

The Ministry—A Good Work

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Under a favorable combination of circumstances this issue of the *Quarterly* could come to the desk of our pastor readers during a time when they may be afflicted with the Lenten doldrums, swamped and weary. But Lent has no monopoly upon the ability to produce the doldrums. Any unusually busy period has the potential for leading us to focus upon the earthen vessels that we are with the result that we are tempted to pity ourselves and to look upon our ministry as a burden rather than a privilege. There is a potent antidote for these blahs in two words which the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3:1 applies to the ministry: *kalon ergon*, a good work (KJV), a noble task (NIV).

Paul was no starry-eyed dreamer. He knew the realities of the situation better than we. If we were to try to elicit sympathy from him by telling him how swamped with work we are, we can imagine him saying, “Well, what did you expect? That’s par for the course. Read my record in my second letter to the Corinthians (6:4–10; 11:23–33). And don’t try to complain to the Master. He worked so hard for you that he experienced labor pains all the way to the depths of his soul (Is 53:11).” In 2 Corinthians 6:5 Paul uses a stronger word than work, “labors” (KJV), “hard work” (NIV). That’s the kind of work which strains every muscle and forces beads of perspiration from the pores. The ministry involves that kind of labor. There is yet another term in Colossians 2:1: *agon*. For this KJV uses “great conflict,” NIV, “strenuous exertion.” If you recognize that this word is the root in our word “agony,” you will realize that Paul makes the point that the ministry also involves intense emotional effort. The ministry does involve work, at some times more work than at others.

Paul knew that. But that is only one side of it. The other is what he was led to emphasize when he called it a *good* work. The ministry is a good work because of what it does for people. We may as well start at the top. In 2 Timothy 2:10 he wrote: “I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory” (NIV). Interpreters lean toward one or the other interpretation of this passage. Some think that Paul refused to cave in under the burden of persecution lest those who were already among the elect, who already were believers, might be offended and say, “If Paul gave up, who am I to keep on holding to my faith?” Others think that Paul was thinking of the elect who were still out there and had not yet come to faith because they had not as yet heard the gospel. If Paul would have quit his ministry because of the hardships and suffering which it entailed, who would have got the word out to them? For their sake he was determined to keep on no matter what it cost him until he had reached them with the good news. These views need not be mutually exclusive. There are other examples of sanctified ambiguity in Paul’s writings. At any rate, this is what the ministry does for people: it helps them to obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. When Judgment Day comes and our standard of values finally becomes completely accurate, we shall realize that there is nothing more important that could have been done for people. That’s why the ministry is a good work.

This heads the list. What we mention next may be pretty far to the other end of the spectrum. But when Paul experienced it, I’m sure that he was led to realize anew that the ministry is a good work. Up in Macedonia the economic plight of the Christians was pitiful. There seems to be some evidence that there was a severe famine in those parts at that time. Furthermore, persecution was an ever-present reality. At any rate, compared with Christians in Galatia and Achaia, they were the poorest of the poor. It was at this time that a fund-raising campaign was under way to raise funds for the relief of another group of very poor Christians, those in Jerusalem. Paul was diligently promoting this campaign. But he had resolved not to approach the poor Macedonians. But they got wind of what was going on. Then this happened: “Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints” (2 Cor 8:2–4 NIV). Now the Old Adam is selfish, materialistic, covetous. To be engaged in doing something which makes people willing to part with some of their possessions to help others and to consider it a privilege to do so stamps such work as a good work. It still does that for

people today in varying degrees. The ministry still produces cheerful givers. The more we consider how completely contrary to nature such an attitude is, the more shall we realize that the ministry is a good work because of what it does for people.

Another facet of the ministry which reveals what a good work it is, is the ministry of comfort. Paul knew it. Notice his enthusiasm as he writes: "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (2 Cor 1:4, 5). Think of what this ministry does for people. Here lies a Christian who has learned that he has a terminal illness and is bewildered, tempted to question the Lord's ways or to murmur. But the minister as a messenger of "the God of all comfort" brings the sufferer what he needs to hear to be comforted. He points to what God did to his Son on the cross as proof of God's love also for this sufferer (Ro 5:8). The minister reminds the sufferer of the wisdom and might of the Lord which he in love will use in the best interests of his own. The patient is relieved, submissive, comforted. That's what the ministry does for people and that's what makes it a good work.

