

Theme 2012: What is the the Work of Ministry?

Ephesians 4:12-16

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on January 15, 2012

Introduction

- ❖ I don't watch much television these days since my daughter was born, but I used to be an avid channel surfer. Back then, one of my favorites was *The Learning Channel*. I think it was because they have these crazy shows that feature odd medical mysteries. I remember this show about a mermaid girl, another about a girl who could feel no pain, or these women who didn't know they were pregnant, and a lot of shows about little people.
 - But there was one show that really got my attention. **It was about this 16-year-old girl who had the body and mind of a 6-month-old baby.** Besides her hair and fingernails, nothing about her grows. She's literally a 16-year-old baby. She weighs only 16 pounds, has never spoken a word, watches *SpongeBob* from her crib, and still needs her mom to feed and change her diapers.
 - Over the years she's seen over 100 specialists and no one can explain what is stunting her growth. She's truly a medical mystery. Sixteen years of life, and she hasn't grown a day older.

- ❖ **Now this may be an oddity in the field of medical science, but sadly, in the field of Christian spirituality, it's an epidemic.** Far too many believers have come to saving faith in Christ, perhaps years ago, but have since grown little in their spiritual lives. Like this 16-year-old baby, some of us might be described as 20, 40, or 60-year-old *spiritual* babies.
 - **Every believer among us needs to honestly evaluate our spiritual lives, and ask if we've been growing since our new birth in Christ.** If we're honest, some of us are going to have a hard time identifying any discernible progress. Perhaps we can recall a few high points, a few victories, but for the most part, our lives have not significantly changed since our conversion.
 - Now if you sincerely trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then I have no doubt that deep down you really do *want* to grow up. You really *want* to mature in faith. **But right now, you feel more like a baby surviving on spiritual milk** (Heb. 6:13).

- ❖ If that describes you, please don't despair FOR this is the very reason why Christ has called you to be a part of his one body, the Church AND why he has given gifts to his saints for the work of ministry AND why he has appointed leaders to equip them.
 - This brings us back to our Ministry Theme for 2012 "***Equipping Leaders to Equip the Saints***". This year we want to make a concerted effort to train leaders in the church. By that we mean the pastoral staff, the elders, deacons, fellowship leaders, coaches, small group leaders, and worship leaders. We want to equip our present leaders and raise up new ones.

- ❖ Now you might be thinking, "*This theme has nothing to do with me because I'm not not one of the leaders, and I have no desire to be one*". But what I want to show you is that our emphasis on *Equipping Leaders* has everything to do with you, especially your spiritual growth.

- **That's because we're trying to equip church leaders who know how to equip church members for the work of ministry.** And the "*work of ministry*" has everything to do to with you and your spiritual growth.
- ❖ Last week we studied Ephesians 4:1-12. And one of the main points was that every Christian has a calling from God. It's not just pastors and missionaries who have callings. **Every believer has been called, first and foremost, to be a saint, someone set apart for holy service to God.** And we saw in vv11-12 how Christ gave particular leaders to his church to equip the saints (the believers) to do the work of ministry.
 - This morning I want us to consider vv12-16 and to ask this driving question, "***What exactly is the 'work of ministry' that the saints have been called to do?***" and "***How does that relate to me?***"
 - I want to let Scripture define this "*work of ministry*" and hopefully we'll walk away better understanding how to help one another grow up from being spiritual babes to mature adults in Christ.

Work that Aims at Building Up the Whole Church

- ❖ If you're following in your outline, there are three answers from this text. The first is this: **The "*work of ministry*" is the kind of good work that aims at building up the whole church.** I see this clearly in vv12-13, but let's start by reading from v11, "*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*"
 - Last week, we saw that the unique role of church leaders is not to do all the ministry on behalf of the saints but to equip the saints to share in the work of ministry. But what is the work of ministry for? Paul tells us, "*for building up the body of Christ*", the whole church.
- ❖ This is a simple but profound point, and sadly it's lost on many of us. **The simple fact is that many Christians are not all that concerned with the building up of the whole church.** We're more concerned with building up our own personal relationships with God. We're satisfied with church as long as we feel spiritually fed or as long as our children enjoy the programs. ***But is there a similar concern for the health and maturity of the entire body?***
 - Friends, we need to repent of the consumeristic way we approach church and the way we think about ministry. It's for the building up of the whole body of Christ, not just for you and your family.
- ❖ But if that's the case, *what exactly are we building up the church to look like?* If you're going to build up a house, you usually start with a picture in mind. You have a drawing or miniature model in front of you, showing what the house is supposed to look like.

