

Real Ministry

Mark 6:6-13 ⁶ And He marveled because of their unbelief. Then He went about the villages in a circuit, teaching. ⁷ And He called the twelve to Himself, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them power over unclean spirits. ⁸ He commanded them to take nothing for the journey except a staff -- no bag, no bread, no copper in their money belts -- ⁹ but to wear sandals, and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰ Also He said to them, "In whatever place you enter a house, stay there till you depart from that place. ¹¹ "And whoever will not receive you nor hear you, when you depart from there, shake off the dust under your feet as a testimony against them. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!" ¹² So they went out and preached that people should repent. ¹³ And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them.

Over a century ago, the Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon made this prediction: "A time will come when instead of shepherds feeding the sheep, the church will have clowns entertaining the goats. I believe that time has come. Everywhere you turn today, someone has come up with some new ministry or ministry technique. Some new gimmick is announced weekly as the way the church will look relevant. I was shocked to read the other day of a pole-dancing ministry, but then, in the circus of modern Christianity, I suppose nothing should shock us. Pastors' conferences have human cannonballs being shot across the auditoriums. Churches host cage-fights in the name of Jesus. Monster-trucks smash cars outside of churches as a ministry. One church in England performed a Lady Gaga song during the service. This is no longer the odd exception. Everyone believes that because they are doing something, anything, supposedly for God, that God stands behind it, approvingly nodding.

What is real ministry? In a world of fakes, posers, cranks, hypocrites, and con-artists, what is authentic ministry? This passage gives us the record of Christ's commission, given to twelve very ordinary men. The ministry they were given was extraordinary, but it was authentic. The works they were to do were not works that fishermen, tax-collectors and other ordinary men could do, but it was genuine ministry. The message they preached was not a message that ordinary, non-ordained Jews would preach, but it was the true message. And the results that came were not results that ordinary men could achieve:

¹³ *"And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them".*

.And yet in many ways, it was a taste of what was to come. It was their first taste of God's remarkable New Testament ministry.

Some of the details of what they were to do, or not do, belonged particularly to their mission, and their context. This passage takes place at a time in Jesus' ministry where the leaders had already turned against him, and the population of Israel was in some ways becoming indifferent. Jesus sent the twelve off to pepper the villages and towns of Israel with His message, with the news of His Messiahship, backed up by signs and miracles. Instead of Jesus Himself visiting ever hamlet and synagogue, six teams of two disciples would spread out and take His message, with His authority and His miracles.

Before they went out, Jesus gave them a set of instructions. These were very particular instructions for the very Jewish mission that these twelve sent-ones, apostles had. Jesus was not giving a set of requirements for all Christians of all time. Indeed, just before the Garden of Gethsemane, He told his disciples to do the opposite of some of what He commanded them here. But what does come out of this passage are some timeless principles that are for all Christians of all times.

If you are a Christian, then whether or not you realise it, you have been enlisted into an army. You

have been commissioned for a task. You have been tasked. Your task is not identical to the task of these apostles, though it is similar. Although you have not been given all the same powers and responsibilities of an apostle, you have been charged to carry on the mission that they began. How do you know if your ministry is real ministry? How do you avoid falling into the ditch that so many seem to be falling into in modern Christianity? As we study this, we will find four permanent principles for Christian ministry that apply to you. If you take these, and apply them, you too, will see how God delights to use ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

I. Christian Ministry is Teamwork

⁶ *And He marveled because of their unbelief. Then He went about the villages in a circuit, teaching.* ⁷ *And He called the twelve to Himself, and began to send them out two by two,*

As the Lord completed one of His preaching tours, He now called the twelve and sent them out in twos. In fact, in the lists of the apostles they are actually listed in twos: Peter and Andrew; James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew, James and Thaddeus, Simon and Judas.

It was a common Jewish practice for disciples of a rabbi to go in twos. And when we come to the book of Acts, we see again, Paul and Barnabas, and then Paul and Silas, Barnabas and John Mark,

Why make six teams of two? Why not send out twelve apostles, and double the reach? Solomon told us the answer back in Ecclesiastes 4.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 ⁹ *Two are better than one, Because they have a good reward for their labor.* ¹⁰ *For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, For he has no one to help him up.* ¹¹ *Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; But how can one be warm alone?* ¹² *Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*

When there are two, the one can encourage the other. The one who is strong on one day can encourage the one who is weak on that day. When one is cold, despondent, weak, the other is there. But woe to the worker who gets discouraged, disheartened, beaten down alone. Not only does he fall easier, but he has a harder time getting up.

Jesus knew that, and He made sure His apostles would have the comfort and the encouragement and the support of each other. In doing so, He set us a principle for our Christian work. We should not go it alone. Christian ministry is teamwork. Whether it is frontier mission; whether it is church-planting; whether it is preaching; whether it is mercy; whether it is evangelism, Christian ministry is teamwork.

Even when a Christian has to act on his own, he should still have a team standing behind him. A missionary might for some reasons be on his or her own, but such a one should never be without many others standing behind praying, encouraging, supporting, helping.

