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Chapter 1



MINISTERING TO AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

*Seeing ministry as service to God,
not a performance for man*

One of my former professors preached for me one Sunday morning. He was the man who formally taught me homiletics, and he continued to teach me long after I took his class. It was always a joy to have Prof, as I call him, come and minister the Word to our congregation.

As we chatted between services, he asked me about an upcoming speaking event announced in our weekly bulletin. I was scheduled to speak that week at a denominational meeting. It was a rare opportunity for a young pastor.

My professor and I joked about the challenges of preaching to preachers. Then the conversation turned. I admitted that, although I was grateful, honored, and excited about spending a week ministering to pastors and church leaders, I was very nervous. It is one thing to preach to an eager congregation. It is another thing to

preach to pastors who may be critiquing your presentation rather than listening to your message.

Prof assured me that all would go well, encouraging me to give God my best. Then he asked me how I prepare for such occasions. I told him about my strategy for overcoming my fears when I am preaching to pastors. I thought what I was about to share was very profound. It was not. (Warning: it is not wise to try to impress a former professor.)

I told him about the first time I preached before a lot of preachers. I was only seventeen, but the experience is still vivid in my mind. I had been invited to preach the closing night of a citywide revival meeting. It was youth night, but I still had no business being the main speaker. I was way out of my league. Most of the other scheduled speakers had been preaching longer than I had been alive. Before we drove to the event, my host gave me a piece of advice. “Don’t worry about the pastors in the room,” he counseled. “Just focus on the people in the pew as you preach.”

This advice proved beneficial. When we arrived for the service, the first room we entered was filled with preachers. I dutifully went around the room shaking the hands of these older, wiser men. Several pastors I greatly admired were present. As I greeted one and thanked him for coming to hear me preach, he casually responded, “We came to see you die tonight.” I was stunned. I was already nervous enough. This remark took it over the top. I felt like running away. Later, when I entered the worship service, there was the pastor who made the comment, seated on the platform near my seat. He not only came to see me die that night, but someone gave him a front-row seat to this epic preaching disaster.

Fortunately, I didn’t “die” that night. I followed my host’s advice. I preached with desperate dependence on the Lord’s help. I

preached the biblical message I had prepared for the occasion. And I preached to the congregation in front of me, rather than trying to impress the preachers around me. I experienced the Lord's assurance to Paul firsthand: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

After sharing this story with my preaching professor, I told him this would be the approach I would take at the upcoming convention meeting. I would preach, focusing on the congregation and ignoring the pastors in the room.

To me, my strategy seemed practical and profound. I was sure my Prof would agree. He didn't. "That's a good thought," he graciously replied. "But I think about these kinds of events somewhat differently. When I stand to preach, whatever the setting, I don't focus on the pastors or the congregation. I just preach to an audience of One."

It is the divine source that makes the difference.

This gracious rebuke tasted like bitter medicine. But it had a healing effect. And it is medicine I keep in my cabinet, as I am constantly in need of another dose. It's easy to forget who the target audience is when we minister. Indeed, we minister to the congregation. But our ministry to them must not be for or about them. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36). As we minister to others, we must remember that the purpose and passion of all that we say and do should be for God and His glory, not man and his felt needs. We are to live and serve for the glory of God, not to win the approval of man.

Warren Wiersbe wrote, "Ministry takes place when divine resources meet human needs through loving channels to the glory

of God.”¹ This is one of the best definitions of ministry I have ever read. This simple definition teaches us that to be a good and faithful minister you only need to remember that you are a “channel” of God’s resources to others. You are not the source, God is. We are only channels through which God works to meet human needs, and we should be “loving channels” who recognize what a privilege it is to be used by God. We should be clear and clean channels, acknowledging that God does not need us. Channels get clogged and cut off. It is the divine source that makes the difference, and the Lord alone deserves the glory.

The apostle Paul gives wise counsel for Christian ministry: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:10–11).

