

What is True Ministry and Fruitfulness

By R.T. Nusbaum

A lot of us are concerned about being effective for the Lord. A lot of us are concerned about being fruitful for the Lord. We don't want to fail the Lord and not only that, we would like to go beyond not failing, but bring forth fruit that would benefit the Lord and the kingdom. Particularly any ministry we are involved in, we want to be one that would glorify the Lord and be considered "successful" or "prosperous" in the Lord. The disciples had walked with Jesus for three and a half years. They had seen miracles, they had seen multitudes gathered, they had seen miracles, blessings, and they had seen God literally with them confirming their ministry with signs following. And it had reached a climax as we enter into Luke chapter twenty-two.

Verse 11-13, "And ye shall say unto the goodman of the house, The Master saith unto thee, Where is the guestchamber, where I shall eat the Passover with my disciples? And he shall shew you a large upper room furnished: there make ready. And they went, and found as he had said unto them: and they made ready the Passover."

Going to the Passover

You have to remember that as they are going into the Passover, the disciples still have the ringing in their ears of the singing of "Hosanna to the King". They still have the recollection that they are coming to Jerusalem to the Passover and people are breaking off palm leaves and laying them down in front of them. And they are seeing people singing and children are singing. There is this movement going on in the city, there is an excitement happening at this particular Passover like no other Passover before. And in the air there is this hope and sense of promise. There was this sense after entering into the city, that this was going to be a glorious Passover. The disciples were hopeful, they were seeing the people honoring Jesus and bringing Him into the city on this Passover day.

Luke 22:14-16 "And when the hour was come, he sat down, and the twelve apostles with him. And he said unto them, With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer: For I say unto you, I will not any more eat thereof, until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God."

They talked about the Kingdom of God coming they were thinking that this thing was about to happen, they thought Jesus was about to be made King, when they were singing "Hosanna to the King." They were singing to the son of David, to the King. And they were thinking that this ministry of theirs, this thing that they had been involved in was on the verge of taking off. And this Passover was different than the last two they had been to. They are mentioned in the book of John. At those they were just participating in the festivities. But there is a sense that they are going to be deeply involved in this particular Passover and that it would be something very special. And I think that in their minds they

were thinking that this event, this Passover was going to be the time for the installing of Jesus as King and Lord over Israel.

Luke 22:16-18 “For I say unto you, I will not any more eat thereof, until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, Take this, and divide it among yourselves: For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come.”

Disciples Think Their Ministry is About to Take Off

They disciples are thinking, “all of the work, all of the preparation, all of the things that we have done are about to bring forth fruit, are about to happen. And the events that are about to happen are going to change from this point.” Everything is going to change for these twelve, for these disciples, everything is going to change for the ministry; they know that the whole city is moved. And when the whole city is moved, than that means the whole nation is moved because everybody has come up. You have to remember this is not just the capital city, but all of Israel has come up for the Passover according to the law of the Covenant. They are asking questions like “do you think He’s going to be here?” There are all these questions and excitement going on. And the disciples have put much time and effort into the ministry and into preparation into the Lord being accepted and honored. And now they are thinking, “We are the main focal point of this big change that is about to happen. We are the ones God has been using; we are the twelve that have been being prepared for this big moment. This is why we went to school with Jesus for three years. How exciting is this? We are going to be the focal point of the movement of God in the earth, beginning right here with the people of God. And God is going to do all that He has wanted to do.”

Luke 22:24 “And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest.”

They are starting to shuffle and jockey for position. Remember James and John fighting over who would sit on his right and on his left. In their mind when they are hearing Jesus say, “I will not eat of the vine...” they are thinking that he is just going to skip a week and then eat with them. And the kingdom will come and not just the kingdom, but the ministry and it will be like before but on a larger scale and we’ll move out. And our ministry that was formerly under suspicion by the Sadducees and the Pharisees and all of the people that doubted, all of the sudden fruitfulness is going to break forth. All of the sudden this thing is going to take off and those people will have to say, “This ministry is of God.” We are going to be universally accepted not just in Israel but all around the world, that we are recognized by God. We are going to be busier than we were ever before serving Jesus and seeing the power of God and seeing the life of God and seeing the ministry of God and seeing things start to happen.” That is why they are saying at the end of the Passover, “Who shall be the greatest?” I believe these were the thoughts that were going through their head. They were entering into this Passover and wondering about these things.

