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Ministry Also Comes in Simply-Wrapped Packages

Candace Wood

Have you noticed that reality shows dominate TV viewing nowadays? The messages given are sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious, but generally revealing. For instance, consider the self-proclaimed, thus-far undiscovered talents who are confident they will surface as the next musical stars. Or, recall the average “already-feeling-defeated” guy trying to find his “soul mate” who is upstaged by more handsome and muscular competitors. How about the makeover of men and women with physical conditions that startle even experienced physicians who intend to bring miraculous good looks to them? If the individual’s self-esteem isn’t already at its lowest ebb, it probably will be after those encounters. To complete their new appearance, makeover candidates sport new hairstyles and the most trendy clothes, they are coached in etiquette and other social skills, and they are whipped into shape by their own personal body-building trainers. All of these attentions make them presentable and now able to function in today’s world. Message being promoted: “successful future insured.”

And that is not all. If the lessons learned from the “experts,” the superstars, and the people of influence are true, we also must collect more material possessions. We need more of the high-demand items that endorse our inclusion into a world of fast-paced, ever-changing technology. And should we venture to gift another with any of these items, it goes without saying that that gift must be presented in a unique and unusual way if the recipient is to feel especially valued. At the same time, the giver gets credit for the considerable time and creativity invested. Now if you, like I, tend to think of practical gifts which are useful for daily needs—such as a bottle of dishwashing liquid—then maybe you also have felt a twinge of guilt when you’ve handed over your simply wrapped, highly unimaginative gift, mentally hearing the gasps of disbelief uttered by members of the “Gift-Giving Is An Art Club.” It is enough to make us hide our faces in shame.

Silly though it may seem, enough worldly emphasis on physical attractiveness and material ways of reflecting oneself can surely cause even the most secure people to feel that their personal worth is under attack. We don’t wonder then why the Bible’s teachings include reminders for Christians to guard against the pressures encountered in daily living that make them desire to conform to the secular world. Making light of these pressures can be dangerous: the subtleties of sin attract us in seemingly harmless ways, and before we know it, we are prisoners of secular “truths.”

Temptations like these make me mindful of Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3.14-21. There he shows us how to maintain our equilibrium with the Lord, the source of our being, so that we are not confused by these “experts” of the world. In it I have found my sense of inadequacy lessened and my desire to serve refreshed. It reminds me to trust in the promises of the one who shows us true reality, God himself.

MINISTRY BEGINS WITH AND IS BECAUSE OF CHRIST

First and foremost, ministry must emanate from Christ. How many of us bemoan the repetition of routine tasks just for daily upkeep in our homes? Let’s face it, labors that are never finished and which must be constantly revisited seem designed simply to keep us busy. But our ministries face the same threat of bore-

dom if their value is based on lavish presentations, immediate responses, and the ability to discover unique methods for carrying out tasks that seem so mundane. The same sense of immobility we get from doing repetitive household tasks can affect our service to God if we let our personal desires to achieve become our incentive. When each project does not rise above the previous one, or there seems to be a lack of progress, or we feel we aren't moving at the speed that truly shows our passion, or our enthusiasm wanes because we don't receive recognition for our labors: these natural occurrences can cause us to question why we even try to minister. We humans get caught up in the minor details of life and then realize that we have missed out on the beautiful things our Father wants to share with us. Our mistake is in allowing the lesser things to take priority over the meaningful things. Without Christ as the force that motivates us, and the Spirit that empowers us, we cannot stand up and go again in what seem to be useless, unrewarding endeavors. Paul prays for us as Christ's family that we might be "strengthened in our inner being with power through his Spirit" and that Christ might dwell in our "hearts through faith."

MINISTRY IS FUNDED BY CHRIST

A second point I am learning from Paul's prayer is that my talents and abilities are not the important elements. Most licensed professions require some proof of continued learning on a regular basis to enable the license holder to continue to practice within that profession. Teaching is one of those professions. It is not unusual to find oneself scrambling to gather enough points, classes, and activities to legitimize one's license renewal when the period nears expiration. All of this serves a good and useful purpose. But in a sense, Paul lets us off the hook. The pressure to perform to the highest standards can imply that we serve on a probationary status with Christ, and if we fail to pass his most excellent measures of quality we are unacceptable to him. Paul causes me to pause and consider that nowhere does he indicate what my credentials should be; rather he tells me what Christ can accomplish, whose "power at work in us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine." The ministry is about Christ, not about me. What an eye-opener this has been for my sense of usefulness in ministry to God.

