

“Equip the Workers”
Ephesians 4:11-16
October 8, 2017

Today we are continuing our series on Disciple-Making. We began with Chair #1, “Win the Lost.” Last week we talked about Chair #2, “Build the Believers.” This leads us to Chair #3, “Equip the Workers.” Ephesians 4:16 reminds us, “...the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” The natural next step for those of us who have been built up in our faith is to join God in His work in this world. Jesus spent time equipping his disciples, then he sent them out. And when they came back from this work, Luke 10:17 tells us, “The seventy-two returned with joy and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.”

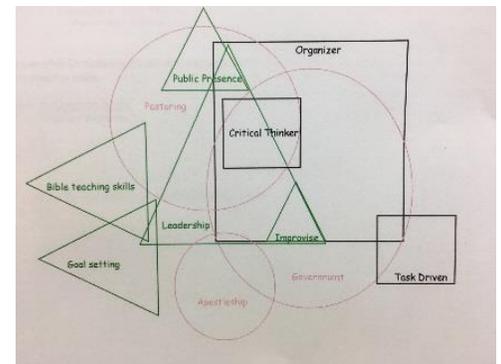
Woo! It’s an amazing thrill to experience God working in and through you in tangible ways. When lives are being impacted and you realize that it’s NOT you; it’s then that you come to know an amazing truth: God IS at work! He is choosing to work through me as His vessel. Wow! This is what I was created for; I want to be part of this! I remember wanting to drop out of college my sophomore year. A group of us from Northwestern had fallen in love with street witnessing in downtown Minneapolis and doing weekend youth retreats in small towns in the surrounding areas. We were filled with energy and spiritual zeal, and we felt invincible!¹ Compared to actual ministry, college classes were so boring, and they felt so irrelevant! Why waste our time in class when there was a whole world to be won to Christ!

But we were NOT very well equipped for ministry yet. Sure, we were loaded with spiritual passion and zeal but it was a zeal w/o knowledge. We were spiritual babies in many ways. We were just barely starting to understand the Bible let alone be ready to teach it to others. The fact is, I wasn’t as well equipped and prepared for ministry as I thought I was.² Pr. 19:2 warns us, “Enthusiasm without knowledge is no good; haste makes mistakes.” (NLT)³ I was naïve in many regards. Through the godly counsel of a college professor named Dr. David K. Johnson, I agreed to stay in college for all 4 years. And boy am I glad I did! I became equipped in SO many ways.

Whether we’re in paid ministry or serving as a lay leader, all of us need to be equipped for the work God calls us to. The workers we are referring to in Chair #3 are not just pastors and missionaries and other people in paid Christian ministries. All of us who’ve been following Christ for a while, should find ourselves embracing the calling of Chair #3, “Equip the Worker.”⁴

But how do we know exactly which Christian work we are called to do? Should I be a Sunday School teacher or a nursery worker or should I help out with the young adult ministry? Should I help out up front on a worship team or should I work behind the scenes setting up chairs or washing dishes after the church potluck? How do I know what I am called to? One of the things that helped me most with this question was something I discovered at Bethel Seminary. It’s called a Venn Diagram. Here’s mine. The black squares represent my **Natural Abilities**. The pink circles represent my **Spiritual Gifts**. The green triangles represent my **Acquired Skills**.

It wasn’t just the details of the diagram that impacted me. What impacted me was the stark realization that, to a large degree, I had been over-spiritualizing “finding my ministry calling.” This Venn Diagram helped me realize that there is a component to our ministry calling that is very supernatural: God gives Spiritual Gifts for



¹ See Dann Spader, *4 Chair Discipling*, Moody Publishers, Chicago, IL, 2014, p. 80.

² Oh, and we also lacked real experience. We’d been doing ministry all of maybe 6 months. But we were pretty sure we had figured out all of the important parts. Much like the Jedi-in-training Luke Skywalker who hadn’t completed his training and left Yoda far too early because he felt such urgency to help his friends in need.