Luke 22:21-23 these are the last words of Jesus at the Passover.

“But, behold, the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table. And truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed! And they began to enquire among themselves, which of them it was that should do this thing.”

Deep Sorrow in Jesus

The deeper they got into this Passover service they began to hear things contrary to their own interpretation of the words of what was about to happen. The further they got into it, there began to be a foreboding thing coming over the Passover meal. The foreboding and things did not seem to be as wonderful and exciting as they thought. In verse nineteen he begins speaking of His body being broken. And they are thinking, “This doesn’t make sense.” Their minds had run one direction the whole way through. And these words of Jesus do not compute, especially at this time, of all that they felt that God had preparing for them. And even in verse twenty-one when Jesus begins to speak of this, they begin to detect the deep sorrow that Jesus had over the fact that one of His very own in that room was going to betray Him, not Pharisees or someone on the outside, but literally someone in the ministry, in the movement. In the thing that God is doing, there is going to be one, and Jesus is not only saying that there is going to be a betrayal, but He is putting it in such a way that the whole movement is about to take a turn for the worse. Instead of being crowned, instead of being honor, instead of everything coming to the forefront and a new ministry being birthed, all of the sudden He is putting it like He is about to turned over to His enemies and be beaten, incarcerated. We know, but they did not know then. But they do know that these words are not your regular words. They sense that the ministry is about to take a bad turn. And they sense a deep sorrow in Jesus.

They may not even comprehend that the sorrow may be over Judas. Not just for the betrayal, but for Judas himself, Jesus is worried over Judas. The disciples may read that deep sorrow as, “The ministry was going real good, but now they are turning real bad. And I’m sorry to inform you guys, but this is the way things are going.” But that is exactly as He is speaking they are realizing things. They went into that meal all excited and happy and now they are asking, “Is it you, is it me?” They are questioning among themselves. It is verse twenty-three, “And they began to enquire among themselves, which of them it was that should do this thing”. They are questioning, “Who among us would do this thing. We have worked so hard, we have believed God, we have prepared. And now, not just an outsider, but somebody from within is going to do this thing.”

John 13:21 “When Jesus had thus said, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. Then the disciples looked one on another...”

There is a doubting in the ministry, they are starting to question one another. “Maybe you have seen some things around the disciples, and you have your own ideas of who would betray him.” They begin to look one on another. They begin to question who would do this thing.

John 13:36-37 "Simon Peter said unto him, Lord, whither goest thou? Jesus answered him, Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards. Peter said unto him, Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake."

Peter's getting the momentum going; he's trying to keep the morale up. "We will go through Hell with you, we're with you!" He was trying to keep the momentum of the ministry minded thing going. Can you imagine the disciples as they are listening to Peter, their leader, and they start getting encouraged again? And then to hear Jesus say, "Peter, not only will you not die for me, before this night is over; you are going to deny me in front of my enemies. And you are going to do it three times." Can you sense the disciples now, their countenance is just falling, and their hopes are being dashed. Especially in verse thirty-eight, "Jesus answered him, Wilt thou lay down thy life for my sake? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, The cock shall not crow, till thou hast denied me thrice." Jesus is explaining that even the most valiant is going to break off from the ministry.

The good thing in chapter fourteen, Jesus tells them some good stuff like, "Let not your hearts be troubled." This tells you that these guys were troubled! This had been in a three year thing to get to this point in their minds, and now they are looking around at the shape of everything and they are saying, "This is not going to happen like we thought it was."

John 14:30-31 "I shall no longer speak many things with you, for the ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me. But that the world may know that I love the Father, even as the Father commanded Me, so I do. Rise up, let us go from here."

