

The Priority of Ministry For God's Servant

Our study is from Ezekiel 2:8-3:27. I want to quickly review chapters one and two of the book of Ezekiel in order to provide the background for our study. In chapter one, we were told the priest Ezekiel was given a vision of the glory of God. In the vision, the prophet saw a dark cloud with a center that glowed like hot metal, four cherubim, four wheels and something like a throne on top of the cloud shrouded in light, appearing as a rainbow. The vision of God was spectacular and awesome. Ezekiel fell down with his face to the ground, and then Yahweh spoke. What an introduction! Ezekiel saw the glory of God in all its magnificence.

Then in chapter two, verse 1, Yahweh called Ezekiel, "Human." God did not call him by his name. God just addressed him as "human." The vision and the name, human, were designed to display God's glory and to humble Ezekiel to prepare him so that he could be used of God. In verse 2, God empowered him with the Holy Spirit. Then in verses 3-5, Yahweh

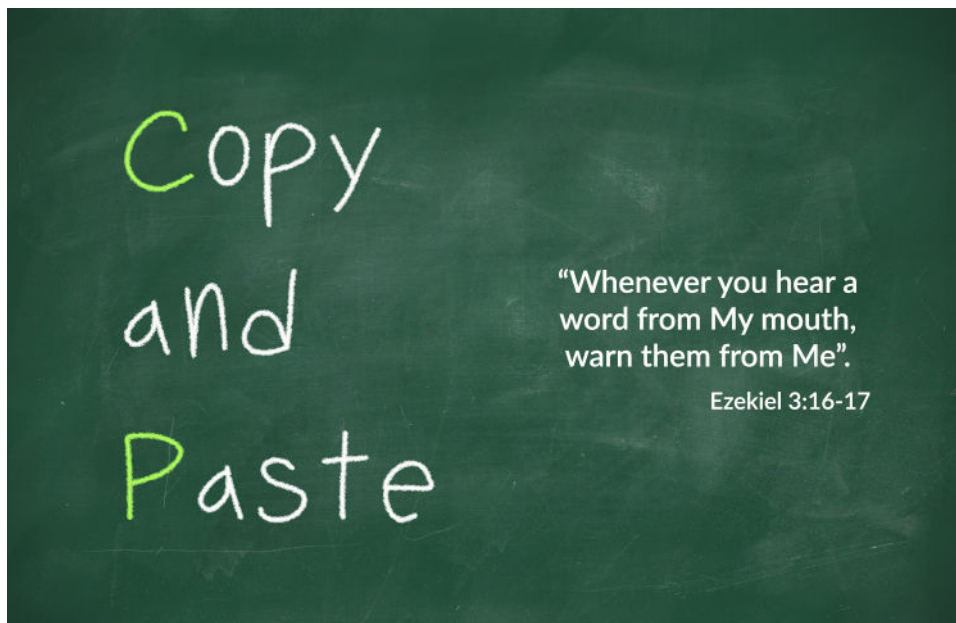
told him that he was to go and speak to the sons of Israel. The spiritual condition of these people was terrible. God said they were rebellious, hard-faced, and hard-hearted. Ezekiel was warned they would attack him with their words, but he

was not to be discouraged. Rather, he was to boldly speak God's words realizing "they are rebellious." Imagine having to speak to people who will not listen to you and do not like what you say. That was the call of God for Ezekiel. What a call! Most of us have illusions of honor, joy, and great spiritual

encouragement when we minister for the Lord. But that was not the ministry that God gave to Ezekiel. His call was one that most of us would not want. He would preach and the people might listen, but they will reject his message.

PERFORMING MINISTRY. Our study continues God's call of Ezekiel. We are going to discover the pattern of ministry that God wanted him to follow. This pattern of ministry should be an example for us today. The study begins in chapter two, verse 8 and continues to the end of chapter three. There are two sections to our study and four principles. The first section is Ezekiel 2:8-3:15. In this section God told Ezekiel how to perform ministry. We are going to learn three principles in this section.

