

Three Ministry Truths

Series: Summer at Grace 2021

Isaiah 55:10-11; Philippians 2:12-13; John 5

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Good morning, Grace Covenant Church. My name is Jeremiah and I'm part of the staff here at Grace.

As we begin our learning time this morning I'd like to you to think back to your first ministry experience where you had a front row seat to the Spirit of God doing something amazing in another person's life. Do you remember that moment? Remember that individual? Maybe you shared your faith with somebody who chose to trust Christ and to follow Him. Or you pleaded with God to change a person and the Spirit responded and the heart grew softer. Or you walked faithfully with a friend who was going through one of those darkest valleys. You watched as God overcame their despair with supernatural peace.

Does it get any better than that? I mean, I am convinced that there is nothing better in life than ministry. There is no greater high than being a part of God the Creator using you to impact the life and the eternity of another soul, of another human being.

In the years that I've been involved in ministry, there are a few things that I've learned along the way. There are three ministry truths that I've learned from Scripture that I've come to live by as a pastor, and I want to share those with you this morning.

And what I've discovered is that I think about one or more of these truths almost daily. Every decision I make when it comes to encounters or ministry experiences that I have is going to be informed by one or more of these truths. And even as ministry leaders on staff, our conversations are often peppered by these three truths that come to us by an Old Testament prophetic book, from a New Testament letter, and then one of the gospels—all over Scripture.

And I believe that if your ministry playbook only had three plays, these are the three you need. Does the Bible have more to say about how we're to approach ministry as believers? Absolutely. There's much more in there. But I'd say if there were three truths that you were to looking to pursue, to stand on as you did relational discipleship with another person, these three truths will be a sturdy foundation for you. They'll hold you steady.

And it might help, I think, if we start this morning by defining what I mean by “ministry.” How are we using that this morning? Ministry is loving someone by guiding them to become like Christ in all of life. That’s what we mean by ministry today. And these three ministry truths are going to help you to do that to the best of your ability. These three truths will help you if you’re mentoring someone, maybe a student in our youth ministry, or a younger woman in our new Cultivate ministry. They’ll help you to do that effectively. These three ministry truths will guide you as you journey alongside a friend who’s trapped in some old sinful habits. These three truths will show you a way forward as you relate to your nineteen-year-old son or daughter who lives with you and is dealing with an addiction of some kind.

What difference will these three truths make a difference in your life? They’ll make an incredible difference. They’ll motivate you to minister, but at the same time they remove the pressure and the anxiety that can come with interacting with an eternal soul. They’ll help you to define success and failure in ministry. God can use these truths to pacify you in the midst of ministry heartbreak. These truths can be used to help you understand when you’re ministering to someone and maybe it’s time to stop it. And there are times when the best thing that you could do is stop.

So, these three truths are going to impact your ministry, but boy, will they change your life as you apply them to your own life first.

So, are you ready to hear them? All right. Well, hold on—the third ministry truth we’re going to share this morning is probably the hardest to apply, and yet the most important. So, hold on for that one.

1. God’s Word Never Returns Empty

What’s the first truth? What is this first truth right out of Scripture that we find that we can apply to our ministry as believers? Here it is. God’s word never returns empty. When the word of God goes out to someone, it always accomplishes His purposes for it. It never returns empty. And we see this truth in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah was one of the prophets that was sent to the southern kingdom of Judah, and he went to Judah to call them back to God, to call on them to repent of their rebellion and turn back to the Lord. And in Isaiah chapter 55 He tells his people that His word that they are hearing will surely achieve what He intends for it to.

Look in Isaiah 55, verses 10 and 11. See what the Lord says. God says, **“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”**

God’s Word never returns empty. It always produces fruit. It doesn’t return void. It doesn’t come back empty-handed. God’s Word never returns empty. That’s what we see in this passage. And there are two things we have to see about the Word and about the work of ministry from Isaiah 55.

And the first is this, that it’s God’s Word, not ours. The Lord assures us in verse 11, “My word ... will not return to me empty.”

As you mentor a student in our youth ministry or a younger woman in our Cultivate ministry, we have to remember that it’s the Bible, it’s Scripture, it’s God’s Word that we’re bringing, not our own. It’s God’s wisdom that we’re sharing, not ours.

