

# Resting in a Received Ministry

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Scripture is filled with commands to wait on the Lord (Psalm 27:14; 37:34; Isaiah 8:17; etc.). While the contexts of these and other “wait” imperatives are varied and often relate to the Lord’s eschatological deliverance, the pattern of waiting is normative for the believer (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:7; Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 3:12). Coupled with these commands are the verses that instruct us to rest in the Lord (Psalm 46:10; cf. Hebrews 3–4), abide in the Lord (John 15:1–8), and feed on his faithfulness (Psalm 37:3–4).

From these core biblical ideas, we can begin to formulate an understanding of what kind of ministry pleases the Lord. Is it one that does great things to impress God? Or one that abides in Christ and works rigorously from a place of spiritual rest? Surely, it is the latter. You might call this a “received ministry.”

A received ministry stands on the foundation of the gospel; an achieved ministry seeks to contribute something to God’s already-sufficient work. In principle, a received ministry coheres with Charles Spurgeon’s warning against an “unconverted ministry” (see his first lecture, “The Minister’s Self-Watch,” in his *Lectures to My Students*). Yet, an achieved ministry not only shows up the unconverted. All genuine ministers are tempted to do great things for God without the promise of God’s power and presence. This is why a received ministry is so vital.

## What Does the Bible Say About Received Ministry?

In at least four instances, the New Testament describes ministry as “received.” First, John the Baptist understood his calling as received from the Lord. When questioned about losing disciples to Jesus he said,

A person cannot *receive* even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:27–30)

John’s sense of “receipt” comes from the fact that he was sent by God. Just as Jesus was “sent” by his heavenly father—a theologically and missiologically rich term in John’s Gospel—so John received his ministry through the mission he received.

Next, Paul says twice he received his ministry from the Lord: “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that

I *received* from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). Likewise in Romans 1:5 he says he "received" grace and apostleship to bring the gospel to the nations. Zealous for the Lord, Paul sought to achieve great righteousness in Israel (see Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:3–8), but the Lord had other plans. On the road to Damascus, Paul repented and received his new commission (Acts 9). This may lead one to believe a "received ministry" is only for prophets and apostles. But that does not hold up, because there are others who also "received" a ministry.

For instance, Paul says to Archippus in Colossians 4:17, "See that you *fulfill the ministry that you have received* in the Lord," and to Timothy "Endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, *fulfill your ministry*" (2 Timothy 4:5). From these instructions, we close in on a normative pattern for ministers of the gospel. Like the priests of old, we do not call ourselves to ministry (Hebrews 5:4). Rather, we wait on the Lord, we press into knowing him, and we pray for him to make known our calling.

## **The Role of the Church**

The final piece in this ministry puzzle is the necessary role of the church. For example, when the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to Galatia, they were worshiping, praying, and teaching in the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1–3). Even when the "call" came, the church continued to pray and seek the Lord. In short, Paul clearly received his ministry by the Spirit, but that didn't overturn the role of the church. Ultimately, the Spirit moved in and through the local church to send them out. The same is true today.

The local church is the place where believers are recognized (through baptism), gifts are cultivated (through service), and ministries are motivated (through gospel preaching and evangelistic praying). As individuals delight themselves in the Lord and exercise their gifts in the church, the elders oversee ways for growing members to use their gifts.(1) In this way, ministry carried out in the context of the local church protects zealous servants from running ahead of the Lord and sluggish servants from dragging their feet (like the horse and mule in Psalm 32:9). In both of these ways, the church wards off proud ministries of achievement, as it creates an environment where disciples are waiting to receive marching orders.(2)

## **Receiving Your Ministry**

In the end, every gifted believer should fulfill the ministry they have received from the Lord. Maturity, passions, vocations, and experience all play a role in an individual's calling to ministry. Every ministry is as unique as the person who fulfills them, and as personal as the God who makes them. Truly, ministry that bears fruit for God's glory is not something we dream up and decide on, so that God can bless our ideas. Rather, like everything else God does, genuine ministry comes from God, is accomplished by God, and is ultimately for God. In this way, we should crucify self-made ministries of achievement, and fulfill the ministries we've received from the Lord instead.

The idea of a 'received ministry' is something I received nearly fifteen years ago. Since then, God has used this truth to crucify much pride and create pastoral endurance. More than that, God has proven himself faithful to open doors in ministry as I have learned to wait on him. I praise God for withholding many desired positions in ministry that were more about me than him. In their place, I received even better (even if more difficult) opportunities to serve him.

May we who labor in the valleys of the shadow of death continue to abide in this principle: True ministry is not achieved; it is received.

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(1) To be sure, received ministry can take place in other ministry communities, but even then such parachurches are retrofitting principles that originate in the church.

(2) Interestingly, Archippus who received his ministry in Colossians 4:17 is called a "fellow soldier" in Philemon 2.