

Ministry and Results

by Coty Pinckney 10/31/08

How does God use you? What is your personal ministry? Are you excited because you have seen results? Are you discouraged from lack of results?

Consider these words from the Apostle Paul:

Romans 12:3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Whatever our personal ministry might be, if we see good results, we are tempted to pat ourselves on the back. We're tempted to think, "I'm really something, given what I've done!" But Paul says that when we think clearly, when we think soberly, we see that our faith is all that matters – our faith in the One with all power, with all authority, who has given us whatever gifts and skills we have, and who Himself accomplishes whatever He wishes through us.

Paul elaborates on this idea in 1 Corinthians, when writing to those who were lining up behind one or another leader:

1 Corinthians 3:5-7 5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

Those God chooses to work through for His good purposes are His servants. The work they accomplish is God's work, which He assigns. Paul goes so far as to say that the workers are *nothing*. The work is all of God, from beginning to end.

Consider the image of a farmer's field. One plants the seeds. Another waters. Yet the one who plants and the one who waters are both nothing – God is the one who causes the crops to grow. He controls the sun. He controls the rain. He controls the frost. He controls the pests.

Should the farmer then talk like this? "Oh well, God is in control. So I don't need to water. I don't need to weed. I'll just throw some seeds out in the field and pray that they produce a great harvest!"

No. As faithful stewards/gardeners we should plant and water wisely – because God enables us to understand what it means to be faithful. He gives us the power to be faithful. We are responsible for the way we plant and water, and should take the task seriously.

But once we have served faithfully, we should not think that the plants will necessarily thrive. God often delights to produce great crops when His farmers work wisely and diligently. But sometimes He works in other ways. Sometimes He delights to give increase when the one who waters is erratic or floods the field; sometimes He delights to give a bumper crop when the one who plants buries the seeds too deep or spaces them incorrectly. However large or small the harvest, and however wise or unwise the farming methods, the farmer in the end must thank God for his crops.

We see this pictured in the Israelite offering of firstfruits to the Lord. The farmer with the largest harvest might well have done the best job of preparing his land, planting his seed, and irrigating his ground. Another farmer, equally diligent, might have had most of his fields trampled by animals. Two other farmers might have both been negligent, yet one had a large harvest and one received almost nothing. Nevertheless, *all* are to offer firstfruits to the Lord. God gives the increase in every circumstance. *All* Israelite farmers – regardless of farming ability and effort – must make an offering to God from their harvest, acknowledging that every head of grain in every field was a gift from Him.

Just so with our areas of personal ministry. God gives us understanding of how we are to be faithful. He gives us health and energy so that we can be faithful. We must learn from errors, and work hard to be His faithful servants.

Yet any time I think, "Because of my talents and abilities, this ministry should grow, this service should succeed, this effort will produce results," I am thinking of myself more highly than I ought rather than thinking with sober judgment. And any time I think, "I've blown it! This ministry has no chance!" I am, once again, thinking more highly of myself than I ought. I am considering myself – rather than God – as the key actor, as the most important determinant of the outcome.

Remember that our God uses both faithful and unfaithful servants: He took an unfaithful, angry prophet and used him to bring an entire city to repentance (Jonah); and He used the extraordinary sacrifices of the faithful Apostle Paul to start churches throughout the Roman Empire.

And remember that God at other times for His wise purposes chooses *not* to provide ministry "success" to faithful servants: Jeremiah proclaims God's truths faithfully for decades, and no one ever seems to listen.

So how is God working through you these days? With obvious, encouraging results? With no results that you can discern?

Do not pat yourself on the back. And do not be discouraged. The one who plants and the one who waters are nothing.

Instead, praise Him for whatever harvest you have. Thank Him for the privilege of serving Him. Trust that God is at work even when you don't see results. Learn how to serve Him more faithfully. And continue in faithful service, for the glory of His Name.