

Sermon 10: 1 Corinthians 3:5-9: Understanding the Nature of Ministry

OUTLINE

Ministers are servants
Ministers are instruments
Ministers are united

INTRODUCTION

We are very familiar with the concept of a personality cult. In the modern age we have seen a wild proliferation of personality cults around tyrants. Through radio, and television, and now the internet, we see the propagation of a savior types like Hitler where Goebbels who was the Reich minister for Propaganda would herald him as a 'heroic genius.' He became a central point for the hopes of the German nation. Mao Zedong was likewise exalted, at one time there were more portraits of him than people in China, and every Chinese citizen had to have the 'little red book' a collection of his sayings. But hero worship, personality cults, idolizing another human being, raising someone up on a pedestal, is not only a modern phenomenon but a problem in all of human history. Ancient Egypt; Imperial Japan; the Aztecs; the imperial cult of Ancient Rome, we see it everywhere the sinful exaltation of a human being into the place of God. In our weakness it seems that we need someone that we can hang our hopes and dreams on; someone who we believe will make the world that we feel is broken better; we too easily lift someone up above ourselves and make them more than us to save us. I do wonder whether God has put this aspiration, this hunger in the human heart as a preparation for the place Christ now holds, He is the God-Man whom we worship and serve, who alone is able to save.

The exaltation of man need not be on a radical scale where we divinize someone, it can happen on a smaller scale. Whenever we forget how God works to bring about His will through human beings, we can too often give the glory to man and not to God and place our trust in man and not in God. It seems we have a weakness to not want to walk by faith but to constantly put our faith in something seen and concrete. Through love and attachment, through respect, through a sense of inferiority, out of gratitude, and many other reasons we can put away our discernment and put ourselves into the hands of men. This is how cults start, this is how false teachers take root among us, this is how the man-following that resulted in divisions in Corinth happened.

Last week Paul had to play parent and rebuke the Corinthians for their immature and worldly behavior, their party spirit resulting from man-following. In the portion before us Paul puts on his teacher hat to shed light on the nature of Christian ministry. We have three headings to guide us, ministers are servants, ministers are instruments, ministers are united.

Ministers are servants

V5, 'What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.' Paul in teacher modes asks some rhetorical questions, he does not ask, who they are, but what they are. Many fixate on popularity, looks, impact, status, age, Paul cuts through the usual shallow categories we evaluate people with to get at the heart of the spiritual truth they need so know about any minister in the church. What they are is 'servants'. The

word here is diakonos from which we get our word deacon. This is the word that we would use to describe a house servant, or a table waiter. If you think of a waiter for a moment you recognize that they did not prepare the meal they merely brought it to your table. You would send your compliments to the chef and not to them if you enjoyed your meal. At a feast you don't treat the servant who served you your meal like you would treat the honored guest at the party.

Paul is underlining an important aspect of servant leadership that we find all over the NT. Unlike the world where the role of teacher is one of the superior, Jesus modelled and taught servant leadership. Mark 9:35, 'And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Being an elder in a church is not an entitled position. When there was a disagreement among the disciples about who would be at Christ's right and left hand He made a clear response, Matt. 20:25-28, 'But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

In Paul's time there was a celebrity culture around teachers. We live in an age of toxic celebrity culture, we are obsessed with celebrities. Whole industries exist on marketing yourself as a brand on various social media platforms. The spectacle has replaced substance; emotional arguments have replaced logical ones; charisma is more important than character; and inevitably this will shape how people engage with the church. There will be demands with regards to the music, the presentation, how relevant we are, but there will also pressures in the area of leadership, where worldly ways of thinking are threatening to come in and shape the way ministry functions. Modern technology with the internet, streaming, the ability to listen to people from all over the world is both a blessing and a curse. We have the ability to propagate the truth, and see many blessed through faithful ministries, but what is lost is the place of the local church. There will be errors on the side of those in the ministry who are trying to build a brand, who are trying to sell themselves meeting the expectations to market themselves and be the face of the ministry. There is a theory around multi-campus ministry that says, 'You are the face of the ministry, people have come to hear you, put your face on a screen on multiple campuses, rather than wasting money building several church buildings and paying several pastors.' This mix of popularity and celebrity culture is easily swallowed as it agrees with the assumptions driving our culture today. On the side of the church we see errors as well. How many sit critically over the ministry of the pastor of their local church as they compare his preaching and church size to their favorite celebrity preacher. Ministers are not to be the center of a celebrity culture but seen merely as servants.