Christian ministers should use their gifts to serve one another, as stewards who must answer to the Lord for His grace toward us. As we serve, we must do so in the strength God supplies, no matter what we do. As we speak, we must speak according to the Word of God, no matter what we say. Why is it so important that we do the Lord’s work the Lord’s way? It is so that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. When we serve, we must do it in God’s strength, so that God will get the glory when others are helped. When we serve, we must do it according to God’s Word, so that God will get the glory when others are helped. It is all about Him. “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory,” sang the psalmist, “for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness” (Ps. 115:1).

We should be like this young pianist who had his first recital. Before he went on stage, his maestro gave him strict instructions. The old man would be sitting in the balcony alone as the young man played. And he was to keep playing until he saw his mentor stand up. That would be his indication that the maestro was pleased with the performance. The young man went on stage and played his first song. The audience clapped enthusiastically. He played another song. They applauded again. But he kept playing. Another song. Then another. He was not playing to win the applause of the crowd. He knew his teacher was sitting in the balcony. So he continued to play until his master stood and applauded. His teacher's approval was all that mattered.

Who are you trying to please?

Chapter 2



A STRATEGIC PART OF YOUR MINISTERIAL CALL

Why the details of your calling are not accidental

One of the many benefits I have enjoyed from pastoring alongside others is to see how God uniquely guides each of us to the ministry.

I remember when one of my associate pastors preached our early service some years ago. He preached on the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). It was a solid message. He had the congregation's full attention from his introduction. He began the sermon by focusing on the fact that this parable is less about a wayward son than it is a father who was there for his sons and who cared for their needs. It is, as Jesus introduces it, a story about a certain man who had two sons (Luke 15:11). The father's loving care and concern for his sons is the dominating theme of the parable.

As a sinner listening to the message, I was deeply moved. As a preacher listening to the message, I realized I would never have thought of getting into the text that way. The relationship between

the father and son is often assumed. We tend to focus on the choices, behavior, and downfall of the Prodigal Son, ignoring what the passage teaches about the godly character of the lovesick father. But for my associate, who grew up without a father, the first thing that jumped out at him from the text was the fact that this man had an active relationship with his sons.

Later that same week, the associate and I stood and chatted on the church porch. As we talked, a man neither of us recognized came walking down the street toward us. He told us that he attended the worship service that past Sunday and was stopping by to thank me for the message I had preached. Both surprised and grateful, I expressed my appreciation for his kind words. But as he kept talking, it became clear that he was not talking about my 11 a.m. sermon. He was talking about the associate's 8 a.m. sermon. My friend and I looked at one another knowingly and smiled without saying a word. When the man went on his way, we talked about how the Lord navigates the circumstances of our lives to prepare us to minister to others in ways we may never know. The absence of my friend's father was a sad reality. But overruling providence worked it out for good in his life, to the benefit of others and the glory of God.

I had another associate who began his ministry at middle age, having spent a good part of his adult life in the world. This brother had experienced much, both good and bad, but the Lord radically transformed his life. He was a godly man with a clear sense of calling. And he was willing to do whatever it took to be faithful and fruitful in the service of the Lord. But one day he expressed to me his concerns about his usefulness. He was surrounded by young men training for ministry, several of whom had started preaching at a very young age, including me. He felt that starting his work for the Lord so "late" handicapped him.

I assured him that was not the case. After all, the phrase “too late” is not in the Lord’s vocabulary. God’s timing is perfect. Over the years, this brother became a good friend and trusted advisor. He also became an influential leader in our congregation. Many members would seek him out for his wise and godly counsel. He had seen a lot of what the world had to offer, but transforming grace changed his perspective on the world. And he had spiritual wisdom that benefited many in our congregation. The unique perspective he had as a result of his life experiences enabled him to minister to others better than the rest of us could. We started calling him (tongue in cheek) the “senior pastor” of the church.

My relationships with these two colleagues made a great impression on me. It taught me that the details of your calling are purposeful, not accidental. God integrates the circumstances of our lives to prepare us for the work of the ministry. Your life experiences—the good, the bad, and the ugly—are a strategic part of your ministerial call. Romans 8:28 is true: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

My friend who was raised without a father read Scripture in a way that helped him relate to other men in our church who were also fatherless. And the way he led his sons was a strong example for other young fathers in the church, including me. His story was a part of his calling that distinctively marked him for service in our congregation. So it was with the brother who had come to God from a life in the world. He was able to warn others against the temptations of the world and offer the hope of restoration to the fallen. God used what they thought were only negatives to bless others.