- ❖ ***So what picture (model) should we have in mind as we aim to build up the church?*** Paul tells us in **v13**, “(for building up the body of Christ) until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”
- ❖ So the goal is for all the saints (“we all”) to attain to “mature manhood”. Now that word for “manhood” is not the word *anthropos*, which is the generic term for man or humankind. It is the word *aner*, which is the specific term for an adult male, a full-grown man.
 - I think Paul had a particular adult male in mind. As we build up the church, the Apostle wants us to picture of a certain full-grown man – Jesus! **The aim of all ministry is to build up the whole body of the church until we all attain to Christ-like maturity.**
- ❖ Paul reiterates this point in **v15** where he says “we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” To help picture what Paul is saying, think of a newborn baby. Have you ever noticed how huge their heads are? They’re disproportionately large compared to the rest of their body. But as babies mature, their body grows up to match their huge heads.
 - In the same way, the church has an extremely huge head – his name is Jesus! **And the goal of ministry to get the whole body of the church to grow up together until we match Jesus “in every way”.**
- ❖ “Growing up in every way” would include, as Paul puts it in **v13**, sharing in a “unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God”. But beyond just sharing right beliefs about Jesus, maturity requires us to share in right behavior, the kind that reflects Jesus’ character, his heart, his priorities, and his obedience to the Father.
 - **What this means is that the “work of ministry” that we’ve been called to would involve any kind of responsibility that aims at helping people grow up in spiritual maturity to know Jesus more and to look and act more like him.**
- ❖ We’ll explain how in greater detail in our next point, but let me conclude this point with a pointed question. ***Friends, is the spiritual growth of each fellow believer in our church a burden on your heart?*** Is it your desire, your prayer, to see your fellow brothers and sisters built up, with you, into Christ-like maturity?
 - This should not just be a burden for church leaders. If you are in Christ, it’s your responsibility – your calling – to minister to one another so that *we all* grow up together in maturity. So that no one remains a spiritual baby.
- ❖ ***Leaders, are you calling and equipping your people to join you in this work of ministry?*** Perhaps you’re feeling burnt out and on the verge of quitting. Could it be that you’re carrying the burden alone for far too long? Thank you for caring so much for the spiritual health of those under your leadership, but perhaps you need to focus more of your time on equipping your people to join you in the work. That’s what we want to help you do this year: To equip you to equip the saints.

