

What Does It Mean to Minister?



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Karen: In the last lesson we were talking about the varieties of pain that people experience, and we went through just a list of different kinds of experiences that people can struggle with. And in this lesson we want to talk about what it means to minister to people in pain. And when I think about the word *minister*, I think about somebody who's paid to minister to people in pain.

Alice: I know, Karen, that is a normal thing for me to think of as well because so often when we think about ministering, we think of the people who have gone through seminary, who have received a degree, and who are on the staff of a church and their responsibility is to minister. And I think it goes back to the Old Testament, in which we find the Levites who were paid ministers. They received the tithes from the people in order to carry on the ministry of the tabernacle. But, at the same time, everyone in the Old Testament was expected to be concerned about the people around them who had need. It wasn't restricted to the ministers, to the Levites.

Karen: And I think Jesus really picked-up—and I shouldn't say picked-up because Jesus was the one who emphasized the truth of what the prophets were saying in the Old Testament, which is that we need to be concerned about everybody who's around us. And Jesus began talking about the word *servant* in a larger kind of way; instead of just focusing in on paid ministers; instead of just, in our world, focusing in on pastors and elders and deacons. Jesus said, "No, we really need to focus more widely. We need to think about serving everybody who is a person who's in need."

Alice: And Jesus himself in Matthew 23:11 said that anyone who wants to be the greatest must be the "servant" of all, and that word *servant* came to be a synonym for the word *minister*. In fact, if we turn to Romans 16:1, we meet a woman named Phoebe, who in the Greek was called *diakonos*. And in some Bible translations she was called a minister, but in other translations she was called

servant, because the word can mean either minister or servant, and when we minister to people in pain, we are coming along to serve them in their area of need.

Karen: So the definition that we're working with in this lesson for being a minister is to give service, to care or aid, to attend as to wants or necessities. And if we take that definition and translate it into what it means to minister as a Christian, we think about ministering as administering God's grace to people in need.

Alice: And didn't the apostle Paul pick that up in Romans chapter 12 when he gives us a lot of illustrations of how we do that. For example, in chapter 12 he says to us: You are to rejoice with those who rejoice. You are to mourn with those who mourn, and if you have something, you are to share it with others. [12:13-15] You are to be given to hospitality, and there are a great many ways in which we share God's goodness. We share God's grace, administering it as ministers or servants of those who have need. [Romans 12:13]

Karen: I think there are other ways that we administer God's grace because, as Christians, we have been given gifts. When we became a Christian, the Holy Spirit gifted us with particular gifts; and another way that we can minister to people in pain is to use those gifts that God has gifted us with to help people in need.

Alice: It is about gifts, Karen, but it's not just about gifts, is it? And I'm thinking about the parable that Jesus told the lawyer over in Luke chapter 10—the parable that we call the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And we know that story, most of us, we know it well. It's about a man, a Jewish man, who was going from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he fell among thieves and he was beaten. He was stripped of his clothing, he was robbed, and he was left half dead. And as Jesus tells the story to this Jewish lawyer, He said that, first of all, a priest came by, a religious person who knew what he was to do for people in need, but he looked at the man there on the side of the road and he walked on by. And then a Levite came along, and a Levite was also part of the religious community in Israel at that time. But he also, in spite of what he knew from the Old Testament, looked at the man in pain and he walked on by. And then Jesus said what was totally shocking; He said a Samaritan came by.

Now if you don't understand how much Samaritans hated Jews and how much the Jews hated Samaritans, you have no idea how

shocking this must have been to that lawyer that Jesus would say a Samaritan came by. And this Samaritan not only stopped but he took care of the man. He poured oil and wine into his wounds, and he put him on his donkey. He took him to an inn, and he stayed and cared for him in his need. Now this is taking us far beyond just the use of our gifts, Karen, to a deeper dimension of what it means to minister out of what we have to those who have need.

Karen: So, are you telling me that the paid clergy didn't minister to this man in pain?

Alice: Well, I think that's what Jesus was saying.

Karen: So Jesus was really trying to expand our idea about what it means to be a minister. What it means to minister to people in pain and really to look for people in need around us. Look for the people who need us to minister to them.

Alice: And I think it was Philip Yancey who made a comment that I found very helpful. He said that ordinary, just ordinary acts of charity and goodness can become nothing less than the incarnation of God on earth. When we do what Jesus would do, we are His hands; we are His feet as we minister to people in need.

Karen: And I think it brings us back to Jesus' example, because Jesus was a person who ministered to us. When we were sinners, when we had no other options for how to have a relationship with God, Jesus came down and died for our sins; and as Jesus ministered in a sense to us, so we minister to others.

Alice: Yes, and it was in that Last Supper as we have it recorded in the gospel of John, in John 13, that we find Jesus doing for His followers what they should have been doing for Him. When they came in with their dusty feet from the outside, one of them should have taken a basin of water and a towel and washed the feet of the others, but none of them did. And Jesus picked up that basin and he picked up that towel and He went around the room washing the feet of each person there. But I think most important, Karen, is what Jesus said at that point. And in John 13:12-15, we read Jesus saying, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you." [NKJV]

Karen: So in washing His disciples' feet and in dying for us, Jesus has made ministry non-optional. And we read more about that in Matthew 25 when Jesus tells us about the great judgment when God will divide, in a sense, the sheep from the goats based on how people ministered to people in pain.

Alice: And it's pretty shocking, when you stop to think about it, that God is going to judge me on my willingness to come alongside other people who are hurting; perhaps to take a meal to someone who's on bed rest or to babysit for a single parent so that person can do something important.

Karen: I think it's interesting that it does come down to those nitty-gritty ways of ministering to people in pain. Jesus tells us in Matthew 25 that He will invite into the kingdom those who gave food to the hungry, who gave water to the thirsty, who invited strangers into their homes, who clothed the naked and visited those in prison. It's that nitty-gritty service that is so difficult but which Jesus calls us to do.

Alice: But Jesus isn't asking us to do anything that He, Himself has not already done for us. He has modeled this for us. He has not only told us what to do, He has shown us what to do, and He is calling us to minister to people in pain.

Karen: So we've talked about many things in this lesson. We've talked about the fact that ministry is not the province of those who are paid. It's the province of all of us who are Christians.

It also goes much broader than just what happens on a Sunday. It's what happens every day. How we're helping people in their lives, their daily lives. It's also something that we do based on the example of Jesus. Jesus incarnated ministry to us, and we incarnate His ministry to others. He did not make ministry optional, and we do ministry to others in His name.

And in the next lesson, we will talk about how people think about issues of pain. I think it's so important to think about what people struggle with when they're struggling with the issue of pain in their lives.