

Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 16:5-12 - Effective Work - Part 2

Alright, we are continuing from last week when we began looking at effective ministry. Here Paul explains that he's not coming to Corinth because a wide door of effective ministry has been opened to him in Ephesus.

This is a good thing because it means that God is doing amazing things in the city of Ephesus even though there are potential opportunities to minister in Corinth.

We started this section last week and I mentioned then that this passage is very instructive for us because every believer should want to be effective in ministry. We all want to take the command to make disciples seriously, like Paul does here. And balancing the ministry were already part of with the opportunity for other ministry can often be difficult.

Last week I gave you an introduction and some background - let me very briefly recap that here and then we'll get into the passage:

I mentioned that there are some bad ways to evaluate effective ministry: basing it purely on numbers, popularity, how new it is or how easy it is, how it makes you feel. Those are all really bad ways to evaluate whether something is effective.

On the contrary, while Paul was in Ephesus what he **was** seeing was the work of the Holy Spirit play out. It was clear that there was an effective ministry going on. New believers were taking ownership of ministry, there was radical repentance and the Word of God was being faithfully proclaimed.

And so he decided to stay in Ephesus rather than come to Corinth which was a huge decision. We're almost done with this letter and it's clear that Corinth was a train wreck in many ways. There was almost no theological issue they hadn't corrupted, and there was rampant sin and disunity in the church. You'd think that the apostle who started this church would drop everything to come and sort things out, but he realizes there's something much more important. And he can't go.

And I think that gets to us directly because I think we've all felt the tension of doing something that's good for the Kingdom and not being able to do more.

How many of you feel like life is too busy? How many feel like you'd like to do more for Jesus but simply can't break away from what you're doing?

That's okay. That's what our passage gets to this morning. There's going to be a million opportunities for you to live life for the glory of God and you can only choose a few.

And I would encourage you to only choose a few. And do those few very, very well. Most people are too busy to actually be very effective of the Kingdom. They take on too much and burn out too fast and don't do any of them well.

Invest deeply in a few good things for the Kingdom.

This doesn't mean you can't have fun or leisure or hobbies. It means that you only have 24 hours in the day, 365 days in the year, and you only have 70-80 years.

In that time there's going to be a lot of options, a lot of opportunities that you can't take. What do you do in those situations?

I think Paul gives us some encouragement in how we can deal with situations where we are already dedicated to effective ministries.

The first encouragement, is not specific to this passage, but specific to the whole book.

1. Write a letter.

I mean, let's not miss the obvious here: had Paul himself gone to Corinth instead of writing this letter we would not have had some of the most theologically profound and richly practical teachings in the New Testament.

There's a meme I see all the time floating around the internet that says "this meeting should have just been an email." And it's true! A lot of times we feel like **we** need to be there, **we** need to be involved, **we** need to solve the problem. We need to be the superhero of the situation. And some of it is just pride.

Here, Paul decided to write a letter and in so doing God used it, through the Spirit's inspiration, to bless the church for millennia to come.

Imagine if we didn't have this letter: We would know very little about the reason God chooses the poor and weak and nobodies for salvation rather than the rich and wise. We wouldn't have a great pattern for church discipline. We wouldn't have some of the richest passages concerning marriage and singleness or remarriage. We would miss out on teachings about head coverings and the Lord's Supper and spiritual gifts. We wouldn't understand the full implications of the resurrection of Jesus and how it ties to our resurrection when he comes.

Many of those teachings, or the specifics, are exclusive to this book. We can thank God that he kept Paul in Ephesus so that we have the amazing truths we now have.

In the same way, it's okay if you can't get to something. It's okay if you're not involved in some ministry because you're tied up with other ministries that are more effective.

God doesn't need you in order to build his Kingdom. He doesn't need me in order to build his Kingdom. Jesus said that God can raise up children of Abraham - people of the covenant - from stones if he wants to.

He graciously allows us to take part in ministry. And sometimes he graciously keeps us from taking part in ministry so that others might benefit.

Maybe you can't do something for ministry. Write a letter of encouragement. Send an email. Make a phone call. Send someone else to go in your place. Or...and I know it sounds crazy...actually write them a handwritten note with paper and envelopes and stamps and everything.

Just a little personal anecdote, most of you know I attend the Spurgeon Fellowship - the pastor's conference held down at Indian Trail Church. Well, I'm also part of the leadership team. So I reached out to Desiring God to see if John Piper would come and preach to 150 pastors. DG said John was unavailable - but we could have our pick of almost any of his books and they would send enough for all the pastors at the conference for free!

That's pretty amazing, and generous! There's more ways to bless people than simply showing up.

2. Just because there is an opportunity for ministry, doesn't mean God wants you to take it right now. Read 16:5-6

Listen, many times what God has you doing right now is exactly what he wants you to do. And maybe he wants you to do it for a long time.

I think there's this idea that people glom onto that just because an opportunity comes along it must be God telling them they should do it. I have to tell you: that's about the worst theology you can have.

