

Practical Responsibilities and Tasks are Valuable

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[0 : 00] Ever noticed how sometimes you buy a product, you get home, you open the instructions and they say the most ridiculous things?

Here's a couple of examples. On a hairdryer, it's said in the instructions, warning, do not use while sleeping. Or on a frozen dinner, serving suggestions, defrost.

Or how about on the packaging of a Rowenta of iron, do not iron clothes whilst on body. Or on a push-along petrol-powered lawnmower, warning not to be used as a hedge trimmer.

I was thinking this morning of a title that kind of sums up what I want to say, and I came up with doing the things you're called to do and not doing the things you're not called to do and knowing the difference between doing the things you're called to do and not doing the things that you're not to do.

Catchy, huh? So let me tell you a story instead. It's a story about a group of eggs. Most of them, in fact, all of them except for one, were chicken's eggs.

[1 : 25] One of them was an eagle's egg and it somehow had found its way among the chicken's eggs. Well, in due course, all of these eggs, including the eagle, hatched.

And these young birds clucked around on the ground, including the eagle. The eagle, looking around and seeing the way in which the hens would cluck around and eat food off the ground, just behaved in exactly the same way.

Even though, over the course of time, as they matured, it was quite obvious that this eagle was different. And as they grew and as their wings grew, so that this eagle was noticeably bigger and grander and stronger, and you could see that this eagle was clearly not supposed to be clucking around on the ground all day long.

It was meant to fly. But it never did. One day, another eagle happened to be circling overhead where these birds lived.

They looked up, aghast in wonder, thinking how amazing it would be to fly. The eagle himself, at that point, took a look at his wings and stretched them out and thought to himself, maybe, just maybe.

[3 : 01] The others around him knew exactly what he was thinking and laughed and said, don't be ridiculous, you're one of us. Your place is down here. Like a fool, the eagle listened.

And eventually, he died, having never flown. That great bird was born to fly.

But because it never really explored what had been given, he never did. It's not a true story, apart from anything else.

Birds, generally speaking, at least in my experience, tend not to have conversations with each other. It does make us think about the things that we have within us, within ourselves, that God has given us, and how we use or don't use them.

Let's think a bit about this story from the book of Acts, from the very early church. A bit of background.

[4 : 16] In the first century Greco-Roman world, there was no welfare system. It was, let's be honest, a pretty rubbish social system that existed.

It was one that was very harsh and oppressive towards women. Women were dependent upon men.

And therefore, if you were a woman and you were suddenly widowed, and you had nobody else around to support you, you became destitute.

It was terrible. But it didn't take very long for the early church, for the earliest followers of disciples, sorry, the earliest followers of Jesus, to realise that when they were called to follow Jesus, they were called to respond with compassion to the needs that were around them.

And so fairly quickly, as the church grew, they responded to this very real need. They would collect in, they would gather in resources on a daily basis, and they would give them out.

[5 : 25] They would distribute them to those that were in need, to those within their society that were most vulnerable on a daily basis. The church grew very rapidly.

We're told on some occasions, hundreds if not thousands were added in one stroke to their number. And so as the church grew in size and activity, they suddenly realised that this was not what they thought was going to happen.

This was big stuff. And they couldn't keep up with themselves. They were victims of their own success. As they were growing, they were trying to meet the needs, but they realised that the structures that they'd set out with actually had been outgrown.

And so the twelve disciples, those that were actually leading the church, that were responsible for taking the gospel message out there, getting it spread, those that were leading this new thing called the church, were at the same time trying to take control of the working infrastructure, of getting food and resources distributed on a daily basis.

And not surprisingly, it was all going very, very wrong. Because they couldn't do it. They couldn't keep up with it. So, as growth happened, the leaders had to come to terms with the reality that they could not, and indeed should not, do everything.

[6 : 55] That they were called to be a people of God. Later, it was referred to in the New Testament as the body of Christ. To actually work as a body, and just as each part of that body is not called to perform every single function of a body, so every member of the body, including its leaders, are not required, are not expected, should not be expected to do everything.

