

PAUL'S VIEW OF MINISTRY IN 1ST CORINTHIANS

All believers are called to exercise the work of the ministry within the church, such that the church is built up and the world is reached in truth and love (Ephesians 4:11-16). Thankfully, Paul gives us a Master Class on ministry in 1 Corinthians. As he defends himself and explains his actions, we get to learn how we should approach ministry. Here are a few takeaways for all of us.

Ministry is centered on the gospel (1:17, 2:1-2). Paul was a powerful figure in the early church. In fact, we could easily say that he is the most influential figure in history—both spiritually or otherwise—since Jesus. What made him so? Well it wasn't a complex message or a flashy ministry model—he simply preached the gospel and the Holy Spirit moved in hearts. He says in 1:17 that his purpose wasn't to baptize but to preach the gospel. And that he didn't try to preach with eloquent words or human wisdom—but he simply communicated the truths of the gospel. Then in 2:1-2, he reaffirms this point by saying that he didn't come with lofty words or wisdom, but only the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified. We must learn this important lesson from Paul: ministry isn't meant to be flashy (where we attract people with the newest fad or fancy), and it must be based on Jesus and the cross (otherwise it is futile). When we are tempted to center on ministry on anything else, let us remember the example of Paul.

Ministry isn't about us (3:1-9). Paul notices the divisions that are happening in the Corinthians church (3:3), and how these divisions are motivated by how the people are picking their favorite spiritual leader (3:4). *I follow Apollos—he's a better preacher than Paul. Are you kidding me? I like Paul—his content is way better than Apollos.* How will Paul solve this issue? It really comes down to a theology of ministry and growth. He asks in verse 5, **“What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”** Paul answers their disunity with an important point: *it's not about us as we minister.* The question is not *did you believe under Paul or Apollos' influence?* It doesn't ultimately matter—for God is the one who gives the growth. This attitude is crucial as we minister to others. It prevents pride (I am nothing, ultimately God is the one who made this happen) and despair (I am not ultimately responsible, I can't bring change, only God can bring growth). Remember as we evangelize, teach, care, comfort, and show Christ to others—it is not about us, and we are dependent on God giving the growth. The more we understand this, the more we prevent disunity creeping in that stems from jealousy.

Ministry is servanthood and stewardship; not mastering and kingship (4:1). Paul frames 4:1 as a foundational statement of how the Corinthians should regard his ministry. **“This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”** I remember being struck by this verse in college and thinking that—in whatever capacity I would serve God someday—this is the attitude I wanted to have. It is so different than our attitude as humans. We so easily default to pride, selfishness, looking to the approval of others—even when we are seeking to serve God. This then is a helpful correction: we are servants and stewards. Servants instead of masters: we are not waiting to be served, we don’t serve others ultimately that they would do something for us. We serve after the example of our Savior—in ways that are costly and sacrificial. Stewards instead of kings. Stewards understand that they are merely caretakers, overseers, for one who is more important than them. We aren’t the master, the king—ruling over all—we are the steward taking care of stuff for the one who is. One of the crummiest characters in *The Lord of the Rings* is this guy named Denethor. He is the Steward of Gondor—meaning, he is supposed to take care of this group while they are king-less. The only problem is that instead of acting like a steward, he thinks he is a king—which makes him a prideful and selfish man when a humble steward was needed. As we are doing ministry on behalf of the Lord: be a servant and a steward; not a master or a king. We don’t serve on behalf of God in order to be satisfied or feel good about ourselves; we do so that other people would come to know God.

Ministry is sacrifice for others (9:1-27). This chapter contains many things that Paul is seeking to do in order to win the affections of the Corinthians—and many of them center around the idea of sacrifice. In 9:12 Paul speaks of working diligently to make sure he doesn’t put any obstacles in the way of the gospel. This takes hard work. It means we may have to cool down our thoughts on politics, soften an opinion on a lesser theological matter, or give up a freedom that may make another brother or sister stumble. That may not be fun—but we are willing to sacrifice these things so we don’t put an obstacle in front of the gospel. In 9:16 Paul describes the necessity of preaching the gospel. It may not always be easy or convenient, but we have a divine calling and the need of our neighbors that is calling us to share the gospel. In 9:19-23 Paul speaks of his willingness to become all things to all people in order to reach them for Christ. It may be difficult to relate to that odd family member or over-the-top co-worker, but it is our calling as believers. Finally, in 9:27, Paul speaks of his hard work to maintain holiness that he would not be disqualified from ministry. Personal holiness is not easy, but it is essential for those who are calling others out of darkness and into light. Ministry is sacrifice. Bringing the gospel to those who don’t know Christ is sacrifice. No one knew this better than Paul—the one who suffered immensely in order to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. Let us be so thankful to be an instrument, a servant and steward of God, that we relish the opportunity to minister to others on behalf of him.