It is important for us to understand that Christ is described by dimensions that are not and cannot be measured. If Christ were a bank account upon which I could make withdrawals, I need never worry that I will be overdrawn on my account. Talk about feeling rich! Look what it reveals to us about Christ. He is big enough to handle any situation. He is powerful enough to carry out any task. He is great enough to overcome any hindrance or uncertainty.

God, "through the riches of his glory" strengthens our inner being "with power through his Spirit," grants that "Christ may dwell" in our hearts, and that we might be "rooted and grounded in love." Furthermore, Paul prays that we might "have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that [we] might be filled with all the fullness of God." God has made all of these things, together with "the power at work in us" available to us for his service. Think of what this says about us, that God would grant us these things. So now it is not I who must be big, or powerful, or great enough to attempt a new project, plan, or program. Yes, I intend to do the best work that my individual skills and talents can produce. But I am released and revitalized simply by realizing that Christ encompasses the giftedness, so I don't need to find it within myself. From a student standpoint, I equate it with being able to audit a class to enjoy participating in an educational setting but without experiencing the pressure of an exam at the conclusion. My point is not to suggest that we become lazy or lackadaisical, but rather to express the great pleasure of learning without pressure to perform. When the pressure is removed, our performance is oftentimes heightened, because we are able to relax and assimilate what has been learned. My own purpose is to use whatever skills I have for ministry, but what a relief it is to realize that I need not update a resume so that I can be approved for continued service to the Lord. Instead, God continually gives me apprenticeships for learning as I go.

MINISTRY IS ACCOMPLISHED THROUGH COMMITMENT AND PERSEVERANCE

Finally, I want to draw attention to the service Christ asks of us. Because ministries vary in their term of service (ranging from short-term service for a single occasion; sporadic assignments such as substitute teaching, nursery care, committee rotations, etc.; long-term obligations such as building upkeep, teaching a regular class, property maintenance, etc.), we may feel our particular work is not important if it is not done often; or conversely, that it is taken for granted when it is done regularly. Again, the danger lies in glancing away from our Lord and measuring our efforts according to the deeds of others. We are reminded in this passage that we are “filled with all the fullness of God” and it is “his power at work within us.”

In my own teaching ministry, I am discovering what perhaps others wiser than I have known all along. That is, opportunities are available, but sometimes we look over, around, or beyond them. I began my teaching career as a substitute for all grades as I tried to find a position in my own secondary area. I found ministry in Christian education (K-12) first as a teacher in grades six through twelve, and then scattered over the years as an elementary teacher. Even today I remember those young third graders with fondness, and I cannot be thankful enough for the lessons I learned in teaching content, in devising discipline methods for both my young students and myself, and in developing general relationship skills.

The lessons I learned then are just as valuable today, as my work has expanded to regular teaching in Sunday school; and, most recently, to include Bible college instruction. Add to those activities my teaching Bible through college extension courses in the local church. In that program, participants who otherwise would not have the chance to attend college now get the opportunity to do so. I appreciate and learn from the insightful questions of these new students. We have tremendous discussions as we examine themes and ideas from the Scriptures. The students show their appreciation for the opportunities for discipleship and ministry that they see opening in their lives.

So here stands one individual in awe of the loving God who puts such opportunities before us and empowers us for the task. But why should I be surprised? This scripture relates that very fact that God has done “abundantly far more” than I could have imagined. Yes, he has. And I am humbled by these experiences, because I can see some of the truths of Paul’s teaching mercifully being cast around me. I am thrilled to realize that it is not what I set out to accomplish, because I didn’t; but what the Lord can do, because he has. It is I who has been the recipient of a wonderful opportunity. I have been allowed to walk with Christ in his ministry, rather than his walking with me in mine. The emphasis is on Christ and what he is able to do: not on me and what I can or cannot accomplish. What a great treasure that is!

These stages from Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians have been instrumental in impacting my personal perception of ministry. Through them I not only rediscover the conviction of God’s work as a privilege for each of us, an honor he has granted to believers; but I am also reminded to lay aside false influences that attempt to dissuade me from stepping up to that commitment. In another of his letters Paul mentions the simplicity of the gospel of Christ, how its truths are stumbling blocks to some, foolishness to others (1 Cor 1.23). This teaching adds clarification to my illustration of the worldly gifts which we give to others. It seems, then, that the very simply wrapped package is not such a bad thing after all. In fact, its practicality seems even more worthy when it is contrasted with the glamour and glitz and expressions of delight at superficialities. The routine of daily obligations need not be a source of anxiety and frustration in our lives. Instead, it is the daily relationship with the many dimensions of Christ’s love that enables us to enjoy our individual ministries. He is the true reality.

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