

# THE JOY OF SERVICE

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# CONTENTS

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Foreword	9
Introduction	11
Ministry as Service	15
Ministry and Sacrifice	21
Ministry and Suffering	29
Ministry and Power	35
Ministry and Persecution	43
Ministry and Responsibility	49
Ministry and Prayer	55
Ministry and Preaching	63
Ministry and the Long term	73
Ministry and Heaven	79
Our Deepest Joy	85
Finale	89

## INTRODUCTION

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'I've been in pastoral ministry for over 30 years and it has been full of joy.'

The speaker was an experienced pastor called Robert. He'd been invited to our church to help us sort out a painful and intractable mess. Relationships were on edge. Wounds had been opened which were raw and painful. The leadership was divided. People weren't getting on. The future of the church was quite unclear. Confusion and suspicion hung in the air like a toxic fog.

Something was wrong. Perhaps more than one thing was wrong. And we'd all realised we weren't able to sort it out without outside help.

Three years before, I'd gone to my first elders' meeting. It felt quite unlike the relaxed, brotherly elders' meetings at the church where I had worked before. When I went home I said to my wife, 'Something's not right.' The three years that had followed sometimes (not always) felt like walking in bare feet over broken glass.

So when I heard what Robert said about joy, my first thought was: 'Oh yeah?' But he was someone who commanded respect, so I shelved my scepticism to watch him at work and see what I could learn.

Now, in my early 50s, I can echo his words.

I truly can. 'I've been in pastoral ministry for over 20 years and it has been full of joy.' It really has. Greater joy than I think I imagined possible. Joy that is not a single point or moment but, as I recall it, is like a set of photos of a whole variety of holiday landscapes – hugely varied, all striking and beautiful. And those are the predominant memories of those years.

But as I have hinted, those are not the only memories. The story is more varied than that. My inner photo library also has pictures of some dark, sad and tense scenes. Scenes of broken objects and broken people, memories of emotional muscles aching because they had been pushed too far. Scenes of shame or pain, which I would rather not dwell on either because I sinned or because the ripples from someone else's shortcoming touched me. Times of deep weariness. Times when all I felt was emptiness. Times when I wished this was someone else's responsibility and even wished I wasn't.

So it has been a joy, but not an undiluted one. There's been both sin and pain, often connected. While I regret my sin, I have learned from it, from the way it has broken me and shown me more grace.

While I do wonder occasionally at just how hard things have been sometimes, I don't wish it had been easier or that we'd magically flown over those moments, like

a migrating bird swerving upwards to avoid a forest fire. The fires have been the fire of growth – for me and for the church – and also of joy. And it has all been more than worth it.

I'd like to explain how – and to explain the connection between serving, ministry and joy.

*Lord, it feels as though I've reached a point where I may have something to share. I pray for everyone who picks this little book up. Grant to them to hear your voice and sense your holy presence of magnetic love as they read. Amen.*

## MINISTRY AS SERVICE

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When I was first asked to write this little book, I read the email too quickly and thought the title was supposed to be *The Joy of Ministry*. Some ideas started forming in my mind. Then I looked more closely and realised that the email said *The Joy of Service*.

The word *ministry* really means *service*, but in modern English the two are not often closely associated. That leads to all sorts of problems. Lots of us say 'ministry' and we mean 'profession'. Or, 'a set of Christian activities that I find fulfilling and which give me some sort of status, at least within the church. So it looks like a pretty good career choice'. That is not the biblical way and it leads us into problems. We need to glue the two words together again in our minds.

In the very early days of the church the apostles, the leaders Jesus had chosen, found they were getting overloaded. Wonderfully, lots of marginal and needy people had become Christians. Many of them were widows and had no easy way of providing for themselves. They depended on the church for meals on a daily basis. So the church set up a food bank. Management of this food bank rested on the shoulders of the apostles. It is rather lovely to realise how it shows us how much they cared about practical needs.