My relationships with these men helped me to come to terms with my own spiritual journey. There was a time when I was embar-

rassed about having a “boring” testimony. I was raised in the church. My father was the pastor of our congregation. My mother was the minister of music. As a boy, I would either sit with my mom on the piano stool as she played or with the deacons on the front row as my father preached. I didn’t really have a “prodigal son” experience. But in the parable of the prodigal son, the son who stayed home was just as lost as the son who left. I had to learn that it takes amazing grace to protect you from some things, just as it takes amazing grace to deliver you from some things. My story was a part of God’s call, work, and mission for my life.

The same is true of you and your life experiences. Your life story is a strategic part of your ministerial call. Young or old. Rich or poor. Single or married. Successful or a failure. Raised in church or saved from the streets. Led by an obvious path to ministry or by a sudden U-turn. Formally educated in the world of academia or

self-educated in the trenches of ministry. The providence of God orchestrates life to equip you to fulfill your call. “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think,” exhorts the Apostle Paul, “but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Rom. 12:3). Don’t be discouraged. Don’t compare yourself to others. And don’t underestimate the grace, wisdom, and power of God at work in your life.

God can take the one who has been dropped into a pit and thrown into prison and raise him up to a palace to save many.

God can weave the story of your life into His great purpose to spread the gospel, edify the church, and advance the kingdom.

God can open the mouth of a reluctant stutterer and make him a great emancipator.

God can take an overlooked shepherd boy and make him a mighty king.

God can transform former fishermen and tax collectors into world changers.

God can use a church-persecuting Pharisee to be the Apostle to the Gentiles.

And God can weave the story of your life into His great purpose to spread the gospel, edify the church, and advance the kingdom. God uses weak people: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor. 4:7). Trust that the Lord knows your past, sees your situation, and governs your future. Your story does not trump God’s plans. The providence of God incorporates your story into God’s unfailing purpose for your good and His glory.

Chapter 3



ARE YOU A HEALTHY PASTOR?

*Why pastors must be healthy all around,
but especially spiritually*

Pastors are getting in shape. Social media is littered with pictures of them exercising and eating better to get their weight under control and live healthy lives. This is good. Paul testifies in 2 Corinthians 4:7, “But we have treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” God has placed a priceless treasure in clay pots like you and me. It is our responsibility to guard the vessel in order to protect the treasure.

In the crucible of my schedule, I often neglect to maintain a healthy diet and exercise regimen. But the social media posts of exercising pastors challenge me to “get it in,” as they say. Robert Murray M’Cheyne was a preacher, pastor, and poet who ministered at the St. Peter’s Church in Dundee, Scotland, until he died at age twenty-nine from typhus. The story goes that on his deathbed, M’Cheyne said, “God gave me a message and a horse. I have killed the horse.

Oh, what shall I do with the message?" I think of this story often these days. Of course, the message will continue to go forth without us. But we should be faithful stewards of our bodies so we can be faithful stewards of our opportunity to herald the Word of God.

The apostle Paul wrote, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). These words are often cited to impress upon us the priority of physical health. This may be an appropriate application of Paul's words. But it is not the primary point

or necessary implication of the passage. 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 exhorts us to be holy, not healthy.

For every pastor you hear about dying in the pulpit because of obesity, there are scores more stories of pastors who lose their pulpits because of the destructive forces of sex, money, and power.

Physical exercise has its place (unless done out of personal vanity), but God is more concerned with the spiritual health of the inner man than the physical health of the outer man. Paul counseled Timothy, "Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as

it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Tim. 4:7-8).

It is good to see pastors encourage one another to get in shape and celebrate healthy lifestyle choices. It motivates me to do better. It also encourages me see to spiritual leaders supporting one

another to be healthy mentally and emotionally. But it also makes me wish we did more to encourage one another to holiness of lifestyle, fidelity of doctrine, and unity of fellowship. Friends push me to take care of myself so I will have many years to preach the gospel. I appreciate the concern. But for every pastor you hear about dying in the pulpit because of obesity, there are scores more stories of pastors who lose their pulpits because of the destructive forces of sex, money, and power.

