

Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 16:5-12 - Effective Ministry - Part 1

Before we get going this morning, let me just say that there is so much to say about this passage. I started to write my introduction and realized it could be its own sermon. Then I started in on the general context and realized it could be its own sermon. So we'll see how far we get this morning.

This morning we come to a passage that I think is going to be very helpful to you to understand the nature of ministry in a very general sense. Every Christian is called to be involved in some kind of ministry. Or multiple ministries.

Literally the word ministry means to give out.

When Paul says pastors equip the saints for the work of the ministry in **Eph. 4:12** he says they are equipping saints for service.

Paul says that believers have the ministry of reconciliation - literally the service of reconciliation. So when we say someone has a ministry, we're saying they are serving in some way, hopefully they are serving with how the Spirit has gifted them.

This could be official ministries, like music or preaching or leading a Bible study or cleaning the church.

This could be off-radar ministries like taking care of your next door neighbor, praying for the families in our church, helping the poor, witnessing to your coworkers, raising kids, so on.

All believers are called to build up the body of Christ with the spiritual gifts God has given us, and all believers are called to make disciples of Jesus through telling others about the gospel while exercising the gifts he has given us.

But here's the rub: at some point in your life you're going to start wondering whether what you are doing is worth it. Is your particular ministry helpful to the kingdom? Is it actually worth the effort you're making? Or could you be used by God elsewhere?

Everyone who takes the command to go make disciples seriously struggles with this tension.

Stay at home moms wonder if staying at home with their kids really is doing anything for the Kingdom.

People involved in music ministry really wonder if standing up front singing every week or playing an instrument really does anything for Christ.

Are people really being sanctified by your efforts to lead a Bible study or family devotions? Is trying to love that impossible neighbor really going to lead to their salvation?

I think what most believers want is to know that what we're doing has some kind of impact for the Kingdom. Or as Paul says in **Vs. 9**: that our work for the Kingdom is effective. **Read**

Paul says he's staying in Ephesus rather than coming to Corinth because there is an open door of effective ministry. Isn't that what we all want all the time? To know that what we're spending time on is effective for the Kingdom?

In **Vs. 9** he uses that word effective and it's the Greek adverb *energys* - we derive our word energy from it. It means powerful, active.

It describes the Word of God in **Heb. 4:12** - It's living and active - *energys* - sharper than any two-edged sword. It's powerful and effective.

In **Philemon 1:6** Paul says he hopes that the sharing of their faith may become efficient for the full knowledge of every good thing...for the sake of Christ.

Philemon is sharing the gospel, proclaiming the faith, and Paul hopes at some point that message takes hold in the lives of the people he's preaching to through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Here, Paul says a wide door of effective ministry has been opened.

I think as Christians that's what we all want. We want a ministry in life - whether big or small or whatever we have - that is effective.

We want to believe that our contribution matters whether big or small.

I'm almost done with the book *Unbroken* - the biography of Louis Zamapriani who was a world famous track star in the 1940s and was later captured in the Pacific Ocean by the Japanese in WWII. In WWII different people played different roles for the sake of winning the war.

Some rationed gas, other donated metal. Ladies went to work in factories. Men signed up for the war. Everyone understood that their contribution - big or small - mattered. And because it mattered people had hope and encouragement to keep going.

Even Zamparini - who became a POW - also contributed. The POWs in the prison camps would do everything they could to contribute. Sometimes they could earn extra food by sewing ammo pouches. So they'd sew the pouches in such a way that they'd break once used on the field. If they were forced to make ammunition, they'd load it incorrectly. They'd steal things from the guards that would frustrate them. It was small, but it was something that helped them understand they were part of the bigger cause of defeating the enemy.

I think we all want that in regard to the Kingdom: we want to pitch in, we want to be effective. We want to see Christ honored. And oftentimes what we do on a day to day basis doesn't seem to accomplish that.

And because we're not content, we often look to worldly ways to measure effectiveness. Before we unpack this passage, though, let me give you 5 bad ways to measure whether or not something is effective.