Work that Involves Speaking the Truth in Love

- ❖ So the “*work of ministry*” is the kind of good work that aims at building up the whole church. **Secondly, it is the kind of good work that involves speaking the truth in love.** The first point defined our goal. This second point addresses our method. If you look around, you can see the “*work of ministry*” being carried out wherever you see the truth being spoken to one another in love.
- ❖ I get this from **v15**, where Paul says, “*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.*” Now let’s consider that in its context. **V14** just warned about the dangers of not growing up. It says if you remain as children, then you’ll be more susceptible to false teaching, to “*human cunning*” and “*deceitful schemes*”.
 - Then **v15** says “*Rather*”. Rather than speaking falsehood in deceit, we are to speak truth in love. That’s how you help one another grow up into Christ-like maturity. That’s how you minister.
- ❖ Let me point out two observations here. **First, notice the content that we are to speak to one another.** We are to speak the truth. Now I used to think that “*speaking the truth in love*” simply meant telling someone a hard truth but in a gentle way. So there are times when we have to tell our friends something they don’t want to hear but need to hear.
 - Your co-worker needs to know if his breath stinks or if his zipper is down. Your friend needs to know she’s had spinach in her teeth throughout dinner. That’s speaking truth in love.
- ❖ Not exactly. **Paul is not just talking about any truthful statement, but more specifically about speaking biblical truth to one another.** Remember, this exhortation is in light of his warning to not be spiritual babes, blown about by every wind of doctrine. Rather, we are to speak doctrinal truth, scriptural truth, to one another.
 - If our maturity as a body is evidenced by our “*unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God*”, then we will have to instruct each other with sound doctrine. The work of ministry involves speaking a particular truth – biblical truth.
- ❖ **Second, consider the attitude in which we are to speak.** It is to be done in love. This is important to stress because some Christians are theologically astute and really good at smelling out bad, stinky doctrine, and they have no reservations in pointing out what’s wrong with your theology.
 - Or some are very disciplined in their own walk and are quick to call out others who are weaker or less disciplined in their walk. These individuals might be speaking biblical truth to you, but they’re abusing this ministry because it’s not done “*in love*”.
- ❖ Some of us here need to hear this. Because of our personalities, we need to be extra careful to check our attitude and motivation for wanting to speak a word of truth to our neighbor.

- *Can you honestly say that you're motivated by love, with the aim of building up that person in Christ-like maturity?* Perhaps we need God's grace to work in us a little longer, to temper our passion for his truth with the tenderness of his love.

- ❖ **So the point is that the “work of ministry” includes any kind of activity where you are speaking, sharing, or singing biblical truth to one another, out of a heart of love and concern for each other’s spiritual health and maturity.** The particular ministry that God is calling you to might be different than mine, but what is fundamental to all of our ministries is “speaking the truth in love”.

- ❖ Now of a formal level, the “work of ministry”, would include ministries that most of us are familiar with – teaching Sunday School or a bible study, playing on the worship team, serving in your small group or fellowship.

- ❖ **But let me give you some ideas of what the “work of ministry” could look like informally,** which should be more common and happening more frequently than formal ministries. **It could involve reading the Bible together with another person.** I imagine a more mature believer taking a younger believer (or seeker) under his wing and meeting on occasion to just read the Bible and to share with one another the truth you’re discovering as you go along.

- ❖ **The “work of ministry” could also involve getting friends together to study a book that helps you better understand the nature and character of God.** When someone is going through a difficult trial in life, often the best way to minister to them is to help them remember the great and glorious God who is actually their Father.
 - Speak to them about the attributes of God – of his holiness, his sovereignty, his infinite wisdom, goodness and unfailing love. Help them see that God is greater than all their trouble and fears. If you need some suggestions, I’d recommend reading Packer’s *Knowing God* or Sproul’s *The Holiness of God*.

- ❖ **But the “work of ministry”, in its most basic form, simply involves speaking the good promises of God to one another in every occasion.** When we’re facing our daily fears, our daily temptations, our daily struggles, we need help to help our unbelief. It’s so natural for us to doubt God’s goodness and to question his plans and his provision for our lives.
 - So it is in those moments that we need fellow believers to do the work of ministry in our lives by speaking God’s good promises to our hard and unbelieving hearts.

- ❖ We need someone to gently yet firmly remind us that “*for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*” (Rom. 8:28)
 - ***Now when a friend speaks that awesome promise into our lives, how should we respond?*** What should we say when reminded of this amazing truth? We should say to our downcast soul, “*If God is for us, then who can be against us? If God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*” (Rom. 8:31-32)

- ❖ **Friends, the truth of God, when spoken in love, has the ability, like a spotlight, to pierce through the dark clouds of unbelief in our hearts.** The spoken truth has the unique ability to minister to our souls – to offer hope and to stir up joy and great affection.
- ❖ **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, in his book *Life Together*, recognized the power of the spoken Word coming from the lips of a fellow believer. He writes this, “*But God has put this Word into the mouth of men in order that it may be communicated to other men. . . . God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother’s is sure.*”
- ❖ Brothers and sisters, I need to hear the biblical truth in your words, spoken to me, exhorting me, encouraging me, challenging me, even correcting me – in love. I need to hear this especially when I’m wavering, when I’m doubting, when I’m acting like an immature spiritual baby. And you need to hear the same biblical truth in my words spoken back to you.
 - This, my friends, is what the “*work of ministry*” looks like when it is actively taking place in a community of faith.