Ministers are instruments

V5b-6, 'Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.' Paul has answered the question what they are, they are not to be treated as celebrities, now Paul focuses on the fact that they are instruments in the Lord's hand. When a violin virtuoso picks up an old cheap violin and plays a beautiful piece of music we do not praise the violin but the player, Paul shows how the preacher is like that old violin. The source of our salvation is God not the minister. Paul stresses that it

was 'through' them that they believed. We learn here about how God uses human instruments to accomplish His work. There is a very real spiritual work going on and we have the privilege of being used by God, but the results are ultimately brought about by God not us. Paul spells out the way of salvation as he emphasizes that it was through them that they believed. Salvation is like the birth of a baby, the minister is not the mother but the midwife. We simply preach the word, and God by the power of His Spirit uses that word to cause a person to be born again, the Spirit opens blind eyes and moves stony hearts to see and love Christ; the Spirit shows the sinner that they cannot do anything to save themselves and that they must cling to Christ; the Spirit convinces us of our sinfulness and produces a hate for sin that results in repentance. The preacher merely preaches but God does the work of saving through His word. As James put it, 1:18, 'Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.'

Paul changes his metaphor from table-waiter to farmhand. Like on a farm where there will be different farm hands doing different tasks, Paul planted the seed and Apollos watered the seed. But that is nothing because ultimately it is God who brought about the miracle of salvation, the growth. In fact God even provided the seed itself, 2 Cor. 9:10, 'He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.' The Corinthians might have had a caricature for what good ministry looks like Paul shows that there is more than one job that has to happen. Some are used by God to sow the seed, to plant the word of God, and God saves them. Others are used by God to water and prune and tend to the newly sprouted plant. You might have your favorite pastor that God used in your life, there might be a key person that God used to share the gospel with you and who prayed for you. You might even have an overly inflated sense of loyalty because of your gratitude, but ultimately we must see past the human instrument to God who is working through them.

There are some key lessons that we need to apply from what might be familiar truths. Firstly, be deeply encouraged, God uses those who are outwardly weak and strong, those who are popular and those who are not. God's power is the power at work that brings about the results so do your job and trust in God. If you are a parent you can rest assured that once you have sown that word, and are regularly watering it with family devotions, and prayer and opportunistic conversations that God is the one who is working silently to make that word take root and bear fruit in their hearts.

Secondly, we see the lesson of God using our efforts. It is so important to emphasize that God works through us not apart from us. He saves through His word and Spirit working in the heart of a sinner, but we are the ones who declare that good news. We are the ones who ask and answer questions; whose testimony and good deeds God uses to back up our words; whose prayers God hears and answers as the means to bring about His eternal purposes. We so often think that if we believe God is sovereign that we do nothing, and that if our role is essential then it can't be God acting to bring about the results. No, God has appointed not only the ends but the means to the ends; our activity is ordained by God to be part of how He brings His will to pass.

Thirdly, I think there is a strong implication for more prayer. If God is the one who works through the preaching of God's word, then you should be praying for the preacher, for your pastor, for your elders, for the Sunday school teachers, for the bible study leaders. If Paul requests prayer for his preaching, we should pray for those who teach, Eph. 6:19-20, 'and also for me, that words may be given to

me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.' Praying and working are not mutually exclusive but mutually strengthening, as Jesus illustrates, Matt. 9:37-38, 'Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Fourthly, do not despise the day of small beginnings, if God does His work through more than one person, in more than one conversation, in more than one day, then be patient. Look for opportunities to plant a seed, to water an idea, to ask a question, you may not be able to preach the whole story line of the Bible in one go, but that is ok, God works through multiple encounters not necessarily all at once.

Fifthly, some people are overly loyal to a single preacher and don't like to hear from anyone else, but here we see that God does use others. Some leave their church when their pastor leaves because they grew too attached to their pastor. Some don't want a visit from an elder but only from the pastor. If I might be able to give a plug for an associate pastor, some might be against the idea, but here we are reminded that God works through multiple people.

Sixthly, God can bless you and grow you through the faithful but less spectacular ministry of the local church pastor. We can become addicted to the best preachers in the world and despise those the Lord has put among us. God can use men of lesser gifting because the increase is a spiritual effect given by God not a social effect manipulated by human means.