And if it’s God’s Word that we share, then the Lord promises that those words won’t be wasted. And then look at what the passage promises. If we’re sharing our word or our wisdom with another person, what does the passage promise? Nothing. There are no promises. Sure, there’s real value in our wisdom, perhaps. But God doesn’t assure us that it’s going to achieve any particular purpose that He has in that person’s life. He says, “It’s my Word that won’t return to me empty.” So, if you’re looking for a definition of ministry success, it’s right here in Isaiah 55, verse 11. Ministry success is sharing God’s Word in love and leaving the results to Him. We leave it to Him to make sure that His Word doesn’t come back empty-handed. It’s God’s Word, not ours. That’s first.

Second, we see that it’s God’s work, not ours. Look again at verse 11. The Lord tells us, **“My word will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it..”**

You see, our hope is never in our ability to change another person. Our hope is always in God to change a person. Our hope is set firmly on Him and Him alone. Because it’s not our desires—it’s His purposes, His desires, that He says will be accomplished in another person’s life.

And the reality is that we don’t always know what the Spirit of God is doing in another person’s life. We don’t always know what God’s intentions are for a person. We’re not always

aware of that. God doesn't share that with us often times. And that's what He's telling us just a few verses earlier in verses 8 and 9. You can see it in Isaiah 55. In verse 8 God reminds us that **“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”** See, His thoughts are as high above ours as the heavens are above the earth. And right now, we may have the Perseverance rover 230 million miles away on Mars, but guess what? We have never transcended the gap between the heavens and the earth, between God's ways and our ways. So, we don't know often times, right? We don't know what the Spirit is wanting to do in another person's life. And you know what? That's okay. God has said it's okay. Because He knows. He knows the work that He needs to do in another person's life. All that we do is share God's Word in love and leave the results to Him. We share what we believe the Spirit of God is putting on our hearts to say to this person, and then we say, *Okay, God. It's all Yours. You do what You want to do. Not what I think needs to happen. Don't use my word. Use Your word and use Your work to change this person's life in the way that they need.*

Look, there are many times in ministry when you share God's truth. You share the Word with somebody, and especially when it's a tough truth and you take a step back and you see the effect that it's had, it can look like you've done more damage than good. Have you experienced that before, when you step back and it looks like this person's life is like a yard of St. Augustine grass in early spring after you've taken a hard rake to it and gotten all that dead grass out? Have you done that before? For about four weeks it looks more like a cow pasture than a yard. You can see more dirt than grass. It looks like nothing is happening. There's no movement, there's no growth. It is dead. But if you'll just wait, if you'll just keep watering and keep waiting for the four weeks—boom! It will burst back to life. And it will be green and it will be full and it will be beautiful.

So much of ministry is lived in that four weeks. You've shared God's Word with somebody, you've shared His truth with someone, and it looks like nothing's happening, right? *Whatever's happening, only God knows, because I'm seeing nothing good, maybe I even brought more harm than health in sharing what I did.* And we don't know. We don't see what God is up to. But it will look like absolute deadness—no growth, no movement, no anything. And it can look that way for four weeks. Sometimes it takes forty years.

It took even longer than that for my Uncle Gary. See, at a young age he heard some of those truths about God. They were planted in him. And yet, for the next several decades he

mostly left behind pain and suffering in his wake. There were mistreated wives, there were neglected children. Most of his life looked like the wreckage you see across a lonely field after a 737 goes down. And then at fifty-five years of age he was told that he had late-stage cancer. He was on his deathbed. So, my dad and I jumped in the car and made the thousand-mile trek to Iowa to be with him in his final days. And when we walked into his room where he lay, his first words to us were: “Why are you here?” And in those next couple of weeks those words about God, those truths about the Lord that had been planted decades earlier, he heard those again at a deeper level. And his heart responded ... boom! He trusted Jesus, he chose to be a follower of His, he became a child of God. And my dad said that after he made that decision, for the first time in his brother’s life he saw him smile. His snarled countenance softened and brightened because he was a new creation.

Those St. Augustine runners had taken off in his life and it was beautiful. And that’s what his final three days were like.

And in ministry, the reality is that we often don’t know the title of the chapter that God is writing in someone else’s life until much later. We just don’t know. God is the only one that knows what is happening when it’s actually being written.

And so, what does that mean? It means that we can rest. It means that we can trust that God is still at work when we saw no movement, when we see no evidence of life. It means that we can have confidence that our Heavenly Father is still working when everything looks hopeless.