1) Just looking at numbers:

We are obsessed with numbers. We like numbers because they are the easiest thing to track.

It's hard to measure how sanctified someone has become under your authority. There's no measurement guideline for that. But it's easy to tell people GPAs, or starting salaries, or church size or how much money was raised for a cause. Christians along with the world have glommed on to numbers for a long, long time.

In the early days of America, George Whitfield and Charles Wesley attracted tens of thousands of people to hear the gospel. There were lots of numbers. Up and coming preachers were lauded based on their numbers. Some were faithful, some were not.

More recently Billy Graham was famous for drawing tens of thousands of people. I know who came to faith in Jesus through those crusades, but let me tell you Billy Graham compromised the gospel message almost from the beginning of his ministry.

He included Catholics and liberals who denied that Jesus even rose from the dead. He championed easy believism - your life doesn't need to change, just slip up your hand, come forward, and God will take you just as you are and leave you just the way you came. Sadly, at the end of his life he basically became a universalist, telling Robert Schuler - a false prosperity preacher himself - that the gate of heaven is wide, and even people who have never heard the gospel or the name of Jesus get in.

This is the man who attracted tens of thousands of people. Who was called the pastor to the presidents. Clearly numbers aren't everything.

Rick Warren, founder of Saddleback Church and author of *The Purpose Driven Church*, recently boasted in front of thousands of people at the Southern Baptist Convention: he preached 120 Harvest Crusades before he was 20, baptized 56,631 new believers (36/week), sent 20,869 members to 197 nations, 78,157 signed membership covenant, trained 1.1 million pastors (4/hour/30 years).

Rick Warren is the king of pragmatism. But not the king of faithfulness.

And can I be straight with something in our own backyard? Numbers often seem to matter at camp. There are some people who believe that how many campers come or how many decisions are made or hands go up is the way to track the effectiveness of camp ministry.

Do not believe that for one second. Those numbers don't matter. If their names aren't written in the Book of Life, it doesn't matter if their names are written down in a book at camp.

Jesus had 12 disciples, really 11. One was a son of perdition, and only 3 who were really tight. At the end of his life everyone had abandoned him except the few gals around his cross as he died.

Easy to be consumed by numbers: church size, ministry size, cash flow, how many downloads, how many likes, how big your family is, what the reach of your church is.

There's only one number we should be consumed with. It's the number 1. There 1 God is who is watching what we do and how we do it. And he only has one measure: faithfulness.

1 Cor. 4:2: It is required of stewards that we are faithful.

Whoever is faithful with little, will be faithful with what? Be faithful with what you have - whether large or small. And God will reward you accordingly.

2) Popularity:

This can be related to numbers, but not always. This is more how much the world likes us. Or our perceived idea of the reception of the gospel. "Man, people are really responding to the message." Responding how?

Like the middle 2 in the parable of the 4 Soils in Luke 8? Those middle soils - the rocky and weedy - did respond and it seemed to be favorable. But it wasn't salvation.

Jesus was popular when he fed people, not so much when he preached. In John 6 he went from a crowd of 20,000 to 12 in a matter of hours because people didn't like the truth.

When Paul was stranded on the island of Malta in **Acts 28:1-8** people thought he was a murderer - cursed by the gods - because a poisonous snake bit him. Ten minutes later when he didn't die they thought he **was a** god! People are fickle and popularity comes and goes.

We see this same thing today with the evangelical complex. Pastors who are Amazon best sellers; there's a whole industry under the banner of Christianity that seeks to make things popular because so and so wrote it. And you need a forward by that popular guy so your book sells. The church eats this up too. One of the reasons for Mark Driscoll's downfall years ago was that his own ministry bought a bunch of his marriage books to make the sales numbers look big so it'd get on the NYT best seller list.

The Church is easily influenced by the desire for popularity and does the same thing the world does: book promos, endorsements, giveaways, NYT best selling this or that.

