



KNOWING & DOING

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Ministering Personally, Ministering Pastorally

by Michael A. Milton, Ph.D.

*Director and Senior Teaching Fellow, C.S. Lewis Institute
of Charlotte and the Carolinas*

This article is an excerpt from Chapter 14 in Dr. Milton's book, *The Secret Life of a Pastor (And Other Intimate Letters on Ministry)*. The book is a collection of pastoral letters written to students, pastors, and churches in order to stir them up to greater faith in Christ and love for His Church. Dr. Milton's forthcoming book, *Pastoral Theology*, will be released in Spring 2016. It is hoped that these books will not only fill a need in Bible colleges, seminaries, and universities, but also through the C.S. Lewis Institute in ministry to clergy, staff and other disciples of Christ of local churches.

Dear Students of the Gospel of Christ:

There's something that is on my heart, something that I need to unburden myself of, and it is this: *you minister to people best when you minister out of Christ's compassion for the broken people God has placed in your life.* Because all truth is God's truth, this applies in other contexts, but its incarnational glory is fully displayed in the life and ministry of Christ our Lord. As a believer and a preacher of the Gospel, I minister out of the centering point of my life and my vocation—my faith in Jesus Christ.

In the ninth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is revealed as the great God of profound compassion. As one reads through the chapter that leads to the climactic moment when His great heart is fully revealed as a broken heart for the multitudes, Matthew shows how He had ministered. In the Lord's compassion, He healed the sick, forgave reprobates, and raised the dead. He moved through the layers of hurting humanity with healing in His hands. Jesus Christ ministered to everyone who needed ministry. He went throughout all the villages healing every disease. There was inevitability about it all. "He will go on healing everyone," it seems. Thus it was recorded in Matthew 4:

And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them (vv. 23-24 ESV).

So in Chapter Nine:

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction (Matthew 9:35 ESV).

And yet the Son of Man came to a point in Matthew's account that He looked up on the multitude who were like sheep without a shepherd, scattered (not a "dispersed" kind of scattered but the Greek means a "downcast" and "ravaged" understanding of scattered), and it was then that Matthew — a sinful tax collector converted by the

compassion of Jesus Christ and who, in this ninth chapter, placed himself in his own writing like a Rembrandt in his own painting — reveals the love of our Savior. Matthew tells us that Jesus had *compassion* on the multitude for they were like sheep without a shepherd. The Greek expression for compassion is a word that speaks of the very intestines of our Savior — the deep inner organs that were wracked with pain — the pain of a compassion that no one can ever comprehend. It is the compassion of the Creator for His own creation. It is the compassion of a father for his children but in an infinitely more intimate relationship of love than you or I could ever fathom. Out of this deep-seated compassion of our Lord Jesus Christ comes His command. The command of Christ is that His disciples should pray. And for what or whom should we pray? What should be our response to this compassion of Jesus for the multitude gathered in Israel?

Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest' (Matthew 9.37–38 ESV).



Christ therefore looks confidently over the landscape of a broken, fallen humanity and sees redemption on its way. Yet the redemption will come to the multitudes through His disciples. And those disciples will develop out of prayer for laborers for His harvest. You have heard of preachers who were called by God to preach who later learned of, say, a great-grandfather who prayed each day that God would bless His progeny with a minister of the Gospel. That example, a very common one, is a direct response to this passage.

But here's the thing that I want to say: the multitudes that Jesus saw were the objects of His divine affection, the objects of His compassion, the aim of His redeeming purposes. And yet, Jesus, according to John 17, would love those who were not yet even born. And he would do so through the testimony of His disciples. So Jesus Christ had compassion on that multitude on that day—those very people who were before him, as described in that text. Matthew tells us this. But John lets us see that His compassion extends beyond that moment, to those people of generations yet unborn, and to disciples yet unconverted, as well as to those called to answer His call to pray and minister.

Jesus Christ's compassion would be extended to others through the very disciples who receive that compassion themselves. Therefore, Jesus cared for *that* mass of hurting sheep Himself. His prayer for shepherd-laborers to go into the plentiful harvest is a prayer for you and me. It is a prayer that we should reach the multitudes in our day, people He made; souls He has elected unto salvation. Yet we can only reach those who are before us. We aim our message at one, or two, or three -- the people we know who need the Lord. Yet if I reach out to those who are on my heart and you reach out to those who were on yours and the other man will reach out to the people were on his heart, then we shall reach many together. This is His plan. This is our calling.

In short: *Minister to the people God has placed on your heart.* There are probably only a few, but because all of us are in the same condition, if you minister to that person on your heart, you will minister to many who others who are in the same condition.

I give an example from my life. I have a broken heart about two people I once knew. I knew these two people very well. One of them I wish that I had known better. But that is part of the necessary beckoning, the acute aching, the deep passion, and the God-given desire to reach them — particular people close to me and others like them close to you — and bridge the distance, enter the multitude, and bring the redemptive relief of healing to their souls through Jesus.

Who are the people from the multitude that God has placed in your life? Name them. Those are the souls—precious souls—for whom Christ has compassion. Minister to those few in your heart and you'll actually minister

to many. Minister Christ personally and you will minister Him pastorally. And Christ's command will become an answered prayer. ❖❖



The Reverend Michael A. Milton, Ph.D is the Director and the Senior Teaching Fellow of the C.S. Lewis Institute of Charlotte and the Carolinas. Dr. Milton is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America who serves as the James Ragsdale Chair of Missions and Evangelism at Erskine Theological Seminary (SC), and is president of Faith for Living, Inc., a North Carolina non-profit (<http://www.faithforliving.org>). Dr. Milton's record of service includes President and Chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary, founder of churches in Kansas City and Savannah, and Senior Minister of the historic First Presbyterian Church of Chattanooga. Dr. Milton is the author of twenty-five books, and composer and musician for five albums of original music. An alumnus of such institutions as UNC Chapel Hill, the Defense Language Institute, and Knox Theological Seminary, Mike and Mae and their son reside in Matthews, NC, just outside of Charlotte.

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