Work that Takes Place in All Points of Contact

- ❖ So the aim of this good work is the building up of the whole church, and the primary method is speaking biblical truth in love. **Lastly, let’s look at the setting in which the “*work of ministry*” should happen. I’m suggesting that this good work is to take place in all points of contact, in all of life.**
 - Look back at **v16**, “*(we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,) from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it build itself up in love.*”
- ❖ That sentence is a mouthful, but the point is that every believer is consider a body part in the larger body of Christ, and we are, as Paul puts it, “*joined and held together by every joint*”. Here Paul is emphasizing two things. **1) He’s emphasizing the places of connection in the body of Christ, where different parts come together to form the whole.** His point is that the growth of the body (the church) takes place in these points of contact.
 - So wherever Christians are gathered, wherever they make contact, that is the setting for the work of ministry. That is where speaking the truth in love needs to happen. But that means more than just on Sundays or just within this building. **Ministry should happen wherever two or more parts meet together** – that could be in the home, in the school, in the workplace, in the neighborhood, in all of life.

- ❖ **The point is that the “*work of ministry*” should not be limited, in our minds, to church work, to the formal programs and ministries that we offer.** Ministry should be happening in every sphere of our lives, not just when we come here on Sundays or go to small group during the week.
 - Husbands and wives are called to minister to each other. Parents to children and children to parents. Employers to employees and employees to employers. These are the kind of relationships that Paul brings up in chapter 5 and 6, where he demonstrates what it looks like to minister within these different spheres of life.
 - Your calling to do the work of ministry is going to take you beyond the four walls of this church, beyond our formal programs. It’ll expand into all of life.
- ❖ But there is something else Paul is emphasizing in this verse, rather he’s reemphasizing. **2) The Apostle is reemphasizing the importance of leaders and their unique role in the body of Christ.** He says the whole body is “*joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped*”.
 - The “joints” that join and hold the whole body together – with which the whole body is equipped – is referring to church leaders, the same ones he brought up in vv11-12 who are given to the church to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

Conclusion

- ❖ This brings us back to our theme of “*Equipping Leaders to Equip the Saints*”. The role of the leaders is not to be the sole ministers of the church BUT to be the equippers of the church. **Leaders, your calling is to make sure each body part in the church is equipped and active in ministry.** That’s what Paul means in v16 when he talks about each part “*working properly*”. When that happens, then the church grows “*so that it builds itself up in love.*”
 - **So, leaders, if you want to see this church grow and built itself up in love, then commit yourself to the task of equipping.** Make it your goal to *not* just serve the people under your care faithfully BUT to equip them and to release them for ministry.
- ❖ **But before that can happen, you need to ask if you yourself are equipped for the task.** *Are you personally equipped to speak biblical truth in love?*
 - Do you know how to rightly handle the Word of truth? Do you know how to communicate it (to a group or 1-on-1)? Do you know how to use Scripture to give godly encouragement or to give godly correction?
 - And most of all, do you know how to bring others along and to help them replicate this “*work of ministry*” in their own lives? These are the various ways in which the church wants to equip you as leaders this coming year.
- ❖ **And lastly, for all of you not serving here in a leadership capacity, I hope the relevance of our new ministry theme is obvious to you.** For those of you who feel like a 20, 30 or 40 year old spiritual baby, what you need most, right now, is to commit yourself to a local body of believers who are all committed to doing the “*work of ministry*”. Immerse yourself in this community and open your life up to receive the ministry of others.

- And for those of you who can point to evidence of spiritual growth over the past years or months – praise God for that! Now go and walk in a manner worthy of the calling you have received by learning how to speak the truth in love and to help one another grow up with you into Christ-life maturity.
 - That is what an equipped, properly working, maturing church looks like.