Popularity, like numbers, is a dangerous game. Even in our own world. Do we love people's applause, people's affection and praises? Popularity is a dangerous drug.

Numbers/Popularity

3) New and Improved!

We like things that are new and improved. In fact, we really have a disdain for anything that is old. We don't usually like old creeds and confessions, old pastors, old theologians.

We like new and exciting and shiny! And if it worked for this person it must work for us. We don't know what the word "work" means, but it's new so it must be good.

But there's a saying about theology: If it's new, it's not true; if it's true it's not new.

We see all the time "New ways of doing ministry, new ways of praying for your family, new ways of preaching or teaching, new disciplinary techniques, evangelism, so on."

But rarely are these things faithful and good. They're usually some spin on an old gimmick. Sometimes it's just an old thing that's repackaged as a new thing.

Maybe my age showing, but the older I get the more I realize that new is rarely an improvement, especially in regards to our understanding of biblical faithfulness.

When we talk about the Reformation and the Reformers - Calvin, Luther, those guys - you know what they were doing? When you reform something, you are bringing it back into accordance with original design.

When you refurbish or reform an old car, you are bringing it back to original condition. We should always be asking ourselves: is what we're doing for the Lord in line with the original purpose of the Lord? His commands and prohibitions and self revelation? Or are we simply desiring something new?

4) Easy - Rarely is any sort of effective ministry easy.

Rarely is anything easy worthwhile. Actually, when you look at the verbs related to ministry in the Bible you realize that they all indicate some kind of hard work:

We are called to labor for the ministry, run, work, strive, toil - these are all words that are the exact opposite of easy. Is your life hard? Is it hard to be faithful to the Lord? Hard to walk as a believer in the midst a crooked generation? Good. It means you're probably doing something right.

There's just no way to easily build the Kingdom of God.

We're called: servants, slaves, workers in a vineyard, under-rowers - all implying hard work for the Kingdom.

If you're thinking about buying a book about ministry or the Christian life with the word simple or easy or painless in the title, you need to pick another book. Because the rest and ease that you're looking for is probably only on the other side of glory.

So we don't judge ministry to be effective based on numbers, popularity, newness, ease.

5) Feels Good

Turn over to 2 Cor. 11 for a moment. Let me just say that serving the Lord can be fun and enjoyable. It can feel good. I think that's probably why most of you guys go serve at camp. And I'll just be honest: that's a big part of the reason I go serve at camp. I love it. It's a great time.

But ministry doesn't always feel good. And just because it doesn't feel good doesn't mean you're doing it wrong. Sometimes the greatest service you can do for the Lord doesn't feel good.

Jesus wasn't rejected by crowds and spit on and crucified because it felt good. His reward was on the other side of the cross.

Here, Paul is telling the Corinthians how he is genuinely an apostle and he shows it because he is willing to suffer so much. He realizes that embellishing his suffering is crazy, but they need to realize what he goes through for their sake. **Read 11:21b-33**

Now we think, “Man, Paul was really suffering for the gospel.” And he did. Part of the reason he was so effective is because he was willing to suffer faithfully for the gospel.

We don’t like ministries that are hard. We don’t like to feel bad. But sometimes there are very tough seasons we are called to go through and if we don’t go through them in faithfulness then there is no fruit.

It’s easy to see other people that are in a good season or happy season and long for what they have. I get together every month with a group of pastors from the Deer Park area and it’s pretty cool because we’re pretty open with each other about successes and trials. And over the years it’s been so encouraging to see people go through various seasons of life and myself go through seasons of life. There are seasons that feel good and seasons that feel almost debilitating.

And we can rejoice in the good seasons: good for them if the Lord has called them to a time of ease. But we have all also learned that effective ministry is often hard.

Numbers/Popularity/New and Improved/Easy/Feels Good are all bad ways to measure ministry effectiveness.

Now, that’s all just introduction to our section back in **1 Cor. 16**. I want you to **turn to Acts 19:1-7** to get a little more background before we go back to **1 Corinthians**.