V7, 'So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.' Paul comes out with a big statement here, the preacher is nothing God is everything. That should not be misunderstood as a statement to disparage the preacher, this is not Paul agreeing with the loss of respect that young people show to men in office that we see happening in younger generations today. Paul is not saying that office does not matter, he is trying to correct a situation where God has been forgotten and men have been overly exalted. Paul says as much 1 Thess. 5:12-13a, 'We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.' This should not be a diminishing of the office of elder which Paul sought to establish in every church he planted. To the Philippians Paul says of Epaphroditus, 2:29-30, 'So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, ³⁰ for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.' The honor that we give to men who serve well in the ministry is not the honor that the world gives where we exaggerate their importance or goodness or necessity. We do not raise them on a pedestal we rejoice in the Christlikeness we see in them. The greater their self-abasement the more we love them, to turn them into some sort of celebrities is against the point.

Ministers are united

V8-9, 'He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.' Paul has stressed that ministers are God's servants; they are God's instruments and here he stresses how despite their distinct ministries they are united in the task of doing God's work, 'he who plants and he who waters are one.' There is no competition between those who preach the gospel. Our goal is the same. We all know that we cannot save and that God alone saves through faith in Christ. We know it is not about us but about the glory of God as the

Savior of sinners. We all know that the conversions that happen are not because we are more holy, more clever, more charismatic than anyone else. None of us is sufficient for this task, we are all dependent upon God, and His Spirit to move. We are all working towards one goal; we are all working by one power; we are all working as one body; we are all speaking of one Savior; we are all one in one body and salvation. We cannot look then at our work and say to ourselves or allow anyone to say about us, 'it is because of me that I am so successful.' If we are one as Paul says, why do we divide men against each other and create parties that exalt one man over another? Paul is aware of these underlying realities and so when he does see people preaching with wrong motives, knowing that God still saves people through sinful preachers he writes, Phil. 1:15-18, 'Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. ¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.'

Paul highlights that it is God who will reward the workers. Those who minister faithfully do not receive their commendation from those they preach to but ultimately have to give an account to God. It has been noted that Paul does not say that God will reward each one according to the success of his ministry, but that he will reward each one according to his labor.' This is of great encouragement to the preacher and to all of us. We have established that the results are from the Lord, He is the one who ultimately causing something to prosper and grow. We do not get to choose what the message is; we have no control over whether the message will actually bear fruit, but what we do have control over is how we serve the Lord. Will we be faithful in doing what He has commanded us to do; will we commit ourselves to speaking all the truth of God? Will we give ourselves to prayer? in the history of the church there have been those who have been faithful and seen little fruit, here Paul tells us that this may be discouraging now, but God will reward us according to our labor. Think on the ministry of Jonah. He was a man who was unfaithful, he ran away from God. He had to be physically arrested in his flight, he had to be humbled and forced to do God's will as he desperately cried out to God from the belly of the fish. He got to Nineveh and he grudgingly preached, he sat under a vine in a bad mood and complained when the vine died, being angry with God and not desiring the salvation of the sinners, hoping that they would not repent so that God would kill these enemies of Israel. But then with one day's work, the whole town repents and calamity is averted. Is the fruit equal to his holiness or efforts or desire to see sinners saved? No! What about Jeremiah? There was a man who was faithful who wept in sorrow and compassion for God's people, he was abused, his message was rejected as the people disobeyed the will of the Lord and yet he persevered in his ministry faithful to the last. He saw very little fruit, was this because he was so sinful? No! Here is the encouragement for us. God can use sinners to do His will. And we should not be discouraged when we don't see the fruit we long for. We must remember to be faithful even though we are not seeing the longed for results.

Paul ends this section with some short and pithy truths that imply all that we have said so far. V9, 'For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.' There are some helpful insights on both sides of Paul's statements. Firstly, see the one who brings God's word to you as God's fellow worker. Therefore stop considering him after the flesh, for better or for worse. Let this both lift his status in your eyes because God works through him, and lower his

status in your eyes because it is God not he who is the true source of salvation and growth. And remember that the church does not belong to you but to God; His will and rules apply not yours; His workers should be allowed to serve and implement His rules, you don't get the final say. And because you are God's field, God's building, those who work better make sure they do God's will and not impose their own will on God's people.