³ See also Romans 10:1-2.

⁴ Ephesians 2:10 points to the natural progression for those who have been saved by grace through faith, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

particular ministries.⁵ But, God also blesses each person with particular Natural Abilities. And, He gives each of us opportunities to Acquire Skills through study and experience. All of these were from God and all of them combined to make me who I am. And each of you has your own unique combination of things that makes you special and equips you for doing God's work.⁶ It can be very frustrating and discouraging to be serving in an area that just isn't a good fit for us. If that is your situation, make a change to something that is a fit. Once you find your fit, you'll know it, because you'll experience joy and you'll recognize God's pleasure as you serve Him where He's called you to be.

Let's use baseball as an illustration. From time to time, all of us need to "pinch hit" and fill in the gaps for someone else. But, ultimately, we want to find our "sweet spot" and thrive where we are best suited. Some of us play infield, some of us play outfield. A few of us pitch or play catcher. Others are base coaches or the water boy or the person who keeps the field in great shape. And, at least one of us, needs to be the crazy mascot who gets the crowd hyped. But, as disciples of Christ, none of us should be sitting in the bleachers. At least, not for very long. Once we've been built up in our faith and we gain some maturity, we need to get in the game. Find your place on the team and get in there!



Today, I urge you to do some evaluation in your own life. Ask yourself this question: "Exactly which Christian work am I called to do?" Take a spiritual gifts test or fill out a Venn diagram. Ask advice from close Christian mentors who know you well. Then, try a few ministries that interest you and see how it goes.⁷ Pray and ask God to show you what He's calling you to. Once you discover what that is, find ways to become equipped to excel at it. God uniquely equips each one of us for the work that He calls us to do.

Once we've figured out what God has called us to do, there are at least **4 Essentials for being Equipped as a Worker:**

First of all, equipped workers need to **Be Available**. We can't serve or teach or help out UNTIL we do something else first: show up! Good intentions won't get the work done. An equipped worker who doesn't show up to serve, might as well still be sitting in Chair #2.⁸ We get a beautiful glimpse into God's throne room in Isaiah, chapter 6. Isaiah sees the beauty and power and holiness of God. In Isaiah 6:8 he tells us, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" Isaiah consecrated himself to God and He embraces his commission as one of God's prophets. He made himself available.⁹

Now, being available over the long haul means we need to set a sustainable pace. It's a bit of a "tortoise and the hare" kind of thing. This is not a sprint, it's a marathon. Burnout is not ok. Consider Moses from the Old Testament. Exodus 18:13-23 tells us "The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening... 17 Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you...select



⁵ Learn more in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

⁶ It's good for us to recognize that we all have a different combination of these. For example, it's pretty clear to me, and to everyone who knows me, that I am not called to music ministry. I love music but I lack just about every acquired skill and natural ability one might need to do well in music. Now, that said, I love to sing to God. And, I'm willing to lead music from time to time when I need to. But, it's not my thing. It's not my primary calling.

⁷ Saddleback Church and Rick Warren have an assessment called "SHAPE." It's an acronym for Spiritual Gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, and Experience. Find the link for it at <http://www.purposedriven.com/ministry/>

⁸ There is something called "The Pareto principle." It's also known as the 80/20 rule or the law of the vital few. It's an economic principle which states that, for many events, roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto_principle) This has often been applied to Christian ministries to suggest that 20% of the people are doing 80% of the work. I'm not sure that the 80/20 rule is accurate at our church though. Frankly, we are blessed. We have 100s of people who serve for 1000s of hours every month. Our local church body is hard working and there is a beautiful synergy here as we serve Christ together with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. (See Luke 10:27.)

⁹ Just imagine if Peter and the other apostles had all responded with a "no." What if the Apostle Paul had said "no." What if Esther had said "no." If Rahab had said "no" she would have been killed with the rest of Jericho and missed her place in Jesus' family tree. What if Moses had said "no?"

capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.” There are so many wonderful opportunities to serve God. Let’s make ourselves available to do God’s work but we can’t say “yes” to everything, all of the time, if we are committed to the long haul.