There is this sense that the movement is dying. There is also a sense that the ministry is headed in a bad direction. And then begins to creep in your thoughts concerning your involvement and your place in the whole thing and your fruitfulness. And then you begin to wonder if everything you have done has been in vain. When you give yourself like that, and it looks like the enemy is winning out and everything's going wrong. You will begin to wonder about everything and everyone. That is normal, but you don't think it is normal at that moment. Jesus begins to say to them, "I'd like to tell you more." And they are saying, "We'd like to know more! We'd like to hear from you, we'd like to know what's going on!" And Jesus said, "I'd like to tell you more but I can't because the prince of this world is coming." "What? I thought you were the prince of God and you were going to be enthroned!" Jesus says, "Arise, let us go from here." Those are some powerful words. Now with these words the disciples rose up and they began to make their way down the stairs from the upper room. It was dark already and they began to head for the garden of Gethsemane. While they are not aware of what exactly what is about to happen, in their minds they know that the end is near. There is something about heading for the Garden Gethsemane, that is stirring them on the inside and by the things Jesus is saying. Jesus called this time, "the hour of the power of darkness". The cloud that seems to be over the whole thing that the end is near and something bad is about to happen.

Hope in Themselves and Their Ministry Lost

What are they thinking? They are not thinking about Jesus, they don't understand what is about to happen to Him. They are probably still thinking about themselves and the ministry, and all of their hopes and dreams. If you are real high and you are knocked real low, it is real bad! Now they are questioning everything including one another and themselves. Some of them said when Jesus brought up the betrayal, "Is it I Lord?" But then Jesus turns and says, "Peter's going to deny me three times." They are realizing that this whole ministry this whole time that they had given themselves, and all that they had hoped for others, and for ministry, it is all going the tubes real fast. Everything just seemed to turn really quick. Now all of the sudden Jesus is even talking of His own death.

Imagine them running back over the past three and a half years. Remembering when Jesus passed by and called them, and they left their nets and followed him. Remember Andrew and Phillip came to Peter and said, "We found him, the Messiah!" They had seen incredible miracles, raising of the dead, feeding the multitudes, they thought, "This is going to be the greatest kingdom in the whole world! Jesus is not selfish, he is blessing everyone else." And all of that is beginning to fade and they are realizing that this is the end of that. "And all that we have put into this, God is not going to reward our efforts. Where is the fruit? Where is the God-honoring ministry?" Put yourself in that situation. As they are coming down the stairs and they are going into the dark of the upper room and walking down the narrow streets to the Garden of Gethsemane they are considering these thoughts. Each one of them in their own darkened fears and concerns are walking along thinking about these things.

True Fruitfulness - "Abide in Me and I in You"

While they are heading towards the Garden of Gethsemane, suddenly Jesus stops. And Jesus begins to speak to them. And again their minds are on the ministry and on the fruitfulness and on the hopes, and right in the middle of that, Jesus stops. And Jesus turns to them and begins to speak of fruitfulness. The last few words in fourteen are this, "Arise let us go from here." And then in chapter fifteen verse one through five He says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." What incredible words. They came out of left-field for these men. They are only seeing in one area, their physical ministry, they are thinking of the fruitfulness of helping this person, and healing that person, and preaching the word at this location and having people excited. They are thinking about when Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount and there were hundreds. if not thousands that were moved on the inside and said, "We are followers of Jesus, we believe in Jesus." And in their mind they are marking these things down. They are marking their fruitfulness down.

All of the sudden there are not going to be any more “Sermons on the Mount”, there are not going to be anymore big healing crusades, or crowds shouting, Jesus is going away and He is going to die. Peter is going to deny Him, one of them (they don’t know who), is betraying them. They are fearful. We know that once Jesus was taken in the Garden of Gethsemane, they were dispersed, and they went and hid. They are thinking of their ministry and they are thinking of their fruitfulness and they are thinking about all that God has done. And then Jesus stops them and begins to talk to them about fruitfulness on a whole other level. He begins to speak of fruitfulness they can continue in. He begins to talk about fruit that pleases the Father. That fruit is not anything that you do; it is what is produced through you. That fruit is not a ministry that you have prayed over hoped for and now become discouraged over. It is the hope that from now and all your days and all the days of those that follow after you, all you have to do to please the Father, is to be plugged into the vine and let His life live through you. You live not the “Christian” life, but Christ begins to produce through your branch what nobody else could do.