What we need to understand for context is that Paul is writing **1 Cor.**, giving these final instructions to tell the Corinthians why he is **not** coming to Corinth. Why? Because what he is doing in Ephesus is the most effective thing he can be doing.

How do we discern effectiveness? How do we know when God is blessing a ministry or it’s time to move on. I’m here to tell you: it’s not very easy sometimes to know. There are no flow-charts in the Bible that guide us here, so there’s a lot of subjectivity. It takes wisdom to know.

But let’s look at what was going on in Ephesus to see if we can discern some things. Here in **Acts 19:1-7** is where Paul is when he writes the Corinthians. So it’s helpful for us to see what’s going on that would keep Paul from going to Corinth himself.

In chapter 18, we see that Paul had begun a work in Ephesus, then went back to Israel, then came back to Ephesus. This is his return to Ephesus. **Read 1-7**

1) So one way to know if your ministry is effective is if people start speaking in tongues. I’m just kidding. Here I think we see that those who are **new to the faith are engaged in the ministry**.

We’re introduced to a man named Apollos. In **18:24** Apollos is called mighty in the Scriptures. The guy knew his Bible, but he wasn’t saved. It was Priscilla and Aquila who actually preached the gospel to him and then Apollos went to Corinth to encourage the church there. Apollos is humble and open to the gospel, and then turns around and begins ministering to the church.

But people in Ephesus are getting saved. And Paul knows this because they are speaking in tongues - foreign languages - that prove they are filled with the Holy Spirit. God seems to be at work. **Read 8-10**

Paul’s left in Ephesus with believers and God begins doing some amazing things and he takes some of the new disciples and he begins preaching. The disciples aren’t just sitting around soaking up information, that’s fine. They’re actually turning around and becoming engaged as well.

This is important. Our ministry isn’t just giving knowledge to people the Lord has entrusted us to or serving them. Our ministry is to make disciples who do the same thing.

We are called to make disciples, who go make disciples, who go make disciples. We’re not just thinking single generation. We’re thinking multi generationally. It’s not enough to simply tell new believers this is what the Bible

says. We have to teach them how to read and understand the Bible so they can go make disciples and teach the next generation of believers how to teach the next generation.

And here, the ministry seems to be growing. I said a few minutes ago that looking at numbers is a bad way to measure effectiveness. That's true. But I should clarify that **only** looking at numbers is a bad way to measure effectiveness.

If numbers are coupled with faithfulness, then it could be a sign of good things. Charles Spurgeon preached to thousands every week. RC Sproul preached to thousands every week. That's not a bad thing! That's a good thing.

Paul's ministry here is growing so much that he has to rent the Hall of Tyrannus to contain the amount of disciples that are coming to learn. We know very little about the Hall of Tyrannus, but it seems that the sheer amount of people hearing the gospel was substantial.

2) What else is happening in Ephesus? **True repentance. Read 11-20**

This is one of my favorite episodes from the book of Acts. If you remember back from **1 Cor. 12**, we saw that when the word "miracles" is used in the gospels and Acts it almost always means some sort of exorcism gift. The apostles all had this gift and it seems many believers in the early church had it too. We don't see this gift exercised today. It could happen, but it seems as though God has either ended its use for now or limited it significantly.

In any case, what this gift does, is legitimize what Paul is doing. And the effect is that many people repent. That's the key.

They praise Jesus - extolling the Lord - and that's great on the surface. But let's be honest: there many unbelievers that will extol Jesus. A lot of people will give lip service to the Lord but they won't give up their sin.

Here, they're not just giving lip service. There is also massive, radical repentance. When people come and proactively confess the wickedness of their hearts and actions - that's a powerful work of the Lord.

When people destroy their sinfulness - that's a powerful work of the Lord.

Think about what happened here. Many people would have said: Oh, just sell those books about the magical arts and give the money to the church. That's a great idea! Wouldn't we be able to do more gospel ministry that way? That's over \$5 million in silver.