In our age, God has set up the ultimate team to support, help, encourage, challenge, and guide ministry – the local church. Whatever ministry God gives you; to whatever people you work with - the poor in an informal settlement; some particular people group; your own family – you need the prayer support, the counsel, the wisdom, the advice, the encouragement from other believers.

What do we say about ourselves when we do not tell the church of our ministry needs, of the people we are working with, the areas we will go into? Are we not saying that we are omni competent? Are we not saying that we do not need prayer? Are we not saying that we do not need mutual encouragement?

Proverbs 18:1 *A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; He rages against all wise judgment.*

Behind the man who isolates himself from teamwork, is a belief about himself. He believes he has in himself all the gifts, all the wisdom, all the discernment, all the joy, all the encouragement to be fully fruitful for God.

1 Corinthians 12:21 ²¹ *And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."*

Real Christian ministry understands that it is one function of a larger body.

II. Christian Ministry is Authorised by Christ.

"and gave them power over unclean spirits."

Jesus gave His disciples authority over the unclean spirits. He authorised them, giving them not only the right to cast out unclean spirits and to heal the sick, but the might to do it. He gives them permission, and He gives them power.

Why is that important? Well, consider for a moment what happened to a group of people who thought they could cast out unclean spirits apart from Christ's permission and power.

Acts 19:13-17 ¹³ *Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." ¹⁴ Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so. ¹⁵ And the evil spirit answered and said, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" ¹⁶ Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. ¹⁷ This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified.*

Paul was an appointed, authorised apostle. Paul cast out unclean spirits through the authority he had received from the Lord. When these unbelievers thought they could borrow the name of Jesus for their own purposes, these unclean spirits turned on them and badly injured them. Taking on these unclean spirits was no light thing. How important is that authority?

The mission Jesus gave His disciples was not something trivial, like running a few errands. He was sending them to confront the forces of darkness, to bring healing, and the message of salvation. This required more than some instructions and a warm "Good luck!" It required that Jesus stand behind them and appoint them and empower them.

In verse 11, He gave them the authority to signal that the place which rejected them had rejected God, and was liable for severe judgement.

¹¹ *"And whoever will not receive you nor hear you, when you depart from there, shake off the dust under your feet as a testimony against them. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!"*

This is not something that the apostles could just come up with, because they didn't happen to like one city. This was something they could do only if Christ had authorised them to do it.

True Christian ministry is commissioned by and commanded by Christ. How do we know what He has authorised? What He left in His Word for all Christians of all times becomes His commission to

us, with His authority standing behind it. We see that in the Great Commission.

Matthew 28:18-20 ¹⁸ *And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.*

But we're told by Christ Himself that there will come a day when many people will be shocked to find themselves classed with the unrighteous, and their plea will be, did we not do many things in your name? Did we not cast out demons, prophesy and do miracles in your name? Didn't we do ministry for you? And Jesus will turn to them and say, "Depart from me, I never knew you."

It doesn't matter if we do things in God's name, if He didn't authorise it. Israel worshipped Him on the old high places of the Canaanites, and it didn't please Him, because He didn't authorise it. David brought the Ark to Jerusalem on an ox-cart and it didn't please Him, because He didn't authorise it. Nadab and Abihu made an offering to Him, and it didn't please Him, because He didn't authorise it.

As Jesus said, "Not everyone who calls me, Lord Lord, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven – this one will enter the kingdom of heaven". Obedient Christians look for God's will in God's Word. What has God called for? What are His priorities in the Word? What are the ministry imperatives of Scripture? To do in His name what He has not called for is a waste of power, time, effort, and bad stewardship. It's also dangerous and can be self-deceiving, we may be walking into the jaws of the roaring lion, our adversary the devil.

Christian ministry takes a leaf out of Paul's book. When Paul was converted, the first thing he asked was, "Lord, what will you have me to do?"

III. Christian Ministry Lives by Faith

⁸ *He commanded them to take nothing for the journey except a staff -- no bag, no bread, no copper in their money belts -- ⁹ but to wear sandals, and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰ Also He said to them, "In whatever place you enter a house, stay there till you depart from that place.*

Our Lord gave His disciples some very specific commands that were unique to their situation. No bag to store provision or money, no extra money, no extra clothes. Once in a town, when they found a place of hospitality, they were to stay there, not shop around for something better.

What did all this amount to? The apostles were to go into each town with a focus on the ministry they had to do, depending entirely on God to meet their needs while they were there. They were to walk by faith, not trusting in their copper coins, the food they'd stored up in their bags, the extra clothes. When they arrived in a town, the people there would know by their appearance that they did not have any business except ministry, and were entirely trusting on God to meet their needs as they did so.

Jesus was preparing them for the life of faith they would need when they would all become full-time leaders of the church in years to come. He was teaching, by principle, that ministry is supplied by God. Ministry is not a commercial endeavour, that where there is a demand, you supply that demand and make a profit. That's fine in its place but ministry is always separate from that. The only way that the message remains full of integrity and pure from blame, is when it is not market-driven, or profit-driven.

Ministry must be lived on faith – trusting God to supply. That's not to say that we must pretend that

ministry doesn't require money. Just like the apostles needed a place to stay, and food to eat, so do all Christians. Paul spoke of that in 1 Corinthians 9.

1 Corinthians 9:13-14 Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat *of the things* of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of *the offerings* of the altar? ¹⁴ Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.

Paul himself chose not to use that right with the Corinthians. Paul was a tent-maker, and supported himself. Living by faith doesn't preclude working. Living by faith doesn't mean it is wrong for Christian ministry to make its needs known.

Different Christians have used different approaches. George Muller gave no disclosure of his needs, and made no appeal. Hudson Taylor gave a full disclosure of the needs but made no appeal. D.L. Moody made a full disclosure of the needs and made an appeal. Each of those men lived by faith.

Living by faith is simply the principle that provision for ministry will be supplied to God's people by God using His people. The principle is that as we sow God's word, God supplies the seed and the bread to the sower.

2 Corinthians 9:8 ⁸ *And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.*

Ministry does not exist for the sake of making money. It must have money, it must use money, but it is not about money. It does not pursue money. In our own country, have we not seen the name of Christ blasphemed by money-hungry false teachers? Do we not see the poor exploited by a false gospel, taught by evildoers whose god is their own appetites? They have their reward.

When ministry runs on faith, it keeps it healthy. It keeps its workers dependent on God. It keeps the people benefiting, thankful to God. When the right cycle is in place, it makes sure that the message is not adulterated and perverted to please the market. It makes sure the messenger never gets so self-sufficient that he becomes arrogant and independent. Kept in balance, the faith principle keeps ministry healthy.

IV. Christian Ministry is Deadly Serious

¹¹ *"And whoever will not receive you nor hear you, when you depart from there, shake off the dust under your feet as a testimony against them. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!"* ¹² *So they went out and preached that people should repent.*

Jesus here gives the apostles permission to do something that would have shocked the Jews. It was customary for Jews, when returning from Gentile territory, to shake off the dust of their feet. Even the dust of the land of the Gentiles was seen as defiling, so to shake it off was to distance themselves from the Gentiles, to make sure that no defiling thing that God might judge would come with them. In other words, let all the sin that would bring God's judgement down on the Gentile nations stay with the Gentiles, down to the dust on the shoes. Let it not come into Israel.

Here though, these apostles were going to towns in Israel, these were all Jews they were going to. So what would have been understood when they saw the apostles shake off their feet. It would be saying, you are as the heathen, you are as unbelieving Gentiles and you are ripe for God's judgement. What you have just rejected is the very Word of the God of Abraham.

In fact, according to Jesus, their guilt would be greater than Sodom and Gomorrah, because those cities did not know that those two men who had come to their city were angels, whereas these apostles would have already performed signs to show they were from God. Great and terrible judgement was coming to these towns that rejected the apostles.

The message they carried was a choice between life and death. Acceptance brought eternal life. Rejection brought certain judgement. Christian ministry carries that same life-and-death message. Whatever ministry we have, be it mercy, missions, preaching, visitation, giving – in the end, Christian ministry comes back to a life-and-death message: you are a sinner, the wages of sin is death, but there is life and salvation in Jesus Christ. Reject Him and you love death. Accept Him and you love life.

Paul told us that the same message is either a sweet scent or a stench.

2 Corinthians 2:15-16 ¹⁵ *For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.* ¹⁶ *To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?*

Do you know why so many in the world do not take Christians seriously? Because so many Christians try so hard to not be taken seriously. They want the world to think our religion is funny like Veggie Tales, or cute like cartoons, or fun, or entertaining like a good movie, or amusing like a great rock or pop or rap song, or “cool” like a sports star, anything but serious. So they make sure that they package their Christianity as a cartoon, or a rock song, or a movie, or as the lifestyle of the rich and famous, so that the world will think that Christianity is nice. That is what some of the unbelievers think but they don't think it's serious, because too many Christians are afraid of that word, and afraid of being thought of that way.

But when those apostles turned back to look at the Jews who had just rejected them, took off their sandals and shook off the dust, there was no smile on their faces. Tears maybe, pangs of grief at the thought of the fiery judgement to come, but no giggles, or snickering. They knew their message was life and death, and they treated it that way. So should we.

No, we don't need to be gloomy like the Pharisees. We don't need a dour, sombre, hopeless religion. Ours is the faith in which there is fullness of joy. But ours is a trembling joy. Ours is a gladness with gravity. Our ministry must be serious because our message is serious. If more Christians took the message seriously, perhaps more unbelievers would too.

Think about your ministry. Think about the broader ministry of your local church. These are the questions we need to ask: is this a team effort, or am I going solo? Is this commanded and commissioned by Christ, or did I come up with this on my own? Is this operating on the principle of faith, trusting God to meet the needs through His people? Is this ministry taking the message as seriously as it deserves?

The world doesn't need more of just any ministry. It needs more church-based, Christ-commanded, faith-dependent and serious-minded ministry.