Another essential for being equipped as a worker is to **Be Dependent**. Depending on our own power just won’t work. We need to remember our power source. Right before Jesus ascends into heaven, he gives His disciples this command regarding doing His work, “I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city UNTIL you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49) The phrase “stay in the city” is in the imperative. This is a command. Don’t do the work of the church without the power of the Holy Spirit. If we try to serve God with our own strength, we end up doomed to frustration or trapped in legalism. We end up burned out, having lost our spiritual joy, and we find our efforts to be unproductive.¹⁰

A 3rd essential for being equipped as a worker is to **Be a Team Player**. We need to work as a team; we are a fellowship of believers. Christian service is not a solo sport. So, if you are leading a ministry team, serve the team of people who are following you. And, if you are the one following, be supportive of the one who is leading the team.

Christian leaders should serve the team they lead. Mark 10:35-45, “Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked. They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” “We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.” When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus served the ministry team that He led.

As a church, we are fellow disciples on the same journey; we’re all on the same team here. There is no place for power grabbing or being conceited or puffed up. We should ask ourselves, “As I lead other people, am I the kind of person other people want to partner with?” How can I become a better team leader? Where do I need to grow? What am I missing that I could correct so that I can make a greater contribution to God’s work? This is why I am so glad to get an Annual Review every year as Lead Pastor. I want to improve and get better. It can be humbling to get feedback, but it’s so important to making me a better leader for God’s work. So, I embrace it.

On the flip side, we need to be supportive of the one leading our ministry team. Whether it’s Sharna leading the nursery or Pastor Albin leading the Youth & Young Adult ministries. Whether it’s Mark leading our Elder Board or Laura leading our Worship Committee. Hebrews 13:17 reminds us, “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.” One phrase that I’ve always liked is “Partner-up-ability.” We should ask ourselves, “As I follow a ministry team leader, am I the kind of person other people want to partner with?” How can I become a better team supporter? Where do I need to grow? What am I missing that I could correct so that I can make a greater contribution to God’s work?

¹⁰ 4 Chair Discipling, p. 87.

One other essential for being equipped as a worker is to **Be Trained**. We need to be intentional about acquiring greater skills. As a church, we are committed to promoting training conferences like Rekindle, the GLS, and the recent BAMM event on “4 Chair Discipling.” We also want to provide opportunities to attend great conferences like the Abundance Conference, EFCA Challenge, and the NW Women’s Retreat we held just yesterday. These are just a few examples of some great ways to be equipped as a Christian.

Let’s recognize that time and money are barriers to these teaching opportunities. What I’m suggesting this morning is that part of being equipped as a worker is making time for training and spending money on it. There comes a point in our growth as a disciple when we need to prioritize becoming equipped above other things. At some point in life, we have to stop “borrowing our neighbor’s tools” and get our own set. We need to be “all in.” So I’m urging you to commit financial resources to training. Get a good Study Bible, buy Christian books and music, attend a retreat, and so on. Use some vacation time and spend some \$ on a Short-term Mission’s Trip. When it comes to equipping the workers, this is some of the best on-the-job training you can get. Even now, let’s all be praying about the possibility of joining our church’s trip to South Asia in November of 2018!

As a church, let’s commit ourselves to providing training opportunities and making them as affordable as we possibly can. We need to Equip the Workers. Equipped Workers make themselves available. They are dependent on the Holy Spirit. They’re team players who get the training that they need.

Don’t get stuck in Chair #2 for your entire Christian life. Don’t get caught in the comfort of “building the believer,” and miss the wonder and adventure of chair #3, “equipping the worker.” That would be such a loss!

As you finish reading this sermon, meditate this week on Romans 12:1-8, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.”

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on October 8, 2017 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson