

Ministry in the Midst of Conflict: Part 3

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Brian R. Wipf

We bought a third vehicle not too long ago. I've got a third driver now and will have a fourth in less than 18 months. I was happy to find a vehicle 13 years old in pretty good condition, or so I thought. It is in good condition, so it was to my surprise when Eli and I were out for a drive one evening and I went to flick on the high beams and got nothing; everything went black.

Now, I pride myself in being able to take care of a few things myself. I'm an engineer; I can fill my own blinker fluid myself. But I don't enjoy projects like this; I'm not looking for more work to do. And I don't have the tools. Come on guys, you know. You can spend thousands of dollars for tools that you hardly use. So, I don't have many. But, I took a stab at solving this problem. I started with the easiest and quickest solution. Could it be the fuses? Nope, found out that it wasn't the fuses. Could it be the switch or the wiring? Harder to say. But I watched a Youtube video on replacing the switch. It didn't look too hard. When I searched for parts I discovered that I could get a new switch for \$25. That's not too bad. I did a quick risk/reward analysis in my head and thought, "Let's give it a go." I ordered the part and waited.

Finally, the day arrived. Sure enough, my biggest problem was the tools; better tools would have made it easier, but I improvised. All in all, it only took me about 20 minutes. When I got everything in place I turned on the high beams and walked to the front of the vehicle to see if the lights were on. And sure enough, they were. Friends, I was so happy. I gave a spontaneous fist pump with a victory shout. Success! The rest of the night I kept retelling Korby the story and all she could say was, "That's nice, dear." I now have a backup plan if this preaching gig doesn't work out.

Oh, the joy of success. It feels so good to be successful. It's intoxicating, quite frankly. That's why failure is so agonizing; we want to succeed so badly sometimes our fear of failure will paralyze us from giving something a try. 72 followers of Jesus were sent out on a mission by their master. Would they succeed? At first glance, maybe not. Jesus sent them out as sheep in the midst of wolves. He also told them, "Don't bring anything with you." That doesn't sound like a recipe for success. Those odds don't look so promising.

The odds don't always look that promising for us either. There are a lot of obstacles to ministry success and sometimes our own observations make it hard to think we're having success. We've been praying for our kids for years now and nothing. We've told our sister about Jesus ever since we got saved and all she gets is annoyed. I thought my best friend's divorce might wake him up to his need for Jesus, but he's not interested. And now, more and more, there seems to be a growing cynicism and intolerance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Will we succeed in our ministry efforts? We should think about that. Let's have more than wishful

thinking. We're building a new facilities hoping for success; we should have more than the Field of Dreams, *if we build it, they will come* strategy. What if they don't?

Jesus has some very interesting words in our passage today about success in ministry and what we should truly cherish. I know you care about being successful in ministry; I also know you care about keeping your priorities in check. So, let's read our passage because Jesus has help on both fronts this morning (READ Luke 10:17-20).

Look what we see: the disciples were successful. How do we know they were successful? Let me highlight the evidence. First of all, they don't come back discouraged; they come back with joy. What an interesting choice of words. I had joy when I changed my high beam switch. I had joy when I saw our unity remain and grow as we progressed through the various stages of our *Reaching Beyond* project. We aimed for unity and by God's grace we were successful. How joyous! I have joy when I hear stories of people coming to faith or growing in faith. The 72 come back and they have joy because they were successful.

Secondly, the 72 say explicitly, "even the demons are subject to us in your name!" They had the power, not the demons or their adversaries. Whether towns received them or rejected them, they experienced power to subject forces to their will.

Finally, Jesus says himself, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." Clearly, that's an enthusiastic description of the triumph the 72 enjoyed in the work. It came by the authority Jesus granted in vs. 19. And doesn't it sound a lot like what we see in Revelation 12 when Satan is defeated? Vs. 9 says, "And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the world - he was thrown down to earth, and his angels were thrown down with him."

It makes me wonder: does this mean we'll be successful in the ministry God gives us? Is God signaling to all of his churches, not just to the 72, that they will be successful in the work? Well, I think it depends a little bit on what we mean by *success*. The 72 don't come back and say that they were welcomed into every town; they don't say that everyone they preached to repent. So, I don't think we can expect success in that way. They were successful, however, in that the Evil One was not able to thwart or ultimately oppose God's work through them. God granted them the authority. And I think this is something we can count on, too. It's so important for us to remember that God is doing more than we can see and when we walk by faith we can count on God accomplishing his purposes.

We'll see more of this as we keep progressing into Luke, but God is victorious! If the scriptures are clear about anything, it's clear that God defeats the powers of Evil and he implements his new Kingdom, the Coming Age, right on top of his defeated foe, the Devil. This is one of those things we believe is happening now with the eyes of faith because victory over the powers of darkness and death are not always so apparent.

When people keep rejecting the message of Jesus, it doesn't look like the church is succeeding. When immorality becomes more normal in our culture, it doesn't look like the church is succeeding. When followers of Jesus are threatened or imprisoned, it doesn't look like the church is succeeding. When the powerful in our world, when the influential grow more and more hostile to the things of God, it doesn't look like the church is succeeding. But we have to remember, God's kingdom is upside down. If we forget the nature of the kingdom we'll get discouraged when we should be celebrating.