But rather, a healthier practice is for everything to be shared, and for people to discover the gifts that they have, and to use them accordingly. So, the early church were in this position where they had to suddenly expand their understanding of ministry, their understanding of what it meant to be church, their understanding of how to use everybody's gifts most effectively.

So, we're told in these few verses something that they did. The twelve, the leaders, the preachers, sought out the help of another seven, and they specifically gave them the task of overseeing their social action, their distribution of the food on a daily basis.

And as that structure developed, we need to be really clear about this. It was not a hierarchy as though some were really more Christian and more cutting edge than others.

No, not at all. Because notice the way in which those who went about the business of the practicalities of distributing food on a daily basis, notice how they were appointed.

[8 : 37] We're told that they set about a process of prayer and discernment. They didn't just stick anyone in charge. But they thought about it, they thought about it prayerfully and appointed people who again were gifted in that particular area and they prayed for them with a laying on of hands.

There was no ministry, and there is no ministry, that is in any way superior or more spiritual than others.

Every single one is vital. And that's a lesson to all of us. So I want to suggest, as we can now leap forward some 2,000 years, that there are two key things that we can pull out from these few words in Acts.

The first thing is that we are told that we must know what our calling is not. Now that may seem obvious, but it isn't always.

Understanding and having the courage to say no to something, even though there may be something about it that has a pull about it, having the courage to say no because we know it's not our call is something that perhaps is easy to say but less easy to do.

[10 : 07] As I was getting ready for doing this talk today, I sat in the study and Tamara, my wife, who was a music teacher, was doing her lessons in the other room.

And before she had started, she took a mobile phone and she put it on the desk and she said, can you answer that when it rings? We wouldn't normally do this, but we were expecting an important phone call from a family member about a family-related business, and that was the only number that they had.

So I was on duty for making sure that this was answered. Well, after half an hour or so, the phone rang. I answered it. It wasn't the family member, but I'd answered it.

The person who was phoning was actually making an inquiry about a piano lesson. So like an idiot, I started to try and answer the question. Well, yeah, I think she's probably free sometime tomorrow.

All right, when tomorrow? Well, I know that she's doing this at so-and-so. Okay, I was just wondering, how about so-and-so? Well, actually, it took about 30 seconds for my total muppetry to be exposed, and it became really clear that actually I didn't have a clue what I was talking about, and we agreed that it would be better for a text to be sent.

[11:30] You see, the point is, and it's stating and screaming the obvious, but I'm going to state it, is we, or rather I, wasted about one minute of both of our lives because I made the mistake of answering a call that wasn't meant for me.

Very often, things can come our way, and we can be tempted to think, well, maybe that looks like a good idea. That's something that perhaps I ought to be doing. And we can almost end up doing it unwittingly.

You know, when I first became a minister, when I was a probationary minister in Devon in the late 90s, I can remember that I kind of came out of college full of enthusiasm, wanting to do absolutely everything.

And so if ever anything came up, I was all over it, and I kind of felt, yeah, yeah, yeah, I want to do that. I ought to be doing that because that's what I'm here to do. And people wouldn't exactly push away that enthusiasm, but it was not that long before I realised that I'd be my own worst enemy and set myself up as the guy who actually wants to do everything.

And it took me years and years and years to unlearn what was, frankly, a totally unbiblical view of ministry, not just for ordained ministers, but for all of us.

[12:53] You see, if that danger is inherent for somebody who was employed by the church to work as an ordained minister, that danger is inherent for every single one of us. You know, it can take huge courage to turn around and to say, no, I'm not going to do that.

Including those things that we might already be doing. Things that we started to do out of a sense of Christian conviction that they were the right thing to do. The danger can be that the longer that we've been doing them, the more they can just become part of what we do, and we don't question it.

