

West Side Fellowship

Works of Service - The Prophet

Over the last few weeks we have looked at **Ephesians 4v11-13** and how in the church, ministry is not there to entertain or inform us, rather it is about a heart change that leads to a desire to submit ourselves to the will of God and serve Him. It is the response that Paul writes about in **Philippians 2v5-11**. A heart attitude that leads to us following sacrificially in the footsteps of Christ, of being willing to submit our will to the will of the Father.

As we have started from the bottom, working through the unseen ministries of helps and administration and seeing the basic lessons that we can learn about constantly seeking the Lord even in what may seem insignificant tasks, we find that these lessons go on to form the foundation of all ministry. To have a heart to seek the Lords will, to wait on Him until we clearly hear and then to act in obedience to that calling.

As we see this progression of ministries, one of the trends we see is that the further up the list we go, the more struggles and rejection we will face in this world. Teaching and then Pastoral work all have their difficulties that mean that the pastor or teacher needs to know clearly from the Lord the direction they should be going in, especially when others around start to pressure them for change to suit their own agenda. We then saw last week how the calling of an Evangelist, going into the world, will be constantly met with rejection. Once again we need to know that we have a clear call and direction from the Lord and that our self esteem and self worth are based on how the Lord sees us rather than how we are received by the world.

In **Romans 1v1** Paul describes himself as *"A servant of Jesus Christ, called to be..."* and this is important with all ministries. It is not a choice that we make, it is a calling, an act of faith on our part in obedience to the word of the Lord. The servant does not get to choose the work the master gives them. The master decides who will be doing what and when based on his understanding of what needs to be done, rather than the servants. This is crucial when it comes to any ministry because the Lord is looking at the heart attitude towards Him rather than our worldly abilities. If the foundation of the servant heart has not taken root, our ministry will always be subject to our own egos, desires, and intellect which cloud our hearing of the Lord to the point that we see in **Matthew 7v21-23**, even those who would consider themselves in important ministries for the Lord can find themselves totally rejected by God because they ran off and followed their own instincts and direction, rather than humbly waiting on the Lord for His instructions.

This week we will look at the ministry of the prophet, a ministry that over recent years has been degraded, almost to something that anyone can have a go at. I've even seen morning courses offered to learn how to be one. Let us be clear; this is a calling not a hobby, and you cannot learn a servant heart in a morning and without that right heart attitude, the implications for the person, as well as those who hear them, can be nothing less than catastrophic and is why it is so important to have learnt the servant heart lessons in other ministries as the Lord leads us.

The Bible is full of warnings about false prophets, the most dangerous of which are not from the world, but from within the church just as in the old testament the most dangerous false prophets arose from within Israel. Jesus warned his disciples about this in **Matthew 7v15** and when speaking of the end times in **Matthew 24v11** He said:

“many false prophets will appear and deceive **many** people.”

Notice that we are warned about “many”, Jesus has warned us to expect these things in the church and that many will be deceived. When reading things like this we often gloss over any concern with a veneer of spiritual superiority. “We could never be deceived”, we say to ourselves. “We are too well taught, we know what our Bible says”. Jesus was talking to His disciples, those that he had taught, so let us put aside our pride and realise that any one of us can be led astray by false prophets.

False prophets are a danger to God’s people and as such put themselves in eternal danger. God wants his people cleansed of the false prophets, in the Old Testament God gave a clear instruction: that they be stoned to death (**Leviticus 20v27**). You will notice the verse talks about stoning a medium or spiritist, those who gain a message by a means other than the Lord. That is a very clear picture of what a false prophet is. Someone claiming to give a word of direction from the Lord that is not of the Lord. As the Lord said through Jeremiah:

“The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own mind.

Jeremiah 14v14

Notice a bit later that these prophets will come to a very bad ending (**Jeremiah 14v15**).

From **Jeremiah 14v14** we can see what the false prophet does, so let us use that verse to help us understand what a true prophet of God is and how the Lord works through him.

As we have seen before, the prophet does not choose to be a prophet. A true prophet is always sent by God. They have a clear calling from the Lord and go in response to that call. The prophet does not choose the time, the place or the message; all of that is from the Lord and this in itself shows the need to die to self, to die to our own prejudice, politics and national pride, because the message the prophet is given may well go against the inbuilt desires of the prophet himself as we see in the account of Jonah. For we see in **Jonah 1v1** that the message the Lord gave to Jonah was not to a people that he wanted to see blessed, quite the opposite. Jonah would have been quite happy for them to have been destroyed (**Jonah 4v2**).

The next thing to think about as we consider the messages delivered by prophets is that they are almost always warnings from God. True prophets from God do not have a reputation for bringing glad tidings, they are those who deliver the truth, usually to those who are hard of heart.

We read in **2 Chronicles 18v1-17** how the kings of Israel and Judah decided to go and attack Ramoth Gilead and so the king of Israel gathered together about 400 prophets who instantly gave him the answer he wanted to hear. However, the king of Judah wanted to hear from a real godly prophet rather than an ear tickler and so Micaiah was brought before the kings. The king of Israel was not happy about this, in fact it says he hated Micaiah, because he always prophesied bad news

(2 Chronicles 18v7). The reason Micaiah was always the bearer of bad news was because the king of Israel was in rebellion against the Lord. Micaiah gave the kings the word of the Lord and as a reward got locked up (**2 Chronicles 18v26**). Who would want to be a true prophet of God if that is going to be the outcome?

This really brings us back to the need to have learnt the servant lessons of having died to self, of having crucified the flesh and to be truly seeking after the Kingdom of God because our flesh has its own set of desires. Those desires can be very subtle, but so often we want God to want what we want. To agree with our politics, our view of the world, of who we see as godly and ungodly to favour our family and friends and to work against our enemies. We also need to be aware that our fleshly desire to feel wanted and appreciated can cause us to want to change the message.

At the same time, if we allow our pride to get in the way, we start to see ourselves as superior, the instrument of Gods wrath; this attitude pollutes the message as it will lose the love aspect of God. For even when the Lord declares his anger and judgement through the prophet, it is always done as a loving Heavenly Father who desires to see His children come to repentance. When we see the Lord reveal his message to the great prophets such as Daniel we see that rather than talking down to those around him, he recognised that he too was a sinner and was the first to confess his sin (**Daniel 9v1-6**), we see again it is a message of power given in humility and love.

This is especially important as we think about the messages that prophets have given in scripture. Rarely do we read of a prophet turning up to say "God is happy with you!". The prophets tend to be sent when Gods people have gone astray or when they are about to face great trials. If we think about this it makes spiritual sense. For when God's people are walking in obedience, when they are seeking the Lord for themselves and walking in His ways, the Lord is able to speak to those people directly. However, as our hearts harden towards the Lord through sin, then it becomes harder for the Holy Spirit to convict us until we become so hardened that our ears become blocked to the truth of God. It is at this point that the Lord sends in a prophet, someone who will deliver a message to those who have hardened their heart and rejected His convictions. When you think of a scenario like that we start to see that the repentance in Nineveh (**Jonah 3v19**) was actually a rare situation. Sadly, most of the time the prophet was sent to a people who had become so hard hearted towards God that they just rejected the message because it did not offer them what they wanted. It is one of those things that makes the prophets life so tough and shows again the great need to be close to the Lord. For when we look at someone like Jeremiah, we see a prophet who gave the message as he should have, yet was totally rejected throughout his entire ministry. In fact the strange thing about Jeremiah is that apart from his scribe, the only person who agreed with his message was the conquering Babylonian commander (**Jeremiah 40v1-3**).

Another type of message the prophet can be given is seen in **Acts 21v11**. This time it is the prophet Agabus and he brings a message of warning and encouragement to Paul as he announces that Paul will be bound and taken to Jerusalem. The message is important for Paul because it is a confirmation to him that he is walking the right path and that although things, from the worlds point of view, might look bad. God knows what is happening and will be with him through the struggles. You would think that a message like this would be readily accepted by God's people, but notice how in **Acts 21v12**, the people, rather than gathering around Paul in prayer and asking God to strengthen him for what lies ahead, instead plead with Paul to abandon his plans to return to Jerusalem. At the same time we also need to understand that Agabus would also have had a tough time with this message. How much easier it would have been for him to make a message up to tell Paul to abandon his plans. Here again we see the need for the prophet to be able to deliver the

message from the Lord even when friendships are involved. We see similar situations for Nathan the prophet in the times of King David. In **2 Samuel 7v1-2** King David has this idea about building a temple for God. A vision that even Nathan was enthusiastic about and yet he was able to put his natural enthusiasm aside and humble himself and go back to David with a message that he was not to be the one to build the temple. Later we see that it was Nathan who was tasked with confronting king David with his sin with Bathsheba (**2 Samuel 12v1-13**). A prophet needed to be sent because David had hardened his heart as he overlooked his sin. Nathan had to overcome any friendship with the David or any fear of the king's position to deliver a message of rebuke, not an easy situation to be in. It would have been so easy to be the false prophet and offer false hope and comfort, yet Nathan delivered the word just as God had commanded him.

At this point we also need to look at the dangers a prophet can so easily fall into, for becoming a false prophet is a place that is easy to slide into.

Most of these spring from either pride or the fear of men and so once again show us just how crucial it is for anyone with a prophetic ministry to stay humbled before the Lord.

One of the biggest dangers, and this applies to any ministry, is that the ministry takes over our relationship with the Lord. An area that I have to be careful of is that I spend a lot of time seeking the Lord about what to preach and teach which in itself is a good thing, however, the danger is that my relationship with the Lord starts to revolve around preparing messages. So no longer am I seeking the Lord about anything else and the other changes He may want in my life. My heart could start to grow hard through sin but I would be deaf to the Lord because all I'm seeking is the message for others. Before we know it the ministry has become more important than the one we minister for. We need to always keep in mind that the job of the priest was to minister unto the Lord and through that minister to the people. If we get that back to front then other issues will quickly follow.

When the ministry starts to become the priority rather than the Lord himself, the next problem we face is that our relationship with the Lord slowly starts to deteriorate and we start to rely on self, rather than the Holy Spirit speaking into our lives as our hearts slowly harden. We start to deceive ourselves that all is well rather than humbly being able to see the truth. This becomes a problem when people start to expect a word from the Lord on demand and the prophet then feels pressured to deliver and so the prophet starts to slip into the delusions of his own mind just to please the people and keep his reputation.

The solution is easy. We need to tell the person we must seek the Lord first for His advice and wait patiently for His answer as Jeremiah and Zechariah said so well: "The word of the Lord came to me..." (**Jeremiah 1v2, Zechariah 4v8**), however as pressure builds our pride so often causes us to miss this step and just prophecy whatever comes to mind. To pass on our judgements rather than the Lord's. At this point we are in great danger of going from being a prophet of God to someone guilty of the sin of divination, of seeking a word other than from the Lord. He has slipped to nothing more than a spiritual fortune teller! For one of the things we need to understand is that there are times when the Lord does not speak to people. If we look at **1 Samuel 28v6** we read that Saul has sought the Lord, but the Lord had not answered. Why had the Lord not answered? Because Saul was in sin. A prophet should not feel pressured, the word of the Lord comes when it comes. If the prophet is not careful they will finish up being used as an alternate route to God, an alternative to Christ.

The final danger is that as the prophets relationship with the Lord fails, the pressures build and the Lord does not speak, so instead of waiting, the prophet steals someone else's word or vision. We read about this in **Jeremiah 23v30**, how as the prophets spent no time in the Lords presence, instead they copied each others words, assuming the other had heard and wanting to be part of the 'club' when in fact none of them had truly heard from the Lord. Each one out of shame and pride was hiding the fact that they had not heard for themselves and was making it up.

A final thought on the subject of prophetic ministry is for those who seek out the prophets. Why are you seeking a prophetic word? Why are you not seeking the Lord for yourself?

So often we desire to have our flesh pampered by a nice word from our friendly prophet, a nice ear tickler who wants to make us feel happy in our sin. False prophets prosper because people would rather go to them than seek the Lord for themselves, people want a short cut. Let us get our own house in order and make sure that we are seeking after the Lord and not trying to get someone else to do it for us. The whole point of Jesus dying on the cross was to make a way for each one of us to be able to come to the Father (**John 14v6**). If we don't get that sorted out then the Lord may well have to send us a prophet, but it will not be a message of comfort that he brings, rather a call to repentance.