Eagerly Listen and Obey God. The first principle in this section is found in Ezekiel 2:8-3:3. In verse 8a God is speaking. He says,



Now you, son of man, listen to what I am speaking to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house. Ezekiel 2:8a (NASB)

The first thing Yahweh did was to give a summary of how Ezekiel was to perform his ministry. First,

Yahweh commanded Ezekiel to listen. Frankly, that is a very common problem in the church. There are believers who do not open their Bible when the Bible is taught, and they do not listen. Recently, I was thrilled when a pastor told the congregation to open their Bibles and read along with him. Believ-

ers need to check if the teacher is accurately interpreting the Bible. I take notes when I listen to someone teach. It helps me to learn. But other people appear to be listening, but some are just daydreaming about something else. They are not carefully listening. They miss important details of what God has said. So, God tells Ezekiel, “Listen to what I am speaking to you.”

The second thing that Yahweh commanded Ezekiel was to not be like the people to whom he was being sent. We must not miss Yahweh’s message. Yahweh knows that we are so easily influenced by others in the community and in the church. Every church has a culture. In some churches, everyone comes dressed like they are going to the beach or to a picnic. In other churches, the men are wearing a nice shirt, perhaps a tie, and women are wearing dresses. New attenders may then change how they dress for services so that they are like everyone else in the church. Every church has a culture and people want to be accepted. The same is true about church attendance and the other ministries in the church. If the Sunday School classes or Bible studies are not well attended, then visitors notice that and many will not attend. If the leaders are late to arrive, the people will follow their example.

The leadership sets an example, and the people follow. It is very sad when the pastor is afraid to be different than the people. His fear of the people affects his own conduct and every area of his ministry. Also, the man of God must not allow people to affect what he teaches about the Word of God. The apostle Paul wrote believers in Thessalonica that he strove to please God—not the people. He followed the same principle that God gave to Ezekiel. He wrote this in 1 Thessalonians 2:4.

But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts. 1 Thessalonians 2:4 (NASB)

In some churches the congregation should focus on following Christ and not their leaders if the leaders are not behaving like Christ or are teaching error. So, the first principle of Yahweh’s servant is that he or she must listen and obey. Yahweh’s servant must be a godly man or woman! That is also true of elders and deacons in a church. Otherwise, God will

find someone else to do the ministry. That happened to Moses, and God then chose Joshua.

Study Until the Word of God Is Sweet. The second principle for performing ministry is given in Ezekiel 2:8b-3:3. Verses 8a-10 tell us that God commanded Ezekiel to,

Open your mouth and eat what I am giving you. Then I looked, and behold, a hand was extended to me; and lo, a scroll was in it. When He spread it out before me, it was written on the front and back, and written on it were lamentations, mourning and woe. Ezekiel 2:8b-10 (NASB)

Yahweh commanded, “Open your mouth and eat.” We are not told whose hand was extended out. But it will soon be clear that it was Yahweh’s hand. We are also told that Yahweh wanted Ezekiel to eat the scroll. The scroll symbolizes the Word of God. The scroll was written on the front and back. This is significant because most ancient scrolls were written on only one side. Most likely we are expected to understand that Yahweh had much to say.

We are told that Yahweh’s message was full of lamentations, mourning, and woe. That is a good description of chapters 4-32. Lamentations were typically a funeral song sung to a Hebrew poem. The Hebrew word for mourning or wailing refers to emotional words spoken by family members or others at a funeral. “Woe” would refer to wailing or an expression of great distress. So, Ezekiel was to eat the Word of God.

In Ezekiel 3:1-3 the command to eat the scroll is repeated and says that after he eats it, then he is to speak to the house of Israel.