Do you know what ministry success is? It’s sharing God’s Word in love and leaving the results to Him. It’s not up to us. It’s up to Him. And we let Him have that.

The first ministry truth we have to grasp is that God’s Word does not return empty. When it’s His word and His work, He will make sure it accomplishes what He intends for it to. And we can trust that, we can rest in that.

2. We Can’t Change without God, But He Won’t Do It without Us

There’s a second ministry truth that we need to believe and apply. And that’s that we can’t change without God, but He won’t do it without us. We can’t change without God, but He won’t do it without us.

And we discover this truth in the letter to the Philippian church. Because pride and disunity were threatening this wonderful church that was so close to the Apostle's heart. And Paul writes to this church, and in Philippians chapter 2 he paints this magnificent picture of Jesus' humble obedience to the Father. And he calls on the Philippians and on us to emulate Jesus by humbling surrendering to the good work that the heavenly Father wants to do in our lives. And Paul tells them, *We can't change without God, but He won't do it without us.* That's how he writes it in Philippians chapter 2.

Look at verses 12 and 13. Paul says, **“My dear friends, my beloved, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.”**

Do you see it in the passage? We can't change without God (**“... it is God who is at work in you to will and to act according to His good purpose”**). But He won't do it without us (**“... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling”**).

Look, so much of Christian theology is separated by a single preposition, and this passage is a prime example of that. Look at the prepositions that Paul uses here. Paul doesn't say that we're to “work for” our salvation, right? We could never earn God's forgiveness. No, he says we're to **“work out”** our salvation. And how do we do that? What does that mean?

Look at the next preposition that Paul uses. Paul says, “God is at **work in** you.” You see, in the Christian life we're only working out what God has already worked in through the Spirit. God gives us this gift of salvation, and all we have to do is unwrap it and enjoy it and apply it with His help to every area of our lives. We can't change without God, but He won't do it without us. So, that's what the Christian life looks like. And this word that Paul uses for God's “work” in us is where we get the word “energy” from. He's saying, *Look, God is going to energize you, He's going to empower you to make these changes. You're not on your own. He's the one that's going to be doing that good work in you. You can trust Him. He'll give you the desire to change, and then the power to change. It's a work of God from beginning to end.*

We can't change without God, but He won't do it without us. And as we minister to people, as we serve people, we've got to help them understand that reality.

And what about the fear and trembling? Why are those involved? Where do those come from? Well, the reason why there is fear and trembling is because we work out our salvation in the presence of God Almighty, and also in the face of these grave dangers of pride in our hearts

and disunity in the church. Yeah, those are things to be scared of. It says, **“Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”**

So, as we serve others, as we minister to others, what we need to help them see is that we just do the surrendering, God does the energizing. We provide the willingness, God provides the power. We can’t change without God, but He won’t do it without us. We simply work out what He has already worked in.

Christian growth, growth in the Christian life, is putting your sails up and allowing the Spirit of God to blow through and take you wherever He wants you to go. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says this. He likens the Spirit to the wind. He says, **“The Spirit blows wherever He desires.”** And so, if you want God to **“be at work in you to will and to act according to His good purpose,”** you know what you’re going to have to do? You’re going to have to raise those sails. You put those sails up, the sails that He has gifted to you, the sails that He will give you the desire and the energy to raise. You raise those sails, and you watch as the Spirit of God blows through your life and takes you to where He wants you to go. That’s how Christian growth works. You can’t change without God, but He won’t do it without us.

About a decade ago, a buddy of mine and I both realized that we were angry men. And we were tired of being angry men and we didn’t want to become angry old men. And so, we prayed this prayer together. We said, “God, I’m an angry person and I can’t stop. I can’t fix me. I can’t do anything about this. I’ve tried. You’re going to have to step in. You’re going to have to fix me. You’re going to have to change me.” And we invited Him to do that. And then together we started, basically, the 12-step program. We took those twelve steps—actually we started the 8-step program, because we looked through and realized, *We’re already about four steps in here.* We’d already admitted that we were powerless over our anger. We believed in the higher power. So, we jumped into this 8-step program and we raised our sails. I took a personal inventory of my anger. I went to every person in my life who had been significantly impacted by my anger and I repented and I asked for forgiveness. And we just followed the steps. It took us about a year and a half. But by the time we were done, wow—the Spirit of God had blown through and taken us to a place of greater freedom and peace and patience. And God’s had to do that again and again in my life—usually right after one of my children was born, actually.