The problem is that simply selling sinful items back to people enables other people to use the sinful items.

It'd be like someone selling their pornography collection to give it to the church. Why would they do that? God doesn't need the profits from sinful things to advance his church.

God is more pleased as the smoke of millions of dollars worth of magic books are burned in his honor as his people repent. Notice what prevailed.

3) Notice what was powerful. **The Word. Read 20**

So not only are new believers becoming involved in ministry and people are genuinely repenting, but the Word is increasing. This is actually something of a theme of the book of Acts. It's the Word that increases all throughout.

Acts 6:7: And the Word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many priests became obedient to the faith.

Acts 12:24: But the Word of God increased and multiplied.

Acts 13:49: And the Word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.

And it happens here too. When the Word of God is advancing, there's probably an effective work happening.

Put another way, if we have to turn to other things, other gimmicks, other strategies than preaching and teaching the word of God, then it's probably not an effective ministry.

Is the Word of God spreading in your ministry? Is that the focus? Is it to teach ingrain the Word

Now, think about this: all of that is going on while Paul is writing the letter of 1 Corinthians. All that's going down. And in midst of that the church at Corinth is imploding on itself.

Corinth is jacked up: division over favorite leaders / adultery / marriage problems / eating in temples of idols / spiritual gifts / denial of resurrection.

What's Paul going to do? Does he drop everything here and go rescue Corinth? What do we do? How do we invest in effective ministries when maybe there are other options?

Let's go back to **1 Cor. 16**.

1) 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. Are there other opportunities? Maybe, and 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 didn't happen. He didn't go. Their sinfulness got so out of control he wrote a letter to them between **1 Corinthians** and **2 Corinthians**; most scholars call this the severe letter where he absolutely blasted them and rather than going to Corinth, he held off.

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.

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.

2) Sometimes we can delegate the situation.

This is sort of just a side observation, but that's why Paul is writing this letter. What he's doing in Ephesus is so important he can't leave. So he writes a letter. It's okay to send a note sometimes rather than dropping everything and being personally involved.

Christians for 2,000 years have benefitted greatly from this letter which is written through the direction of the Holy Spirit because Paul has more important things to do in Ephesus. So sometimes we don't have to drop everything and be present in a situation.

The second way Paul delegates is that he sends Timothy. **Read 10-11**

So he sends Timothy instead going himself. There's an old saying: When Paul couldn't stay, he left Timothy, when he couldn't go he sent Timothy. He delegated situations to a faithful companion.

Again, a lot of times we get this idea that **we** have to be somewhere to do something. We have to be directly involved. We have to manage it or it will fail.

No.

The Kingdom was advancing long before we were around and the Kingdom will continue to advance long after we are around.

There have been many opportunities for me in life to do various ministries. Be involved, help out, so on. And many times I have to say no. In fact, usually my problem in life is that I say yes when I should say no.

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 are serious. That's why he's writing and sending Timothy.

But when he comes 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.

Sometimes that's helpful, sometimes that's the nature of a ministry. But not always. And I think it's safe to say: not usually.

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) The last way is to realize that you need to be ministered to as well. Notice that Paul isn't the only one giving out here. Read 5-11

A lot of times we think we are the sole benefactor in a situation. We're the smart ones, we're the best, brightest, most financially able to do something.

That's not true. Paul says when he comes they can help him on his way. That's actually a technical term in the original meaning that they can aid him financially or with material goods.

Remember earlier in the book he said he refused to take money from them. He didn't want them to accuse him of doing ministry just for the money even though they desired to pay him.

Now, after all this time, he says, "Look, I want you guys to help me. I want you to take part in the spread of the gospel."

And he wants them to take care of Timothy. Put him at ease, don't despise him. A lot of times we like the number 1 guy and look down on the number 2 guy. Paul says don't do that.

What he's getting at is that even those people we're ministering to are called to serve us back.

They're called to love and provide and pour out the richness of their spiritual gifts on us too.