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Excellence In Ministry

By

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Excellence in ministry begins by serving others in the same way Christ served us. “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).” (Ephesians 2:4-5) Eternal Salvation is God’s Service to His children. He saved us ‘because’ of His Great Love and ‘by’ His Grace.

Unfortunately, many Christians believe that when they read the word ‘minister’ and ‘ministry’ in the New Testament it’s speaking to someone who is paid to serve God. However, Jesus made it clear that His command to minister is to all believers (e.g. Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8). Paul wrote that Jesus gave the Church apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers ‘for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ ... but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.’ (Ephesians 4:11, 15-16).

For the purpose of this article about ‘excellence in ministry,’ we will consider that Jesus has called all Christians to be ‘ministers.’

God teaches us that the core purpose of ‘ministry’ is Love. “And yet I show you a more excellent way. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging

cymbal.” (1 Corinthians 12:31 – 13:1) Love is the foundation for all true service to God and to others. It is the “more excellent way.”

However, other things can become a bigger priority in our hearts and minds. One is when ministry stops being a service and becomes a ‘position’ in the church. That’s when what we ‘do’ in ministry becomes more important than who we serve. Pride can destroy us and our ministry. Christ’s excellent example is of a Servant Who humbled Himself to death, even death on the Cross. Paul warned the Corinthians not to take pride in one leader over another. All Christians are precious in God’s sight. Each of us has a special place and purpose in God’s Plan. You are part of God’s Precious Plan to take His Grace to the world!

Jealousy led to the first murder. It can lead to the destruction of our lives, our families and our ministries. Paul warned the Corinthians about jealousy. He told them they were still carnal (worldly) – “for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?” (1 Corinthians 3:3) Paul also warned the Galatians about jealousy. He told them to love each other even as they loved themselves. “But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!” (Galatians 5:15) Any movement of God has the potential of self-destructing if the people within that movement become jealous of each other. Paul reminded the Galatians that the acts of the sinful nature included – “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like.” (Galatians 5:19-21)

Ministers should be an excellent example of love for the brethren. We should demonstrate the principle of putting others first. The Philippians had a problem with jealousy and envy among some of their people. Paul wrote them a letter to remind them of the importance of considering others first: “fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:2-4)

Public ministry places ministers in a position to become popular with people. Christians love to talk about their pastor, their Bible teacher, or the evangelist or missionary visiting their church. Even unsaved people take pleasure and pride in a popular minister in their neighborhood or community. Leaders lead and followers follow. Followers want to believe they are following the best leader. They take personal pride in who they follow. That leads to popularity. Ministers are written about and talked about. Many ministers write books, appear on television and radio and speak at civic organizations and social functions. Some have national prominence because of their activities or who they know.

What should public ministers do with that popularity? Understand it and be wise about it. Popularity can be a good thing as ministers promote the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It gives them a public stage to proclaim the Good News of God’s Love and Grace. Popularity can also be a bad thing if they believe what people say about them and let it go to their heads. I’m sure we

can all think of public ministers who had problems because of the way they handled their popularity.

Paul dealt with the popularity issue at Corinth.

“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe’s household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” 1 Corinthians 1:10-13

Christians in Corinth had their favorite preacher. I’m sure it was for different reasons; much like it is today. Some people like the way one minister looks better than another. Some like the way one talks better than another. Some like the way one minister acts better than another. Some like the way one teaches and preaches better than another. And so on. Everyone has a personal reason why they have a ‘favorite’ public minister.

Paul did not go into the reasons for why the Corinthians thought the way they did about leaders. That doesn’t even matter. What does matter is Unity in the Body of Christ. “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same

mind and in the same judgment.” (1 Corinthians 1:10) That’s what matters to God: Unity in His Body.

Paul quoted from Jeremiah 9:24 when he wrote the Corinthians: “He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.” We follow Christ. We glory in Him. Christ should have the glory with all Christians. Paul reminded the Corinthians that he came to them “I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 2:3-5) Paul did not want the Corinthians’ praise. He did not want to be popular with them. He wanted Christians to love and follow Christ. He wanted them to praise and glorify the Lord. He wanted them to depend on God’s power, not on the wisdom of men.

Popularity can lead to pride, which can lead to the downfall of even the best public ministers. We know the stories. We’ve seen the results of pride. I thank God for the reminders. It’s not a place any of us should want to go in our ministries.

Another subtle peril public ministers face is the belief they are always right. We are not always right. None of us are infallible. Only God is infallible. Public ministers make mistakes and the sooner Christians understand that the better. We all study the Bible with the desire to get it right, to understand it perfectly, to be correct in every observation and interpretation. I’ve ministered long enough to have made many mistakes in my ministry. I’m not the same person today I was 20 years ago or even ten

years ago. I am reminded often of my fallibility. That's not too hard to accept 'if' we minister to people with our eyes and their eyes wide open. We are imperfect. We work hard, we study hard, we pray hard and we try hard, but we are human. We make mistakes. We err in our judgments. We stumble and fall. Each of us, when we are alone facing God, know our limitations. God knows them. He knows them better than anyone. Does that make God love us less? Does that make God use us less? Does that make God turn from us to others who are perfect? Of course not. The only One Who is Perfect is Christ Jesus our Lord! We take comfort in the fact that God knows us and we don't have to play games with Him. We are honest with Him and He is honest with us. That's such a wonderful, freeing relationship.

We can have a similar relationship with our wives, our children, the Christians we lead and the communities we serve. We don't have to pretend anything. We can be honest with everyone because we are FREE in Christ. Jesus gave us eternal life and made us free. That freedom flows from the Truth of God. We experience freedom as we are honest with God, our families, our congregations and our communities. I love being free. I don't have to pretend to be something I'm not. I can be who and what I am in Christ.

Public ministers, Christian leaders, should demonstrate how a child of God should live. If they are dishonest about their relationship with God, so will the people who follow them. If anyone could have hidden behind his piety, it was Paul. Paul stood before the world as God's Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul spoke face to face with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit of God inspired

Paul to write the very Words of God. Paul came from a deeply religious background. He came from one of the best family backgrounds. He was a college graduate and had been a member of a very important religious group. He had been zealous for religious things. He had led the persecution against what he thought was a false religion. As for legalistic righteousness, he had been flawless.

“But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.”Philippians 3:7-12

Paul understood who he was. He knew Christ was everything. He knew what was important. He didn't think too highly of himself. He knew he was fallible, but he also knew the One Who had called him was infallible. The desire of his heart was to press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of him.

Christianity will see the power of Christ's resurrection reflected in the faces of public ministers who want only what God wants. Christians will burn with a passion for Truth as they follow public ministers who burn for the Truth; who are honest with themselves, with God, their families and their people.

I'll finish these thoughts about excellence in ministry with what Paul wrote Timothy in his first letter. Paul told Timothy to be a "good minister of Jesus Christ." (1 Timothy 4:6) The word "good" is kalos. It means 'to do well, to do rightly.' "... brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed." Paul wanted Timothy to do the right things in his ministry to God's people. God wants us to do the right things as we minister. What are they? Paul was specific and the details of his letter to Timothy guide us toward Excellence in our ministries.

1. "command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith."
2. "fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience."
3. "that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."
4. "men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing."

5. “women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.”
6. “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.”(Paul then lists what it takes to be a excellent minister)... above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect...He must not be a recent convert...He must also have a good reputation with outsiders...”
7. “have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.”
8. “Command and teach these things.”
9. “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.”
10. “... devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.”
11. “Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.”
12. “Watch your life and doctrine closely.”
13. “... keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism.”
14. “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.”

15. "... flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness."
16. "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life of which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses."
17. "... keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ."
18. "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God...Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share."
19. "... guard what has been entrusted to your care."

This final one should touch all of us deeply. Think about what God has entrusted to your care. He has given you His Children to love, teach, and protect. The Great Shepherd has given you the care of His sheep. Ministers have no greater calling in life than to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and care for those who believe it.

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