Christian growth—it’s raising your sails and letting the Spirit of God come in and take you where you need to go, whether you realize you need to go there or not, He will get you there.

That's what it looks like. And don't get me wrong—surrendering to the Spirit hurts. It hurts bad. **But the pain of surrendering is always less than that pain of staying the same or trying to fix yourself.** So, get after it. Help those that you minister to get after that. We can't change without God, but He won't do it without us.

So, if you're helping a friend who is stuck in some old, sinful habits, your call to them is to hurry up and get tired—tired of trying to fix themselves, sick of staying the same, so that they might tag God in to do the work that only He can do. Exhaustion and fatigue can be wonderful companions if they are what motivate you to stop trying to fix it yourself and say, “God, please, you've got to help me. You've got to heal me. I can't do this.” That's how we help them to put their sails up so the Spirit of God might take them to where He wants them to go.

God's Word never returns empty-handed. We can't change without God, but He won't do it without us. Do you believe those realities? They're true.

3. Do You Want to Get Well?

And how about that third one? How about that third ministry truth? Again, it is probably the hardest to apply, but it's also probably the most important. And yet, if I'm honest, I'd have to say that this is the one that I regret being true. But you know what? It is. It is true. And that final truth is: Do you want to get well?

Whenever we're working with somebody, whenever we're ministering to somebody, we always have to be asking, “Do you want to get well?” That's what we're listening for. That's what we're seeking. And do you know why that question is so important? It's because Jesus asked it first. In the Gospel of John, chapter 5, this is the question that Jesus asks a man who had been paralyzed. He'd been an invalid for four decades. And when Jesus comes in, before he tells him to pick up his mat and walk, he asks him this deeply insightful question: **“Do you want to get well?”** And he wasn't just asking, “Do you want your legs to be restored?” And we know that, because at the end of the narrative, after Jesus had healed the man, in verse 14 Jesus tells him, warns him, **“You need to stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”** Jesus was asking, *Do you want your heart to be well? Not just your body?* He was asking him if he was willing to give up whatever sin he was holding onto or that was holding onto him, that he might be well, that he might be healed.

And so, this is the question that we always have to be asking those we minister to, especially when there's a sin that they're holding onto. *Do you want to get well? Do you want to be healed?* And it's such a significant question, because if a person doesn't want to get well, if they don't want to change, if they don't want to grow, they won't. It's simply not possible. Remember that last truth? God won't do it without us. He will not make us well against our will.

When Dallas Willard writes about what it takes for a person to experience spiritual transformation, he says there are three ingredients, and two of them we can't talk about today. But he says that one of the key ingredients that you need to be transformed by the Spirit of God is intention. He says that a person must intend to get well. Why is that? Because change doesn't happen by accident or by force. You have to intend to get well. And what's involved with intention? Two things. One is, there has to be a desire to get well. And second, there has to be a decision to get well. The emotion and the will both have to be engaged. Emotionally you have to desire, you have to want to be better, to get healed. And volitionally you have to decide. You have to choose that with God's help you're going to change. So, emotionally and volitionally, you have to be engaged in both ways. It's kind of like learning to play the piano. That always starts with someone who intends to learn to play the piano—or at least a parent who intends for them to learn to play the piano. You have to want to learn. You have to decide to learn. Spiritual transformation requires that we intend to get well.

An important question is, how do you know when someone doesn't intend to get well? What are the signs that tell you this person---it's not time yet—they don't want to get better, they don't want to be healed. How do you know that?

I'd say there are two clues. There are more than this, but for this morning, there are two clues that I would encourage you to be looking for. One, if they're all talk and little action. If you're mentoring someone and you're asking them to do things that will help them to get unstuck and they are agreeing to do those things, but they are consistently not following through, they don't want to get well. They're not ready to be healed. The best thing that you could do is to hit pause, to stop meeting with them for a time. Be praying for them, but stop meeting with them, because if you keep meeting with them you're wasting their time and yours. In fact, they may even be worse off because they think they're checking off that "meet with a mentor" box, so they must be doing better. And yet, they're not. So, if they're all talk and little action, it may be time to hit pause, to stop, to wait, to pray.

John the Baptist said, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” And this is a person who talks repentance, but their tree is barren. So, all talk, little action.