I've had Christians tell me that it's okay to date and marry an unbeliever because "God brought them along in their life." Well, maybe God brought them into your life in a generic sovereignty sense, but not to marry. I mean, do you respond to every spam email from a prince in Nigeria just because God brought it into your inbox? No, you delete that junk.

There's a lot of things that pop up in our lives that are not there for us to partake in. And that's true with ministry opportunities as well. We're going along, living our lives working for the Kingdom and something comes up.

Should we take it? Maybe, but not always. There may come a time later down the road where God wants you to take up that pursuit. But it might be that he has you exactly where he wants you right now.

Here's an interesting tidbit: this plan that Paul was making to go to Corinth? It never happened. He didn't go. The sinfulness of the Corinthians got so out of control he wrote a letter to them between **1 Corinthians** and **2 Corinthians** scolding them. Most scholars call that the severe letter. We don't have a copy of the severe letter, but he absolutely blasted them and rather than going to Corinth.

He talks about that in **2 Cor 2**. It's okay that things don't work out. That severe letter led the Corinthians to repent. And their repentance led to what we call **2 Corinthians**.

What's the take-away? Just because God has put an opportunity in your path now doesn't mean you need to take it. And just because it's a good idea now doesn't mean it will be later. It's okay to keep doing what you're doing.

I think sometimes we get a habit of thinking "If only I had done this..." then things would have worked out differently. And we live in regret or guilt or frustration because we didn't do something. In those times, there's really only 2 options: 1- You did mess up and made a mistake or deliberately chose something bad. Confess, repent, and move on. Or 2- you made the best decision you could with the information you had. That's all God asks of us: do the best we can with the information we have.

Not every opportunity is to be taken just because it presents itself.

3) Sometimes the only way to handle a situation is in depth. Read 5-7

Paul says he doesn't want to just stop in for a quick visit. Some of the things going on in Corinth were serious. That's why he's writing and sending Timothy. He does need to do something. He can't just sit idly by and do nothing. But when he does come he wants to spend a lot of time. There's a lot to do.

Can I just say, a lot of people have this idea that a ministry they are engaged in is a quick in-and-out thing. They can drop some truth, do a work project, encourage people quickly and they're gone and there's this eternal lasting impact. Well, maybe sometimes .

Sometimes that's helpful, sometimes that's the nature of a ministry. But very rarely is it the nature of ministry. People just don't usually change or grow overnight. Or if they do, it's temporary and there are usually setbacks along the way.

Difficult doctrines take a long time to explain, a long time to digest. When I became a Calvinist, it was a year or two in the making. When I changed my eschatology it was 4-5 years. It took a year and a half to believe that head coverings weren't just for the first century. I've fine tuned my view of the Lord's Supper and spiritual gifts over 10 years.

Listen, it's dangerous to just jump on board a doctrinal bandwagon because it sounds good or seems convincing at first.

Listen carefully: we are not called to test everything by Scripture. We are called to test everything by **all of Scripture**. Does the whole of the Word of God support this theology? That takes time.

Sometimes we've got one passage - like baptism for the dead. Sometimes we've got hundreds or thousands of passages. And because there are hundreds or thousands of passages there are hundreds or thousands of questions. We have to be faithful answering them.

That's what Paul wanted - to spend substantial time with them. Although we know Paul doesn't actually go to Corinth, here he doesn't want to just fly through and drop some quick knowledge. He wants to spend time with them.

In the same way, usually, any affect we're going to have for the Kingdom is years worth of investment. Years worth of investment in our church, family, friends, neighbors, disciples. There's just no shortcut. There's no fast track.

4) Sometimes we can delegate the situation. Notice how Paul seeks to include other people in the ministry.

Read 10-12

So Paul urged Apollos to head to Corinth. Now if you remember, Apollos is something of a hero in the Corinthian church. **Look back at 1 Cor. 1:10-17. Read**

They're fighting over their favorite preachers and Apollos is one of them. **Look at 3:5-9. Read**

We quote this often to understand that people have different roles in ministry. Paul planted - he started the church and got it going. Apollos watered, he nourished the church from infancy to youth. But in all of that, it was God who made it grow.

Look down at 4:1-7. Read

Stewards, no matter where they serve in ministry, are called to be faithful. We apply that to all believers, and leaders as well. We go beyond what is written in the Scriptures when we favor one servant more than another because if someone is being faithful that's what matters.

And think about this: there was division in the church over who was the best: Cephas or Paul or Apollos. But Paul's response was not: Well, we're not sending Apollos because that would cause more division.

No, his response is to rebuke the Corinthians and encourage Apollos to go back. God had used him before and God could use him again. Paul isn't afraid of causing more division by sending Apollos. He knows Apollos could do a great job.

Let me just branch off here for a minute. Delegating ministry is hard. It's hard because we think we know the best way to do something. It's hard because people mess up. It's hard because, frankly, we have pride about our own abilities and don't think about how God could use other people.

Permit me to do a little tangent here because it relates to delegating.