Then He said to me, “Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and He fed me this scroll. He said to me, “Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving you.” Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth. Ezekiel 3:1-3 (NASB)

We should notice that in Ezekiel 2:8-3:2 Yahweh told Ezekiel four times to eat the scroll. Then after he ate it, he was to go and speak. This gives us a second principle that before

a servant of God speaks for God, whether sharing the gospel or sharing the Word of God, he must first study it until he is filled to overflowing with the Word of God. Colossians 3:16 communicates the same idea,

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Colossians 3:16 (NASB)

Every believer is commanded to let the word of Christ richly dwell within. This has the idea of the Word of God living inside. Here in Ezekiel, Yahweh said “fill your body.” Ezekiel was to be absorbed in the study of the word of God, and it would become sweet. This means that our goal for Bible study cannot be to teach it, preach it, or share it. Our goal must be to understand what God wrote and to be absorbed with it until it becomes like honey. Psalm 19:10 says that the law of the Lord is sweeter than honey. King David said in Psalm 119:103,

How sweet are Your words to my taste! Psalm 119:103 (NASB)

King David loved to read Yahweh’s words. The words of God were sweet.

I believe some Christians have missed the meaning of the phrase “the Word of God.” That phrase is not the title of a book. It is not some nice reference to the Bible. It is not something that we buy at a store. It is none of those things. The Word of God refers to words that Yahweh wrote. That is why we call the Bible the Word of God. When we read the Bible, it is like reading a letter or an email that our God in heaven wrote. Now I suspect that when someone you love sends an email to you, you are eager to read it. The Bible is the Word of God. It is like one long email. But His words are more important than any email. He wrote 66 books full of them. All of His “emails” have been put into the book that we call the Bible.

Some Christians are not very eager to read the Bible because they are not eager to learn what Yahweh wrote to them. Sadly, some believers find His Words boring and uninteresting due to their own sin. For other believers, that occurs because their

knowledge of the Bible is limited. They miss the joy because they have not read all of the email. They skip from paragraph to paragraph. But notice that God took the entire scroll and put it into Ezekiel’s mouth. Yahweh did not tear-off pieces and feed Ezekiel one piece at a time!

After Ezekiel ate the scroll, he was ready to go and speak. Now we have the second important principle in our study. Yahweh’s servants must be absorbed with the Word of God until it is as sweet as honey. Only then are they ready for ministry! The Lord’s servants are to study the Word until it sets their hearts on fire! Then they are ready to serve the Lord.

Then Faithfully Speak His Word. The third principle regarding how to do ministry is found in verses 4-11. Here are verses 4-7.

Then He said to me, “Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them. For you are not being sent to a people of unintelligible speech or difficult language, but to the house of Israel, nor to many peoples of unintelligible speech or difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. But I have sent you to them who should listen to you; yet the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, since they are not willing to listen to Me. Surely the whole house of Israel is stubborn and obstinate. Ezekiel 3:4-7 (NASB)

Yahweh told His servant to “go and speak My words.” I just love that statement—My words. He did not say preach a sermon you created or launch into some unrelated topic. Yahweh said that they will understand you, they will understand your language, but they are going to ignore your words. They will ignore you because they are stubborn and obstinate. The Hebrew for both words is better translated as “strong-forehead” and “stiff-heart.” That is, their hearts are insensitive to the Word of God. We must not miss the message. These people heard the Word of God, but they just ignored the sermon or the teaching - just as people today ignore the gospel.

Some people do not listen because they are not believers. There are unbelievers in the church who think they are going to heaven. They are tares. Many are morally good people. For some people, Christianity is part of their culture. Mom, dad, and people in their community claim to be Christians. They

enjoy being in church, the music, and the social connections, but they are not true believers and are not going to heaven.

The house of Israel was not stupid. They heard Ezekiel, but they ignored him. They rejected his message because they rejected Yahweh. This has always been true, and continues to be true today!

Then Yahweh told Ezekiel . . .

“Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces and your forehead as hard as their foreheads. Like emery harder than flint I have made your forehead. Do not be afraid of them or be dismayed before them, though they are a rebellious house.” Moreover, He said to me, “Son of man, take into your heart all My words which I will speak to you and listen closely. Go to the exiles, to the sons of your people, and speak to them and tell them, whether they listen or not, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD.’”
Ezekiel 3:8-11 (NASB)

Yahweh kept reminding the prophet that the people are rebellious. His ministry was going to be discouraging, and so the Lord will help him to not be discouraged. This is an important reminder for everyone who serves the Lord. The ministry can be very discouraging. Yahweh will help us to not be overwhelmed with discouragement. Yahweh told him to speak My Words whether they listen or not. This gives us our third principle. The servant of God must faithfully and accurately speak the Word of the Lord. He must not fail to do so.

But before we leave verse 10, notice that Yahweh once again repeated the second principle. He says, “Son of man, take into your heart all My words which I will speak to you and listen closely.” The Lord is pounding the point. His true servant will study the Word of God until he takes it all into his heart. He receives it and applies it to his heart. I believe that Yahweh is referring to an emotional response after His servant intellectually understands the message. This occurs only when the servant of the Lord has a sensitive heart.

TIME OF REST. Verses 12-15 is a transition section.

Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard a great rumbling sound behind me, “Blessed be the glory of the LORD in His place.” And I heard the sound of the wings of the living beings touch-

ing one another and the sound of the wheels beside them, even a great rumbling sound. So the Spirit lifted me up and took me away; and I went embittered in the rage of my spirit, and the hand of the LORD was strong on me. Then I came to the exiles who lived beside the river Chebar at Tel-abib, and I sat there seven days where they were living, causing consternation among them.
Ezekiel 3:12-15 (NASB)

We are told Ezekiel was lifted up by the Spirit. This refers to another vision. We are told that he heard a great rumbling sound behind him which said, “Blessed be the glory of the LORD in His place.” He heard the wings of the four living beings, and the sound of the wheels from the first vision. Then the vision ends. We do not know the purpose of this short vision. Maybe the announcement of the glory of the Lord was a reminder of the high calling that Ezekiel had just experienced.

In the last part of verse 14, we are told he was embittered in his spirit. But we are not told why he felt his way. Maybe he was upset at the difficulty of ministry. Who would want to speak for the Creator and be ignored? Who would want to hear God’s evaluation of the spiritual condition of one’s own people?

Then he arrived in the city of Tel-abib which was beside the river Chebar. The location of the city is unknown. We only know that it was somewhere along the Chebar River. The exiles from Judah were located there. Ezekiel sat there for seven days. It was a custom for people to take seven days to sorrow and recover from great emotional pain. That is what Ezekiel did. As he sat there, the people could not understand why.

PRIORITY IN MINISTRY. Then in verses 16-27, Yahweh gave Ezekiel the motivation for ministry. This is the second section. It is the priority for everyone who serves the Lord. Ezekiel wrote,

At the end of seven days the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me.” Ezekiel 3:16-17 (NASB)

Ezekiel said Yahweh had made him a watchman. He was to speak to the house of Israel. Many people are thrilled with the

concept of a watchman. The watchman referred to here had the responsibility to warn the city if he saw danger coming. 2 Samuel 18:24y-27 and 2 Kings 9:17-20 are some good examples of watchmen. They might stand in a tower and watch for criminals or enemies and alert the city of danger. If the watchman failed to alert the people of the danger, he was executed. This helps us understand that Ezekiel was to warn Israel of spiritual danger. Today, pastors and teachers are watchmen too! They are to warn the people of the dangers of hell, sin, false teachers and false doctrine.

But notice Yahweh's exact wording of Ezekiel's responsibility. Whenever Yahweh spoke, Ezekiel was to repeat what He heard. That is still the responsibility of every servant of God. Today, we have all of the Word of God. We are not looking for prophets and apostles to write more Scripture. Today, when we read the Bible, we are hearing the Word of God in our mind. So, when we hear Yahweh speak in the pages of Scripture, we are to repeat what He said. Good evangelists do that. A good pastor does that. Every believer must not twist it, spin it, decorate it, or add spice to it. Our goal must always be to accurately say what Yahweh says.

Next, Ezekiel was told,

“When I say to the wicked, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to warn the wicked from his wicked way that he may live, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. Yet if you have warned the wicked and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered yourself.” Ezekiel 3:18-19 (NASB)

As a watchman, Ezekiel's responsibility was to warn the wicked if Yahweh warned the wicked. Failure to echo Yahweh's warning would result in him being held personally responsible for the spiritual lives of the people.

Then in verses 20-21, Ezekiel was told that he is to do the same for those who were righteous. The term, righteous, refers to external behavior. It does not mean they are necessarily believers. But they looked good on the outside. Here are the two verses,

“Again, when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I place an obstacle before him, he will die; since you have not warned him, he shall die in his sin, and his righteous deeds which he has done shall not be remembered; but his blood I will require at your hand. However, if you have warned the righteous man that the righteous should not sin and he does not sin, he shall surely live because he took warning; and you have delivered yourself.” Ezekiel 3:20-21 (NASB)

Once again, Ezekiel was told that he had the responsibility to repeat what Yahweh said. If Yahweh warned the righteous, then Ezekiel must warn the righteous! Ezekiel would be responsible for the spiritual condition of those to whom he was to speak! We are not told what would happen to Ezekiel. Who would want to displease the Lord by refusing to serve Him? Who would want to displease Yahweh by not repeating His words? It is dangerous to displease Yahweh.

Verses 22-27 is the conclusion of Ezekiel's commissioning as a prophet.

The hand of the LORD was on me there, and He said to me, “Get up, go out to the plain, and there I will speak to you.” So I got up and went out to the plain; and behold, the glory of the LORD was standing there, like the glory which I saw by the river Chebar, and I fell on my face. The Spirit then entered me and made me stand on my feet, and He spoke with me and said to me, “Go, shut yourself up in your house. As for you, son of man, they will put ropes on you and bind you with them so that you cannot go out among them. Moreover, I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be mute and cannot be a man who rebukes them, for they are a rebellious house. But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you will say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD.’ He who hears, let him hear; and he who refuses, let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house.” Ezekiel 3:22-27 (NASB)

Once again, Ezekiel had another vision of the glory of the Lord. After seeing the glory of the Lord, Ezekiel must have been overwhelmed with his responsibility to Yahweh. Yes, he was chosen, but he was told to speak the words of the Lord. Once again the Holy Spirit entered the prophet. This is

another reminder the Holy Spirit did not permanently indwell the saints before Pentecost.

Then Ezekiel was commanded to lock himself in his house. His ministry was to occur in his home. He was not a street evangelist, a missionary like Jonah, a forerunner like John the Baptist, or an apostle like Paul. It may surprise us that Ezekiel ministered from his house. There are several reasons to believe this. First, verse 24 says Ezekiel was told to lock himself in his house. In verses 25-26 Yahweh said he would not be able to move or speak. As a result, he could not rebuke the people. Now notice verse 27. Yahweh said the only time Ezekiel would be able to speak would be when Yahweh opened his mouth. When that occurred, he was to say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD.”

This gives us our fourth and last principle. The motivation for ministry is to give glory to the Lord, by speaking the word of the Lord every time He gives us the opportunity. We have learned that Yahweh wants servants who listen and obey, who love the Word of God, who faithfully and accurately explain what Yahweh said. When the servant of God is given the opportunity to do this, he is to say, “Thus says the Lord GOD.” The servant’s words and opinions are not important. This brings us to the only priority of ministry for God’s servant. Give Yahweh glory by plagiarizing His sermons!