Second is if the person is playing the victim. When someone uses second- and third-person pronouns to talk about you are to blame or how their spouse is all at fault, that’s someone who’s not ready to get well either. What you’re listening for, what you’re waiting for, what you’re praying for, is this turn that happens where they begin to use first-person pronouns and they talk about how they’re responsible, how “I” need to change, how the Spirit of God wants to transform “me.” That’s what you’re listening for. And when you start to hear it, that’s when you know they’re ready. They’ve turned this corner and they’re ready for God to work His magic in their heart. And so, you’re listening for that.

When a person is all talk and little action, when they are committed to be a victim, it’s time to stop. It’s time to wait. It’s time to hit pause on that relationship until they get to a place where they intend to get well.

And look, if this sounds harsh or un-Christian, let’s just consider for a moment how Jesus ministered. The one who was perfect love, Jesus, when He ran into a hard heart or someone who didn’t want to get well, He didn’t impose Himself on them. He didn’t force them to change. He didn’t do that. In fact, did you know that the four gospels count twenty-six times—twenty-six times!—when Jesus met a hard heart or someone who wasn’t ready to get well, and He walked away or He let them walk away. Twenty-six times—just consider that for a moment. Twenty-six times I might have chased after the person, because I don’t know any better. But Jesus didn’t do that. When our Savior ran into a hardened heart, somebody who didn’t want to get well, He didn’t berate them, He didn’t shame them. But He also didn’t force change on them. He grieved, but He stopped, too. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, but not everybody who is lost is ready to be found. Jesus knew that. And so, He was willing to wait. He was willing to wait until a person intended to get well, they desired, again, with His help, to get well, they wanted to be healed. And so, He was willing to walk away and wait for that moment, if and when it came.

A friend once told me this: “Never stand between a hard heart and their rock bottom.” Don’t save the prodigal from the pig slop—not out of cruelty, but out of love. A daily serving of pig slop might be the very thing they need to be hungry for the fatted calf. Never stand between a hard heart and their rock bottom.

So, if your nineteen-year-old son or daughter who lives with you is addicted to some substance or maybe just their own ego and they refuse help, it could be that the very support you think you're giving them is what is propping them up so that they are suspended three feet above rock bottom. It could be that you're keeping them from the very pain that God could use to bring them to their senses. And sometimes the greatest act of love that you could ever show as a parent is to put their belongings on the front porch and change the locks, all with tears streaming down your face and prayers going up to heaven.

Do you want to get well?

There's a time to stop and allow space for God to work on somebody's heart. You stop, you pray, you wait, you grieve, you pray some more. And you remember: this reality that God is still at work, that it's His work, not mine. So, even when we stop, He doesn't.

And what do you do if the person hits their rock bottom and they cry out to God for help? What do you do if they intend to get well, they desire and decide to get well? Well, first you rejoice with the angels in heaven. You praise God that the one who is lost is ready to be found. And then you dive back in. You join them in this journey of becoming like Christ in this area of their life, or in all of their life. And you rejoin them in that, because now you won't be wanting them to change more than they do. Now you won't be trying to fix them or work harder than they're working on the change that needs to happen in their life. Now you're a friend walking shoulder-to-shoulder down this path towards healing and growth that God wants to see in their life.

Conclusion

Grace Covenant Church, you hear it regularly here: Every believer is a minister. And look, if you want to minister in a way that is most fulfilling, in a way that makes the most impact, in a way that will bring God the most glory, then you add these three ministry truths to the top of your ministry playbook: God's Word never returns empty; we can't change without God, but He won't do it without us; and do you want to get well? We have to wait until they want to get well.

Would you pray with me? Let's ask God to help us apply these truths to our lives and to our ministry.

Father God, we are Your workmanship, and You tell us that we have been created in Christ Jesus to do the good works that You yourself have prepared in advance for us to do. So, Father, I pray that You'd give us the courage through Your Spirit to step into those good works and the ministry that You've prepared us for. And that as we walk through those doors, I'd ask that for each one of us that we would be applying these three truths to our hearts, that we would be convinced in our own lives, we'd be experiencing these realities: that Your Word doesn't return void; that we can't change without You, and You won't do it without us; and that we have to want to get well. Lord, that is, that we apply those to our own souls, Father, and then we would be ready to apply them in the lives of others as we mentor them, as we disciple them, as we encourage them, as we support them. Father, would you help us to do that and to do it all with Your power and Your Spirit living inside of us? In Jesus' name. Amen.