

SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 13 DECEMBER 2015



This article is of relevance for all those who serve in the Lord's work, not just those in ordained ministry. I pray it will benefit you as it has me. – A M Clarke (Editor)

Discouragement in Ministry

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Anyone who has laboured in ministry for any period of time knows that a consistent companion accompanies ministry. This companion raises its head for moments, days, months, and even years. It can threaten our joy, steal our delight, and hinder our zeal. What is this all-too-familiar companion? Discouragement.

After conducting an informal survey with a few dozen pastors and lay-people over the past few months, the following are the top five reasons given for discouragement in ministry along with a few encouragements about how to battle through these struggles.

Hidden Nature of the Work: Ministry is an odd endeavour. We minister the Word, pray, counsel, disciple, evangelize, teach, and preach, but seldom do these efforts produce immediate and concrete “results” that prove our labour was beneficial and effectual. We labour in the spiritual realm. Evidence of our labours is often impossible to see, which can be discouraging.

Encouragement: We must remind ourselves that we can't rely on what we see or don't see as evidence of an hour, day, or even month well spent in ministry: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood” (Ephesians 6:12).

Though the invisible nature of ministry can be discouraging at times, it also serves as one of the most encouraging aspects of gospel ministry. We never quite know what the Lord is doing or has done. A conversation we thought meaningless leads an individual to conversion; a poor sermon shakes a sinner from their stupor; weeks of agonizing and apparently ineffective prayer leads to an answer months later. God calls us to spiritual work, and we don't always see what is happening. We must remember that our calling is simply to be faithful in what he has called us to and to use the means he has appointed. He does the rest.

Pride: Pride is an enemy of ministry and a harbinger of discouragement. We forget the call of our Lord, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:26). The problem most of us encounter in ministry is not that we are too God-centred, Christ-centred, or even man-centred, but that we are too “me-centred.” We fail to remember that ministry is not about me or even my local church, but about Him and His glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). Pride can lead us to be discouraged in ministry because we expected God to do more through us and even for us.

Encouragement: I once heard another pastor say something that resonated with my own experience in this realm. He said, “When I came to saving faith, I thought, “Lord, do great things through me for the sake of the Kingdom.” After graduating from seminary, I thought, “Lord do great things through me in my denomination.” After a few years in ministry, I thought, “Lord do great things through me in the local church.” Now, after a few more years of ministry, I think, “Lord, just help me to finish the race!” With the cross before our eyes, everything becomes clear. Humility is one of the great weapons we can employ against discouragement.

Inappropriate Expectations: Discouragement sets in because we expected something different or something more from our ministry labours. The slowness of growth in sanctification astounds us. Surely our church, children, or even own lives should have progressed further. We expected more fruit and longer lasting fruit. Demoralization sets in.

Encouragement: Sometimes the great work the Lord is about is not the work He is doing through us, but the work He is doing in us. Don't miss it! Unmet expectations themselves can be a sign of His working in us. It puts us in the posture of limping, humility, and dependence. This doesn't always feel like God's grace to us, but anything that leads us to our knees and looking up to Him is grace, indeed!

Betrayal: One of the hardest experiences in ministry is betrayal by those you have loved, ministered to, and sacrificed for. It can depress your soul, distance your heart, and destroy your resolve. May it never be!

Encouragement: Our Lord Jesus knew betrayal greater than any we shall experience. Matthew states gravely, "Then all the disciples left him and fled" (Matthew 26:56). Matthew goes on to detail Peter's famous denials. Paul writes about Demas, his friend and companion, betraying him for love of the world (2 Timothy 4:10). Betrayal will come in ministry. The world and sin exercise a strong pull, and some of the people we love the most will disappoint us the most. We should be prepared for it. However, we also want to continually be shocked by it. Otherwise, cynicism can set in and it has no place in our ministries. Be shocked, but not devastated. Let the wounds given to us by those within the church, lead us to fall more in love with the church rather than out of love with her.

Conflict: Maybe the greatest discouragement in ministry stems from the regular conflict which seems to attend it. We are sinners ministering to sinners; that is always ready ground for conflict. Some conflicts will be warranted and others will seem silly and petty, but they all take their toll.

Encouragement: Like betrayal, conflict will come. As Peter said, "do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). If you are embroiled in conflict, you are in good company and the Lord's grace and peace is sufficient. Fight the temptation to become jaded. Embrace conflicts as an opportunity to show forth the love and grace of your Saviour and the gospel we proclaim. Quickly dismiss the petty conflicts and refuse them the authority to keep

you up at night. When false things are said about you, remind yourself that the humble man need not take any offense at the accusations or ridicule of others, because he knows he is far worse. And if false things have been said, you rest because the Lord is your judge and He knows the truth (1 Corinthians 4:4).

Other Encouragements

Finally, I would like to offer a few other encouragements to fight discouragement in ministry. **(1)** Read biographies of the saints who have come before us. There is great encouragement in learning about their lives, ministries, and perseverance in the Lord. **(2)** Read letters and diaries from previous ages. As an example, I am currently reading the letters of George Whitefield and John Newton. Their heartfelt struggles and prayers have lifted my soul and directed my eyes heavenward in profound ways. **(3)** Find friends like Philemon, who "refresh" your soul (Philippians 1:7) and surround yourself with them. **(4)** Attend to the means of grace. Don't be so busy about ministry that you miss being ministered to. Sit under the Word preached, come to the Lord's Table, steal away moments to pray. **(5)** Continually look for glimmers of encouragement in your ministry. I often remind myself and others that we miss what the Lord is doing because too often we are looking for something grand and magnificent, when he has provided a steady stream of encouragement with little glimmers of His working effectually through and in us. It robs our soul of delight and joy to miss these glimmers of encouragement.

Ministry is hard work, but it is glorious work. Something every Christian is given the responsibility and privilege of enjoying. Let's not allow discouragement to steal the delight from us.



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Edited from:

blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindyoung/2015/12/01/discouragement-in-ministry

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