here was the cure to cancer. Think how you would feel as people came in limping and in wheelchairs and on stretchers and left cured and healthy. Wouldn't you love to be the guy that gives them the pill? Wouldn't you love to be the gal who seats them comfortably for treatment? Wouldn't you love to be the guy who helps them find a parking place? Wouldn't you love to be the gal who invited them? Well, we're doing something more important than that: We're dispensing the unsearchable riches of Christ. That's why we can be optimistic. Ministry is a gift. So (1) your ministry is a stewardship. (2) your ministry is a gift. Now thirdly:

Ministry is a Gear

I bet you didn't see that coming! You might have expected me to say ministry was a stewardship or a gift, but you probably didn't expect me to say it was a gear! So what on earth am I talking about? Why do I say your ministry is a gear? I just mean that when it comes to that task of sharing the riches of Christ, you don't have to be the whole machine. Sometimes you're just one gear. Look at what Paul says in verses 9-11. He has said his ministry was to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles. Now he continues:

and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God who created all things. 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, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- Ephesians 3:9-11

So what is Paul saying here? He's giving another big-picture view of his ministry. What he's saying is "The big-picture, the big hairy audacious goal of this task that God has given us, is that the wisdom of God, the wisdom that caused him to sacrifice his only Son, the wisdom that let him to triumph not through power, but through love, and the cross. The big-picture goal of this task is that that will be declared not just to every nation on earth, but even to angels and the spirit world, both good and bad.

Now that's a pretty big goal, considering that the gospel had really only been preached in the Middle East when Paul wrote this! The gospel hadn't made it to Europe, or most of Africa, or Asia, or North or South America! But it has now we're getting close to what Paul talked about!

How is this going to happen? Notice what Paul says:

His intent was that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known

- Ephesians 3:10

It was through the church, not just through Paul, but through the Church! Through the "Capital C" universal Church. Through all believers. In other words, this isn't just up to Paul! God, sovereign God, has a plan. It's a huge plan, and he's working on it through many, many people - not just through Paul! So it's not all up to Paul. It's not all about Paul. He doesn't have to figure it all out.

And neither do we. We just have to play our part. And that's encouraging to me. When I'm trying to share the riches of Christ, I don't have to figure out everything. I just have to figure out the role that God want me to play at that moment.

Several years ago when Kelley and I were in South Africa, we visited the largest mosque in the country with another missionary. The Imam showed us around the Mosque, and he explained

Islam and sort of tried to evangelize us. We learned a lot! But near the end of the tour, the other missionary just said to the Imam “So, I’m just wondering: How does your religion deal with sin? On what basis is it forgiven?” I could tell that question really gave the Imam pause, but then the missionary walked away! He didn’t push it. He just left it at that. When we got back to the car, the missionary said “Sometimes I find it helpful to remember that I don’t always have to share the whole gospel with people. God has other people working in their lives, and I’m just one gear in the machine.”

That’s true of our loved ones that we want to share the gospel with. That’s true of the people we want to invite to church. That’s true of the people we serve in this community. Ministry is a stewardship. There is a responsibility that we have a task that God has equipped us for. We need to play our part in full. But we should be encouraged that we only play a part. We’re not the whole machine. We’re just one gear.

Ministry is a gear. Now the last truth that Paul shares is simple. It’s this:

Your Ministry Is Backed By Powerful Prayer

Not only did Paul have other believers working alongside of him in this task that God had given him, but he had a powerful God working alongside him as well! Look at what he says:

In him (that is, in Christ) and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

- Ephesians 3:12

Paul said earlier in Ephesians that God works all things after the counsel of his own will in verse 11 of this chapter. He said that God was accomplishing his eternal plan. Now he says that this God, this sovereign all-knowing all-powerful God, invites us to bring our requests to him with freedom from guilt and with confidence that he will hear us as we pray for our ministry.

And church I'm just going to say it: Prayer changes things. Sometimes we pray and we don't get the answers that we want. Sometimes, to be honest, that's because all we ever pray about is ourselves and our comfort. We need to be praying not just for our comfort, but also for our ministry:

- * That God will equip us and give us boldness
- * That God will guide us and give us success
- * That God will encourage us if we do feel discouraged

God invites us to bring our requests to him in powerful prayer.

Last Sunday, I knew that I had a very busy week coming up. I spent some time in prayer about it as I often do. But this time just to get clarity, I wrote down everything that I was actually asking God to do. I wrote sixteen things - everything from "keep me from worrying about things you don't want me to worry about" to "give me your message in the sermon to more specific requests." Do you know, as the week went on, every single one of those sixteen requests was answered by God. Every one. God invites us to come to him, and if we will do that praying for our ministry freely and with confidence, we will find that our ministry is backed by powerful prayer.

So in this passage, Paul gives us four encouraging truths about ministry:

1. Our ministry is a stewardship. It's something that God has been preparing us for and giving us the resources to do. We're not on our own!
2. Our ministry is a gift. It's not just something we give to God. It's something He gives to us. We have the chance to share Christ with those who need him.
3. Our ministry is a gear. We're not the whole machine. God has others working in people's lives to accomplish his purposes.
4. Our ministry is backed by powerful prayer. Prayer changes things.

Because of all that, look how Paul closes this passage in verse 13. this is what he writes from Jail in Rome:

I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

-- *Ephesians 3:13*

Paul is saying to the Ephesians “Don’t you be discouraged, because I’m not!” I’ve got a powerful God behind me. I live to accomplish his purposes. And until my task is done, I’m invincible. So I’m encouraged.