As a young pastor I heard it said that another pastor can be your best friend or your worst enemy. I thought that was a cynical statement. Unfortunately, I found it to be true over the years. Another pastor may be your best friend, standing with you in the fight for truth, holiness, and faithfulness. Or he may be your worst enemy, subtly encouraging your sin. May the Lord help us to be better friends to one another. Know that your best friends are the ones that make you better. “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17). Iron sharpens iron by grating against it. You do not grow by surrounding yourself with “yes men” who only cosign your foolishness. You need men in your life who love you enough to tell you the truth. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy” (Prov. 27:6). It is better to be hurt by a friend than kissed by an enemy!

Because there are stresses and struggles in ministry we cannot share with members of our churches, we need godly men, especially other pastors, with whom we can be honest, share our hurts, and pray. Of course, if you have a wife, she should be your primary prayer partner, point of accountability, and support system. This is not always easy. But you must do whatever it takes to make sure the work of the ministry does not drive a wedge between you. Make sure your wife is your best friend, yet be careful not to dump every-

thing on her. Your calling is not her calling, and she may not have as thick of skin for the ministry as you do. Avoid overwhelming her with behind-the-scenes details that may embitter her toward the church.

Develop strong relationships with wise and godly men who will stand with you through the changing seasons of life. This kind of fellowship, counsel, and accountability should transcend ministry issues. What's going on in your congregation is definitely important. But the things happening in your life—before God, in your devotional life, with your family—are far more important. We need people in our lives to ask us tough questions about our personal lives, like:

- Are you having a daily quiet time with the Lord?
- How is your prayer life?
- Are you being faithful to your wife?
- Are you making time for your children?
- Are you practicing sexual purity?
- Are you handling your finances properly?
- Do you need to seek reconciliation with anyone?
- Are you keeping any secrets that can ruin your family or ministry down the road?

Then, when you have answered these questions, your friends should ask one more: “Did you lie in any of your answers just now?” You need total accountability.

When pastors who have fallen into disqualifying sins are probed about why they went astray, the top answers are usually the same. Many pastors who fall into sin did not think it would ever happen to them. This is the seductive nature of temptation. Our

sinful hearts can so deceive us that we see many others fall and yet think we can take the same path without consequence. This is the height of folly. Paul warned the Corinthians, “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:12–13).

Fallen pastors often admit that, in addition to dangerously assuming they were immune to temptation, they did not have true friends with whom they talked candidly. Some pastors have no ministry friends whatsoever. Others have friends that they intentionally keep on a superficial level, so that no one has room to intrude into the details of their lives. This is not healthy. You need at least one Timothy in your life, a young man you can disciple and mentor. You need at least one Paul in your life, an older, wiser man who has been where you are going and can show you the way. But you also need Barnabas’s in your life, peers who will encourage you when you are right and confront you when you are wrong.

It is good to check in with other pastors about sermon preparation, ministry plans, and leadership challenges. It is even good to challenge one another about healthy lifestyle choices, like exercise and diet. But more important than all of these, we need to help one another be spiritually healthy pastors. It does not need to be broadcast on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. We need an underground movement to challenge one another to live our message so we do not become ministerial casualties that give the bride of Christ a black eye.

Paul wrote, “Practice these things, immerse yourself in them so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and

on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:15–16). As we strive to be good and godly ministers of Jesus Christ, our spiritual progress should be evident. Paul did not tell Timothy that the church would grow if he lived and served with godliness. But his spiritual progress would be obvious to the congregation. If nothing is growing in the church, it should at least be evident that the pastor-teacher is growing. Shepherds lead and feed the flock. But here is where the metaphor breaks down. Pastors are also to be an example to the flock. “The minister must experience what he would teach or he will find himself in the impossible position of trying to drive sheep,” wrote A. W. Tozer. “For this reason he should seek to cultivate his own heart before he attempts to preach to the hearts of others.”² Our members should be able to follow us as we follow Christ. May the Lord help us to be spiritually healthy pastors worth following!