When perhaps God might be saying to us, actually, you know, this is somebody else's ministry, and you need to have the courage to lay this down and to say, no, I'm not going to do this because it's not what I'm called to do.

So if the first challenge is having the courage to understand and face up to what our call is not, what about the second, the more positive thing?

Knowing what our call is. How do we go about that? Now, I'm not going to pretend that there is an easy, formulaic answer to that question, because I don't think there is. But I do want to share this with you.

[14:13] I'm going to tell you a story, and this time it is a true story, about somebody who I met a few weeks ago when I was at a conference in another place.

It was a Christian conference, and this person I was talking to, she was from Germany. And we got talking about her life, and although I sort of knew her late husband, I didn't really know him that well, but he had died about three years ago of cancer.

And as the conversation unpacked, so we talked about the way in which she had gone through that experience, not only of losing her husband through cancer, but how she had herself had a cancer diagnosis five years earlier to that.

She had come through that, but she explained how she had to process things and learn to take each day as it comes, and also describe her experiences of how she worked as a, they both worked as missionaries in Indonesia, and then moved to another part of the world after that, seeking to follow God's call.

And through what was quite a lengthy conversation, there was one particular theme that really, really stood out and really got me by the scruff of the neck and was a wake-up call.

[15:39] It was this. She said that she had a sign at home that she pulled off the internet, printed out, and stuck on her fridge.

And that sign was these words. Welcome to the next level.

It was a slogan that was actually used in the early 90s for one of the game consoles, you may remember. But welcome to the next level. I said, well, tell me a bit about that.

What do you mean? She said, I put those words there so I can see it each day, because as I look back at the experiences that I've gone through and am going through, I find that I've got two

choices. Choice one could be to look at the situation and the circumstances around me, and to panic, and to think, I can't go through this.

I can't. I've got this far, but I can't. The other option is to see the circumstances that face me now that I haven't faced before, and to look back on everything that I've been through, and to look at the experiences alongside what I believe are the gifts that God has given me, and to understand what is going on this day as the next level, as a set of challenges, not to be terrified of, but as an invitation from God to embrace, because God knows what's going on.

[17:17] And as she shared this with me, she also shared her conviction of how she believes that God never stops in our lives whatever we're going through, and that each day, even though we may face massive limitations and may not be able to do the things that we would like to do or the things that we used to do but can no longer.

We have that opportunity to regard that day and its challenges as something new that God understands and that God is equipping us for, even though we might not fully understand.

I find that massively, massively challenging. Welcome to the next level. You see, as we go through our lives and as we seek to discern what God would have us do each day, I think it is genuinely important that we learn and continually relearn that God actually does have a plan for us each day, that he knows and understands and that we might not, but nevertheless he is equipping us for.

And that vision that God continually is about the business of growing and growing and growing the stuff inside us that he has gifted us with is something that runs right through the Christian tradition. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, Anglican priest, had something to say about this when he wrote about the way in which God's spirit is continually, continually wanting to do things in us.

[18:50] He wrote this. This was about 200 or so years ago, so bear with me for the language.

Yea, and when ye have attained a measure of perfect love, when God has enabled you to love him with all your heart and all your soul, think not of resting there.

That's impossible. You cannot stand still. You must either rise or fall. Rise higher or fall lower.

Therefore, the voice of God to the children of Israel, to the children of God, is go forward. Forgetting those things that are behind and reaching forward unto those that are before, press on to the mark for the prize of your high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

There is no standing still. Now that could be terrifying or we can see it as exciting as God's daily invitation to say to us, welcome to the next level.

I don't know what's going on in your life right now, but my guess is, is like most human beings, we'll have a combination of things that excite us and things that may make us worried and afraid.

[20:17] Can I suggest that starting right now, we embrace each day with that sense of hopeful expectation that here's the voice of God saying, welcome to the next level.

You might be feeling nervous, you might be feeling afraid, but it's okay. You've been gifted, you've been equipped with everything you need. Welcome. To the next level.

To the next level.