A New Concept

A new concept begins to dawn on the disciples. A new concept altogether that this thing is not about ministry as we understood it. The thing that pleases the Father is not all the things that I would try and do for Him. “I am not pleasing God very much because I am not doing much.” Realizing now that it is all different, every branch can please the Father not by doing much, but by living Christ, by letting Christ live in them. The message finally started to dawn on them. In a certain way, Jesus reserved a lot of this for the last year of His ministry, but for them they are leaving the concept of healing, and such, not that it ever left because it is in the book of Acts, but their lives were focused in a whole other way. Fruitfulness to them became something totally different. It was day to day whether you were at home, or at work, or at church. You didn’t have to have a big crowd gathered all in the name of Jesus. You could be in a situation where it was just you, and instead of you coming out of you, Jesus comes out of you, and nobody see it but the Father. And the Father’s applaud His son.

Everything began to change for the disciples. Maybe the followers still wanted to see the ministry do something wonderful and glorious. The wonder and the glory began coming through them, not just on them. God did not just pour out His spirit upon them in the upper room, He filled them with. It is a big difference. It is a change of ministry. It is not the “anointing on”, it is the “life of God within”, it is the Son within, it is the power and the spirit of the living God. It is being a channel of life. That may result in almost nothing you can see in ministry. Can you imagine God the Father, and Jesus sitting on the throne after the resurrection and seeing people start off excited about the ministry, see them involved in the ministry, seeing them have glorious things happen in the ministry only to see Him turn the tide again and again to lead them to down into to death so that life, not their life not the life of their ministry not the life of their good works or their good thoughts, but the life of Christ come out of them. How many times did these disciples fail even of the life of Christ only to turn back and say, “This is the answer. What came out of me that time was not Jesus, but I will not give up because this thing can happen.” The other depends on God staying with you because you are good. God is with your ministry

because you have done everything right. I have got news for you! There is not a person in here that will do everything right. You are going to mess up again and again. Your only hope is Christ in you the hope of glory.

What is God's Hope

But forget about your hope, what is God's hope? His hope is that Christ come out of you. His hope is that this thing begins functioning by life and not good and evil. Good men will fail. Because there is none good but God. But if you want to take it more technically, good men will fail because the devil's been at work for two thousand years and knows how to trip men up. The devil can trip up any good man because the devil is smarter than man. But not only that, men will fail because God will see to it, because God's plan is not for good men or women. If you lived your whole life, ordering your life, ordering your family, ordering your ministry perfectly, most of the glory would go to you. People would say, "What a great man of God." Peter wanted to be a good man, but right in the middle of this God brought him down to show us that even the best among us is just a man. Why? Hoping that in their despair as they look at Jesus hanging on the cross, hanging there bleeding, and so beaten and marred that Isaiah 53:52 says, "He was so marred you could not recognize him." The one that they thought that very weekend would be king had a crown of thorns on his head and is nailed up there. And they are in fear and despair, and the words come forth, "Father forgive them" (not the disciples the ones who hung him there) "for they know not what they do." And maybe in the moments of their own failures, the failure of the ministry and this terrible thing that happened to Jesus, they are watching something happen in Him that would never happen in another human being. Jesus is not full of revenge, not full of right and wrong, good and evil, just full of love.

And maybe they are remembering their despair as they descend from the upper room heading for the dark walk to the place of His betrayal, heading to the garden of betrayal. Maybe they are remembering that time, and they remember Jesus stopping, and in His mind they are connecting Him saying, "Arise, let us go from this place of gloom and death and broken bread, let us arise and go from here" and the next words spoken after that, "I am the true vine and you are the branches." And maybe all of the sudden it is all coming back to the disciples. It was never about how well the ministry went. It wasn't about not having a Judas in our midst. It wasn't about not having a leader that couldn't measure up. It wasn't about guys fighting over who would be the greatest. It wasn't just those two fighting because every one was mad at them. God has a plan and it's not right and wrong, good and evil. It isn't for a glorious ministry, it is that the glorious ministers lay down their life and bring forth Christ, whether by life or by death that Christ be glorified, magnified in our body. Oh the joy if the disciples had understood this going in, instead of them saying, "We will die for you." They would say, "You're the vine and we are the braches, whatever way it goes, we will go. It is by honor and people accepting us and praising us, or if it is by, 'you did it wrong, you are bad, you failed.'" Which is what they said of Jesus, the chastisement for our peace were laid on Him. He did not point the finger, he died. He always will.