Turn to Acts 15. From a biblical perspective, delegation assumes some amount of trust, some amount of discipleship. We encourage others to take part in ministry, but always with an eye to training them and offering input and oversight. But sometimes it goes incredibly poorly.

This is sort of an infamous incident in church history. If you remember, Paul and Barnabas had returned from their first missionary journey. It was their smallest journey, sort of a 1,000 mile triangle route through modern day Greece and Turkey. And they decide to go back to all the churches and visit them. **Read 15:36-41**

Missionary journeys have almost always been expensive, especially in the ancient world. It was long and slow travel. You were subject to the elements. If you went by ship, certain times of the year were off limits. Certain areas were miles and miles from any town and you could get murdered or robbed. To undertake something like this was huge. And to abandon the ministry was unthinkable.

Paul actually uses a very strong word in the Greek - ἀφίστημι - which is used elsewhere for apostasy. Now, this isn't theological apostasy - John Mark didn't become a heretic. But he abandoned the mission. And he probably cost them a lot of money and difficulty in doing so. They would have had to finance his way back.

Now, a lot of people make this argument between Paul and Barnabas out to be way more than it probably was. They still worked together in the ministry. But this was a huge separation. This was a breach in discipleship.

Listen, if you're raising up a disciple or delegating things to a disciple, know that they will fail. They will do things wrong. Just like we've failed and just like we've done things wrong. Did our failings bring the Kingdom to a screeching halt? Of course not.

Now, look at this, because this is important. **Read 16:1-5**

They split over John Mark and Paul and Silas end up with Timothy on their journey. Just when we think the gospel mission is compromised, God raises up someone else to keep it going forward.

I'll tell you, there have been many times in life and ministry where I've thought, how are we going to fill this gap? How is this ministry going to go on? How are we going to make it. And God's up in heaven thinking, "Please, you really think this is going to bring the Kingdom to a halt?" In reality many times what we need to do is wait on GOD.

Now, we read this part in chapter 16 because you can imagine that Timothy would have known about John Mark from Paul and Silas. He would have heard it. But **look at 2 Tim 4:9-13**

This is at the very end of Paul's life. Maybe months or weeks before he's executed in Rome. This is decades after he and Barnabas split. But look now. **Read 9-13**

Who is Paul writing to? Timothy, the one who was there right after the break up. Who is very useful to him in his last days? Mark. Same guy.

Mark failed. He went home. But his failing wasn't everything. When we're done with 1 Corinthians we'll spend over a year unpacking the glory of Jesus Christ in a gospel written by...John Mark.

Listen, are you never excited about putting people in charge or delegating ministry because people might mess it up? Let me just tell you - promise you - ministry will get messed up. There will be issues and difficulties and struggle and misfits. Know that God uses misfits for his glory. Young kids who abandon the mission often go on to much greater service to the Lord.

Are you the young punk who messed something up? Did you sin or blow it when someone gave you an opportunity? God isn't done with you. Not by a long shot.

How many times did Peter deny Christ outright? 3 times. And Jesus, in grace, restored in him through repentance.

Part of gospel ministry is understanding that our goal is not just to spread the gospel externally to people who have never heard. But it's also to remember the gospel internally with those who are taking part in ministry because we all need it.

Yes we want to tell others about the love and grace of Jesus, but we also extend the love and grace of Jesus to those who are already saved even as we serve together.

I'm guessing Mark never forgot his leaving. I think Peter never forgot his denials. I'm guessing Paul never forgot standing by while Stephen was put to death. Barnabas never forgot abandoning the Gentiles. John never forgot worshipping angels.

But more importantly they never forgot the grace of God in Christ. Who used them for his glory.

Look back at 1 Cor. 16. Read 10-12

So when Timothy comes, serve him. He's young, but put him at ease. Apollos will come when we can. The ministry is delegated and God will sort it out.

One more observation here.

5) We need to understand that all ministry is based on the Lord's will. **Read 7**

If the Lord permits. We are called to be faithful. We are called to be pure and holy and minister the Word of God in purity. But at the end of the day, whatever "success" we have in ministry is up to the Lord.

1 Cor. 4: We plant, we water, God gives growth.

Psa. 127:1 Unless the Lord builds the house, the laborers labor in what? Vain.

Prov. 19:21: Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.

James 4:15: we ought to say, "if the Lord will, we will live and do this or that."

If you want to stay sane in ministry, you need to have a healthy grasp of the sovereignty of God in all things.

As a parent, ultimately it's the Holy Spirit who will work the gospel in the hearts of your children to save them. You can preach. You can pray. You can discuss. But it's God who saves works.

As a camp worker, ultimately it's the Holy Spirit who works in the hearts and lives of campers. You can preach. You can pray. You can discuss. But it's ultimately God who saves.

All ministry activity, every plan and goal needs to be couched in the sovereignty of God: if the Lord wills, if the Lord permits, if the Lord grants.

And if he does, to God be the glory. And if does not? To God be the glory. Forever and ever. Amen.

Pray