We could multiply examples to substantiate this evaluation. But now let's look at the other side of the coin: the ministry is a good work because of what it does for the minister. It's only stating the obvious when we observe that a goodly portion of a minister's time and effort are taken up by preaching. There are times when the ascending order of work, labor, agony can be applied to the process of producing a sermon. But all of that is forgotten when it results in an edifying sermon. But there's one more step. When a man has been permitted to prepare this kind of sermon, he would burst if he could not preach it. There he stands in the pulpit sharing with the Lord's people the truths which the Lord permitted him to mine out of his Word. Something happens. The preacher senses that the people are hanging on his words and that he himself is reaching out to them to share a treasure with them. This is rapport. Now we know that preachers are not the only ones who are permitted to have rapport with their hearers. William Jennings Bryan had it. Hitler had it. But here it is connected with the process of sharing the enlightening, the comforting, the saving truth. Those precious moments when the minister experiences rapport with his people make the ministry a good work, good for him.

We have mentioned that the ministry of comfort is a good work because it is good for the people who are served. But it is also often good for the minister. It can be good even in a selfish sort of way. In practicing the ministry of comfort the minister is brought face to face with the various kinds of misery to which human beings living in this sin-ruined world are exposed. When he sees what another has to endure, the minister is moved to thank God that he has been spared from that particular affliction. When he sees a cripple, he is led to thank God that he himself is able to walk about freely. But he may be led to experience a higher form of exhilaration. There may be some sufferer who is so miserable that he asks that no one should be permitted to visit him. But he makes one exception. He does want the minister to be allowed to enter his room. When the minister does come, the sufferer smiles in spite of his pain. He is hungry for the comfort of God's Word which the minister has come to bring. What a privilege it is for the minister to know that he has something to offer which the sufferer needs, that he is important to the sufferer. The minister may not be hailed by the public press. His ministrations may go unnoticed by the community. But he is important to the sufferer, important because as the voice of the God of all comfort he brings from that God a message which supplies strength for patience and for triumph over the sting of death. This makes the a good work, good for him.

There is a form of the ministry which can put lead into a man's shoes: the ministry to the impenitent. In it the minister must operate with the law, and the law works wrath. He may be rebuffed at first. He may continue to be rebuffed. But not always. Nathan may have dragged his feet when he was sent to David. But how his heart must have leaped for joy when his sharp preaching of the law led David to confess, "I have sinned against the Lord," and Nathan could tell him, "The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die" (2 Sm 12:13). Our Lord Jesus said: "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (Lk 15:10). A minister will experience many joys in his life. But when he is used by the Lord to bring a sinner to repentance, his joy will exceed the ordinary level of joy. It is an angelic joy. Because the ministry brings opportunities to experience that kind of joy, it is a good work, good for the minister.

A facet of the ministry which we do not want to overlook is that the Lord provides opportunities to bring the gospel to those who do not know it. This may happen in various one-on-one situations. It happens also in adult information classes. By the grace of God there are those whom God brings to faith through our message. The fact that we have been used to make them heirs of salvation surely makes the ministry a good work, good for those to whom we have ministered. But it is good also because of the rare kind of joy which fills our own hearts in such situations. The Apostle gives vent to this kind of joy when he writes: "We give thanks to God always for you all ... for our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance ... and ye became followers of us, and of the Lord" (1 Th 1:2, 5, 6). Notice how Paul's heart welled up with joyful praise. We shall feel a like joy if someone whom we have been permitted to lead to his Savior tells us, "I feel so much better now." That, too, makes the ministry a good work, good for the minister.

So when we come into one of those periods when the only word which comes to our minds when we think of the ministry is *work*, let's not forget that while the Lord does admit that it involves work, he modifies the word *work* with the word *good*. And then let us pause in our busy-ness to meditate upon the reasons why the ministry is a work that is good. Let us recall that it is good for people, but good also for us. The work will still be there, but now we shall approach it, not as a drudgery, but as a high privilege as we say with Paul: "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry" (1 Tm 1:12).