Can you hear the disciples thinking, “This ship is sinking.” Have you ever been in a panic when you yourself are slipping? And all you can think about is you have got to find a plug to stop the flow. You need to stop this thing because it is bleeding all over the place. And that is the thought that comes whether it comes individually or collectively. Yet Jesus is saying, “I have got to go away from this form that you are familiar with, that you are comfortable with. The form of having me there touching you, speaking words to you all the time. That me has got to go away. This ministry has got to go away.” But in chapter fourteen, He is telling them before the end, “I am going to come back. But in a different form. You are not just going to be my disciples, but I am going to be in you. I in you and you in me. And fruitfulness will come on a whole other basis.”

What Success Looks Like to God

Did you know that many times you cannot tell what is fruitful? Consider an outsider looking for three years watching this ministry of Jesus. Consider Him watching the miracles, the movement, and the different levels of things that happen right up to the upper room. And that person thinks, “That is some sort of prosperity that is some kind of success”. Only to shortly after that see Him hanging on a cross, his disciples abandoning Him and He is about to die and you would look at that and you would say, “He is not successful.” In fact there are religions raised up saying that Jesus failed, calling the cross a failure. And there was this guy in Korea saying that he was the new Messiah and that he was going to get a big following and have success. What looks like failure in God’s eyes could actually be success. But how could that be? Because those seemingly failures, called disciples, the ones that are arguing and fighting, betraying, stealing and denying, God never put His hope in them. And you are a fool if you put your hope in them. He put His hope in Christ on the earth, and then when Jesus left, He put His hope on putting Christ in them. That was the hope, that in the process of time Christ would come forth. And you see it happen. Compare Peter in the gospels to first and second Peter. He was transformed. I challenge you to look at his different viewpoint. I challenge you to look up how many times he brings up suffering and to look up how much he speaks of loss; he says things like, “This is your calling brethren, that as he suffered, we are called to the same thing.”

I want to ask you something, how in the world can you turn the other cheek unless there is someone around willing to slap you? But if you all conform to the image of Christ God will see to it that someone will get upset and slap somebody. God can even allow you to fail and not put it on your account just to test you. Are you going to be a Son of God? Are you God the Father’s Son, or are you a Christian? The word Christian is used three times at the most in the whole bible. Beloved, now ye are the sons of God.” You are a son of God by Christ, male or female, Christ is the Son in you. And you honor the Father not just by ordering your own life perfect, but for Him. Imagine the twelve and one of them ordering their life perfect and saying, “Well, at least I stayed the course.” No, that is not God’s plan, for one to end up perfect out of the whole thing. The plan is “until we all come”. That is the heart of God. If you want to know the heart of God than find the worst person and love them. Find the biggest failure and speak words of encouragement. Don’t just fall into the gloom of that moment, but look for somebody else. When you have been

down and out about yourself and then God sends someone across your path that you need to minister to or talk to, and you know that you are worse off than they are, but God puts them in your path to minister to and when you do, the cloud begins to lift and you are happier than they are. God did it because that is the plan it isn't about me or my perfection, but a perfect "man". We are that man, that many-membered body, that one new man. The plan is don't worry about your plans or theirs; keep your eyes on Jesus. Keep going after Jesus, but do it by grabbing one another.

"By this perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us." Let's do more than perceive it. Now let us, we ought to lay down our life for the brethren. For who? The ones that are better than you, which seem worthy? Who are you supposed to lay your life down for, the really good ones? No, it is the uncomely members upon which we bestow the more abundant honors. You can't say that is what you will do, because you never will, until Christ is formed in you. Because Christ will lay down His life for the sheep, because that is the Father's plan. The plan is bigger than me and my sonship; it is "the Son", a many-membered body making up the Son. "Until we all come to the unity of faith, the fullness of the stature of the son of God". Everything in Jesus will pour out. The advantage to us is that when you are a stagnant pool, every creeping thing is in you, but when you start pouring out like a river instead of a stagnant pool, when rivers of living waters start flowing, it cleanses you.

Closing Prayer

Father, in the name of Jesus, that Christ may receive the desire of His heart, that He might fill up His body, that we may recognize that true ministry has nothing to do with how well things are going, but how much I am letting Jesus live out of me and encouraging that in others. Father may your Son accomplish in us the things of nature that become self-giving, that are the Lamb. In Jesus name, Amen.