Here's an example: Talking with friends who know India, it's a scary thing to hear how people in positions of political power, military power, economic power are growing more and more impatient with the Church. Our friends there have to jump through more and more hoops just because they are Christians; there's growing opposition and hostility from people in power. It doesn't look like the church is succeeding; it doesn't look like the gospel is advancing. Yet, I was amazed at the fruitful work of the gospel in the tea plantations. Among the poor, among the disadvantaged, many are coming to Christ and the church is growing.

Now, you might think: Ok, poor people are coming to Jesus... wonderful. But it seems that everyone in power, everyone who's great, with real influence is an obstacle to the gospel. Yes, but be careful who you call great. Didn't Jesus call a child the one who is great in the Kingdom? Didn't we just learn that the least is the greatest in the kingdom? Didn't Jesus say in Luke 6 *Blessed are the poor? Blessed are the hungry? And cursed are the rich? Cursed are the full?* Friends, be careful not to define success the way the world defines success. Define success the way Jesus does. God is winning the victory where he wants to win the victory. God's people are treading on serpents and scorpions with the authority he has granted, even when that costs his people their lives. Think of it: the Christian martyr who is executed for Jesus is the one in authority. It's not that the word of God has failed! Even in the death of God's saints, the church is breaking down the gates of hell. In Acts 5, did not the apostles rejoice in their hardship and mistreatment because they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus Christ?

Look, I think we can have great optimism that men, women, and children will keep being saved through the faithful proclamation of the gospel; when we as a church family live our lives in conformity to Jesus Christ; his arm is not too short to save. But if that slows down, that doesn't stop our joy; our joy is seeing Satan fall from heaven and our joy in something even greater.

Look what Jesus says is even more glorious than ministry success in vs. 20, "Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." There is something that's even better, there is something even more glorious, more joyous, than having success, than being granted power over the forces of Evil. What's that? Having your name written in heaven.

What does that mean? Let's be clear about this. Jesus is saying having your name written in heaven is better than have the joyful success over the powers of evil in our ministry efforts; let's make sure we know what that is. I keep bringing up Revelation; why stop now. Go to Revelation 20.

In this humbling, sobering scene where God judges the earth we see this in vs. 11-15 (READ). Ok. So, in heaven there is this book called the book of life with names in it. If your name is not found in this book of life, you are judged by what you've done and all of those things were recorded in the other books. So, having your name in the book of life is pretty important, right? It spares you from being thrown into the lake of fire where, according to Jesus in Matthew 25, the Devil and his Angels have been sent. So, that's what you get when your name is not written in the book of life.

But if it is, what do you get? That's the next chapter, 21. And chapter 21 tells us about a new city, God's city, the New Jerusalem. Find some time to read it for yourself starting in vs. 9, but it's a pure city. It's a safe city. There is no night there and the city has no need for the sun or the moon because God's glory never stops shining giving the city and its inhabitants light. Look at vs. 27, "But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life." This city is for all those whose names are written in heaven.

When I put this good news together, I see in the scriptures God preparing a home, preparing a city for his children. It's a home where the hardship, the trouble, the violence, the poverty, the sickness, the impurity of our present world is absent. It's a home where we will finally be able to be all that God has created us to be in Christ Jesus, totally free from the reach of the Present Age. Look at the next verses, 22:1-5 (READ).

Remember what Jesus said in Luke 10:20, "Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Can you see why? Could I sum it up this way? What God has done for you is better than how he will use you for God (REPEAT). There is something more glorious and joyful than working and even succeeding for God; it's enjoying him and his grace forever.

It's so important that we never forget: God is our greatest treasure. In the last number of years, there's been a strong social justice push within the evangelical church. It's been a good thing. God did not save us to relax in our spiritual laz-e-boys basking in the glory of his favor while our world and those in the world could use some of that favor that we've found. No, we have work so more can know this grace. And, praise God, the gates of hell will not prevail against us.

But in this push to make sure we share the love of Jesus in word and deed, it's tempting to make that ultimate. To make working for God our greatest treasure. It's well-intentioned, but when you stop and think about it, it's a disastrous and idolatrous mistake. There is nothing better than knowing God; there is no greater treasure than God himself. That's why Jesus can

say in vs. 20, “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the demons are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” Because knowing God is better! Having the promise, the guarantee that we can be in an eternal, complete, joyous relationship with him is more glorious than God working through us.

FBC, let’s keep working; there’s so much to do. Listen to Isa. 55:10-11 in closing, “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” It will succeed; and so will we in our work when we are obedient to the call. But there’s something better; there’s something even more glorious. Having our names written in heaven, having a future with unhindered access to our Heavenly Father, to our Savior, Jesus, and to his Spirit is better. Rejoice in the grace of God that found you.

Questions for the week

- What did God use from his word today to encourage you? Tell somebody.
- What did God use from his word today to challenge you? Tell somebody.
- What’s the most important thing you heard today? Tell somebody.