

1 Vision Area

1 Ministry

The Big Picture

Today we will look at “doing ministry” with hopes that how Paul describes what ministry is becomes more of a reality (literally!) for our groups than what we often times define as ministry.

Biblical Text

Ephesians 4.1-16 (NIV)

Preparing for the Lesson

This lesson will be a two-parter. One will be discussion of the principles we see in Ephesians 6, the other will be a living out of those principles. What will be challenging for us is that I am going to have a difficult time “filling in the blanks” for your second part. Your task in part one is to determine the application of part two. Given the unique make-up of your group, only your group can do that.

First, a little philosophical background related to the nature of “ministry.” I once was a full-time minister at a church that had a campaign to get every member to become a “minister.” We listed every ministry on the books, printed them up in a slick booklet, and then asked member to check off the ministries they would be interested in doing. Of course, all of the ministries we listed had a ministry leader, an overseeing elder, and some formal way of functioning. Surprisingly, there were over 100 possible ministry opportunities.

What we did not count on—or consider—is the amount of ministry that was happening that never fell in a budget code or had any formal structure. We never thought about Mrs. Smith who sent cards to those who were sick ... and did so every single week and used her money to purchase the stamps to send them. We never thought about Travis who hired a bunch of people to work part-time labor, most of whom were “down and out.” When you worked for Travis, you often got a paycheck, a meal, a prayer, and if you needed it, a warm bed for the night. Oh, and Travis never mentioned it to those of us in the “official” ministry structure. He just did it because, well, that’s what disciples did. The list could go on and on.

This is not to say those 100+ ministries on that booklet were not important—they were and very needed—but if we are going to be honest with what ministry really is, then we must not limit ourselves to those ministries that are an “official” part of church. We must first begin with why we minister in the first place and then work from there.

When you look at Ephesians 4, you discover that Paul acknowledges that different people are gifted in different ways. (We have already looked at this in Lesson 3.) Paul lists some pretty impressive ministers (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers), but I think the point is not to say “Here are some important people you should strive to be like.” Instead, I think Paul uses the roles people in that day would be familiar with to make a bigger point, which is: everyone has been given a gift (same word the NIV uses for grace here in verse 7) in order to “equip people to build up and mature the body of Christ” (paraphrase of v. 12). In other words, your responsibility in ministry is not so much to complete a job or task (reading scripture on Sunday morning or teaching a Bible class, for instance), but to help people mature and to look like Jesus.

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Preparing for the Lesson

There are a couple of implications I want to keep in mind as we prepare for this lesson. First, the goal is not to get people more active in church. Back when we did our brochure to sign up for ministries, we openly talked about having 100% of the congregation involved in some ministry, which we defined as signing up for *something*. Unfortunately, we never discussed whether people were actually building one another up, just that they were busy doing ministry. What a shame!

The second implication here is that we need to be careful in how we view ministering to those who are on the fringes or margins of society. I want to say this carefully, so please follow this entire argument. When we plan some activity to do ministry in the community, sometimes we are quick to decide to give food to the hungry or help someone fix up a dilapidated house. We spend an afternoon or evening doing so, pat ourselves on the back for doing ministry, and then head back to our comfortable quarters until the next time we decide to do some ministry project. To use Paul's line of thinking, how does this build up the body or mature people in Christ? Please understand that I believe strongly that we need to help those on the margins. (I sent you a link encouraging you to sign a petition to allow Tent City to remain where it is, remember?) I just think that if we are simply throwing money or a little of our time at an issue, are we really following the instructions Paul gives us here for doing ministry? Would it not be a better act of ministry to spend time repairing a house AND visiting with the resident today, next week, and in the months to come, building a relationship that allows us to speak a word for Jesus into their lives?

So, here's our challenge for this week. Discuss the questions provided for Ephesians 6. Then, in your discussion, come up with a plan to "equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (v. 12). Again, I do not know what that will be for your group, but I have great faith that *you* will be able to determine what it is. Then, go do that ministry. I am reserving next week for you to do so, but if you need to do it some other time, feel free to use next week as a time to just gather and celebrate or continue preparations for ministry together as a group.

Possible Lesson Outline

Begin your discussion time with Question #1.

After discussing this question, read Ephesians 4.1-16.

Continue with the remainder of the discussion questions.

Make a specific plan to minister together as a group using Paul's instruction in Ephesians 6 as a guide for your planning.

Do the plan.

For the Kids

I have a challenge for those of you who have children in your groups. Let your children be very involved with the planning of ways to be engaged in ministry. The challenge? You have to follow through with what they suggest. Sometimes children see opportunities for ministry much better than we do. And sometimes the simple faith of a child is really a stretch for us old folks! So, if you are not willing to follow through with the idea your children have as an opportunity for ministry, then perhaps you need not ask them.

You also have a great opportunity to share with your children the idea of both equipping people and building up the body. My guess is your children are somewhat programmed—truthfully they simply reflect our practices—to see ministry as something you do for others, i.e. helping the margins of society type things. Let me encourage you to steer your discussion toward "How does that help people come to know Jesus better?" or "How does that help people serve Jesus better?" I think you will be surprised how well they grasp this idea and move your group toward viable ways to go about doing this that they can be a part of.

For Next Week

Do any preparations that you need to in order to be able to begin ministering together as a group.

Discussion Questions

1. To begin our discussion, let's do a word association. I will say a word and you give me the first word or phrase you think of. The word is: ministry. Why did you think of the word/phrase you did?
2. If you were going to summarize what Paul says in verses 2-6 in a phrase or sentence, what would you say?
3. The word used in verse 7 for grace can also be translated "gift." What do you think of when you read/hear that God has given each of us a gift or gifts? Do you think you understand the ways God has gifted you? Why or why not?
4. Paul lists off some pretty "important" people in verse 11, although he is probably using roles that the people he is writing would have seen as a part of "church," rather than advocating these roles as the most important. More likely the case, Paul is saying people have been gifted by God in a lot of different roles. If Paul were writing Ephesians 4.11 today, what sort of things do you think he would include here? Where do you fit in this list?
5. Paul says "each one of us" (v. 7) has been gifted to do two things: to equip people for works of service and because of this equipping, to build up the body of Christ. How does this idea of ministry compare to the idea you associated with your word or phrase we started with? How does this idea of ministry compare to making disciples?
6. What specific ways do you see the body of Christ being built up today?
7. What is a specific way we as a group can be doing ministry together in the same way that Paul describes in Ephesians 4?

What's Next

I hope that what is next for your group is actually executing your plan of ministry together as a group.