LESSONS LEARNED IN MINISTRY

Exodus 18:13-23

After arranging the handful of books I owned and the few supplies I had, I sat down at my desk on a Monday morning for my first day as a minister. Sitting in the chair, looking at my (almost empty) desk, I realized something – I did not know what to do. I was embarrassed and frustrated; I had walked away from the beginning of a career in academia to enter ministry, only to realize I had no idea what I was doing. I have been trying to figure out how to do ministry for the past 26 years. Along the way, I have learned a few lessons I want to share with you all, lessons with valuable applications beyond ministry.

The first lesson – **ministry needs people**

"WHAT YOU ARE DOING IS NOT GOOD"[1]

I learned two crucial lessons early in my ministry:

- **I cannot do everything on my own.**
- **Not involving people in my work and in my life prevents them from fulfilling their Christian responsibilities.**

While I learned those lessons in the first few years of my ministry, my growing understanding of the Bible's teachings helps me appreciate their significance. Consider a few passages that begin to outline the importance of those lessons:

Exodus 18:13-23:

- God entrusted Moses with the responsibility of leading the Israelites, and he faithfully worked to fulfill the task God gave him. Despite his earnest efforts, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, criticized him, saying, "What you are doing is not good" (*Exodus 18:17*). Moses tried to handle his responsibilities alone, but Jethro told him, "You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone" (*Exodus 18:18-19*).
- Attempting to fulfill our responsibilities on our own, without help, harms us and those around us.

Genesis 2:18-25:

- Jethro's advice to Moses echoes an insight introduced in the Bible's opening pages. His comment directs readers back to God's declaration in Genesis 2:18: "It is not good that man should be alone." God's announcement does not reveal an oversight on His part.

[1] Exodus 18:17. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

Rather, God purposefully designed humans to need relationships and delayed creating the woman until the man recognized his need for companionship.
- We can only survive and thrive when in relationships characterized by mutual dependence and loving faithfulness.

Ephesians 4:15-16; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

- Paul's comments about the way God "composed" the church reveal that the relationship expectation extends beyond the marriage setting in Genesis 2. In Ephesians, he described the church as a body that functions properly only when each member does their share (*Ephesians 4:15-16*). But working properly requires more than mere cooperation; it requires a relational investment so that "if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (*1 Corinthians 12:12-26*).
- Ministry's effectiveness and Jesus' ability to work through the church in the world depend on the character of the relationships that bind a church's members together.

Matthew 22:34-40

- A lawyer challenged Jesus with a question, "Which is the great commandment in the law?" (*Matthew 22:35-36*). Jesus responded by naming the two greatest commandments – love God and love people (*Matthew 22:37-39*). He then added a critical insight – "on these two depend all the Law and the Prophets" (*Matthew 22:40*). Jesus pointed out that everything God expects from people rests on the foundation of loving God and loving people.
- Ministry succeeds only when it pursues love-motivated relationships. No metric, no matter how impressive, can redeem a ministry that does not foreground relationships.

APPLICATIONS

- Our culture's emphasis on the individual and individuality goes against God's design for humans and His plan for the church. Learn to recognize how our culture markets that message to you, and insulate yourself from it by surrounding yourself with influences that offer a strong, clear countermessage.
- Resist the cult of productivity and the allure of hustle culture to embrace the slow, challenging path of building relationships. Ministry's success is measured not by accomplishments but by relationships.
- People widely recognize that ministry and church should focus on relationships. However, other concerns often – and easily – supplant that relational focus, revealing our tendency to rely on our own wisdom rather than trust God's.