But, as so often, church growth brought new problems in its tailwind. The apostles weren't getting enough time for the critically important responsibilities entrusted specifically to *them*. So they called a church meeting, explained the issue and proposed a solution: find some reliable folk we can delegate the food bank to.

There is a lot that is interesting about this little episode. Let's look at the words they use. Here is what they say:

**'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to *wait* on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to *prayer and the ministry of the word.*' Acts 6:2-4 (my italics)**

They sum up the whole of their work as two things: prayer and the ministry of the word. The word they used for *ministry* in verse 4 is the same as the word for *waiting at tables* in verse 2. It is about *servicing*. That is an easy word to understand but the pairing of it with 'the word' is unusual. The apostles were not trying to get out of the food bank – but they did have something that was more important for *them* to do.

So, what does serving 'the word' actually mean? In Acts 'the word' is not simply the whole of the Bible (which for them was the Old Testament). The word in Acts is the message of Jesus Christ, what we would call the gospel (as in verse 7 – 'So the word of God spread'). It is seen not simply as a set of ideas but a living dynamic force. It is the powerful speech of God unleashed in the world, which grows and spreads, bringing new life and unexpected hope wherever it goes. These days we talk about 'memes' – ideas which 'go viral' and spread rapidly. Acts portrays the word of God rather like a divine meme, going viral in the ancient world. But it is different because it spreads through divine power and the divine power comes from divine presence in the word – the Holy Spirit.

The apostles have a central role in this process because the word spreads through being communicated, being preached and explained. That is the work that must not be neglected, even for something as important as a daily food bank. And the picture they used to define their relationship with the work is *serving*.

Is that how you see Christian ministry? We could have chosen lots of other verses to demonstrate the same point. Paul, for example, repeatedly describes himself as a servant of Christ in his work, and therefore in the whole of his life. And servant meant slave.



Is that how you see your future as a youth pastor? Or a Bible translator? Or a pastor? You are a servant of the word of God. The word of God is God's presence in this world: it is God speaking about himself and his Son and his love. It is the most powerful meme in history. It has gone viral in a way nothing else, not even human sin, has done. And your relationship to it is defined by the word 'service': you are its servant.

There is a wonderful positive side to this, mind you. I have a friend who was the pastor of the same church for 45 years. When he started there were around 40 members. When he retired in 2015 there were 750 adults and children in church every Sunday morning. The secret?

It is all in Acts 6. My friend basically did three things very well (and I mean very well): prayer, preaching and finding others to share the work of love in the church.

I asked him once what it had been like. He said it had felt like being on a huge ocean-going liner. He felt he was no more than the man on the bridge who steered it a bit either way but had nothing to do with the power of the ship's engines. All the momentum, all the stability, all the safety for the passengers and crew, all the wonderful sights along the way, came from the word of God, an unstoppable power that he saw at work and marvelled at. I suspect that he saw the growth he did because he was a servant

of the word, and not the other way round. It is hard to imagine a greater privilege for a life's work than seeing broken lives healed; people, who no one would ever have imagined in church, raising their arms in worship week by week and lives burdened by care and consumption released into rest in Christ.

Let me ask you again, is that how you see yourself in ministry? If you are like me you need to think about that rather carefully and pray it through. Here is how I did that:

*Lord, I'm a mystery to myself and what I do see is very mixed. I am not sure that ministry has always meant service for me. In fact, I am sure it's often meant something else. I find it hard to admit it to myself, let alone to you and the folk who may read this, but quite a lot of the time, ministry has meant serving self. I have used it to try to feel good about myself. I have done it and described it in ways that are carefully angled to make myself look good. I have made the word my servant rather than the other way round. You can see deeper than I can into the cavern of my inner life: I rather shudder to think what you can see. But I cling to your grace: and I find a safe place in the forgiveness which is the heart of the message of the word. And I think of the new creation which the word has germinated in my soul. And I pledge myself again to serving the word, not making it serve me. And I find rest. Amen.*