



# You and Them

The Pastor's Wife and the Church

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## Introduction

While the expectations of a minister's wife might be high, even unrealistic, her service when given is often overlooked or taken for granted.

Crazy mixed-up sinners that we are, we sometimes want it both ways. We resent the spotlight, the feeling of being scrutinized and being looked over, (along with the guilty sense of not measuring up) but sometimes we are sad because nobody seems to notice or value our contribution. We feel over-looked. While we treasure our right to privacy, we occasionally fantasize about being up there on the stage, in the limelight, getting the Oscar.

It is no fun being ignored but lesson one in ministry life for the pastor's wife is the art of being overlooked.

## **Chapter 1: Secret service is known to God.**

The book of Ruth makes me smile in this regard, for despite giving her name to the book, Ruth herself is repeatedly nudged out of the spotlight by her mother-in-law, Naomi.

Naomi is not the only bereaved woman in Ruth chapter 1, but it is Naomi's grief that takes centre stage. In chapter 2 Naomi sits at home while Ruth does back-breaking work in the fields. In chapter 3 Naomi calls the shots in fixing Ruth up with a husband. She even tells her what to wear. In chapter 4 Ruth is referred to merely as 'the Moabite woman'. Only Boaz uses her name. And the freeze-frame shot at the end of the story has Naomi in the spotlight cuddling baby Obed while the local women shower Naomi, not Ruth, with congratulations.

### **Grace and beauty**

The grace of Ruth in all this is beautiful and exemplary. Boaz appreciated it and knew her secret i.e., that Ruth has come to take refuge under the wings of the Lord, Ruth 2.12. And the end of the book acknowledges Ruth's pre-eminent worth. Her humble invisibility is noted and praised.

As pastor's wife, learn to embrace invisibility in your service, even while you deal with, on occasions, unwanted attention on your life.

Do it because secret service is commended by Jesus. We all can nurture a desire for applause. Jesus says, 'be careful', Matthew 6.1. Good deeds, like prayer, fasting or giving, can be booby trapped. Doing such things secretly is a mark of their genuineness and sincerity. Whose eyes are they for? Jesus.

### **'This is for you Jesus'**

My own experience, feeble as it is, is that secret acts of devotions, anonymous ones or hidden ones, afford great pleasure. That church cupboard you tidied, those hours spent peeling vegetables for a church supper, that tiresome afternoon minding a load of wild children to give respite to a weary mother, when done in a spirit of, 'this is for you, Jesus' are precious sacrifices.

When King David's mighty men brought him, risking their lives, some water from the well near Bethlehem (occupied at that time by the enemy), which David had

expressed a longing for, 1 Chronicles 11.15-19, David was so moved he could not drink it. It had been such a costly thing to do. It was too precious to be drunk. That is how King Jesus feels about our own costly and secret acts of righteousness - giving, fasting, prayer, maintaining our husbands, as well as the kind of mundane things you might do around the church or for its members. It is for Jesus. He knows. You have his smile.

## **Chapter 2: Reluctant service may also be helpful**

When I say reluctant, I don't mean grudging. God loves a cheerful giver, 2 Corinthians 9.7. I am talking about that sinking feeling you get when something needs doing in the church and you look around and zippo! There is no one who will do it. Or, more commonly, there are lovely Christian people who say they'll help, but they won't take responsibility for the job or lead.

So, because you love God and you love your husband, you step up.

### **Three cheers for mediocrity**

Now I understand about gifting, Ephesians 4.8, and I understand about natural and personal inclinations, but occasionally, at least in the short term, and especially in a small church, in order to model a willingness you simply need to do your best and help out. Those things (like what you are gifted at) must be set aside.

Think Nehemiah 3 and those builders of the wall: lack of gift or training did not disqualify. They had not done an apprenticeship in bricklaying – but they got on with it. It is obviously delightful to excel at stuff but writing as a person who is pretty average at most things, I want to raise three cheers for mediocrity. Sometimes satisfactory is exactly what it says. It gets the job done. It means you are not covered in glory, and perhaps that is the point.

### **Counselling?**

Among the expectations laid upon the unsuspecting pastor's wife might be that she will be an in-house, informal counsellor to the distressed. This is a challenging expectation for most of us. Many feel ill-equipped which is why they attend courses, conferences and seminars on the subject. There is nothing wrong with that.

I would describe myself as a reluctant counsellor. But it is always the right thing to want to help others. We do it in the spirit of 'carry each other's burdens and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ.', Galatians 6.2.

So here are some tips for reluctant counsellors.

### Three 'remembers':

- Remember to wear the right clothes. I'm thinking Colossians 3.12 – compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. You need all of the above, plus the overcoat of love. These are the clothes of the new you, the true you in Christ. Put them on with prayer.
- Remember the story we are all part of. People who are struggling are looking for explanations and solutions, but what they most need is imagination. There is a big story going on, the story of God's kingdom. The story of a war and a Saviour King who has rescued his disgraced bride and is preparing her for her wedding day. Our culture has long abandoned the big story and adopted the gospel according to Disney: 'it's all about you'. No wonder so many people are depressed! No wonder they find life pointless. Without the big story it is all meaningless. But within the story, as Christian believers, we all have a part in it. This is what gives our lives and troubles meaning. This is what people lost in the middle of their own stories need to hear.
- Remember the heart. Whenever we have troubles, we tend to blame things or people outside ourselves. But we should beware. In a victim culture like ours beware of stripping the self of responsibility, not for the trouble itself but for the response to that trouble. It is always appropriate to ask someone, 'where is your heart?' Everything depends on the correct response. (See James 1)

### Three 'nevers':

- Never expect to fix people or let them assume that you can. That is above your pay scale. Freely admit your ignorance and impotence in that regard. It is God who heals.
- Never promise complete confidentiality. You can promise not to gossip but always say from the start that you will use your discretion to share information as necessary in the appropriate quarter, e.g., with your husband (the pastor) or the safeguarding officer.
- Never counsel a man. Enough said.

### Three 'always(es)':

- Always set a time limit on a one-to-one session. Say something like 'We will meet 11 until 12'. This is both for usefulness and sanity. Start time, end time.
- Always listen more than you speak, James 1.19.
- Always pray, Nehemiah 2.4, while listening, that the Holy Spirit will prompt you with a relevant Scripture.

## **Chapter 3: Forbearing service is necessary to your sanity and continuance**

Paul opens his first letter to the Corinthian church with a beautiful description of his readers. He calls them 'those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people.' What a great bunch.

But what do we find as we read on. Grace Church Corinth was a pastoral nightmare, beset with quarrels, factions, boasting, immorality, error, heresy and all kinds of disorder.

Christians are called to be holy, but we are not there yet.

### **The most common discouragement**

What is the commonest cause of discouragement in ministry, that makes pastors and wives want to give up or run and hide.? Lack of fruit? Ageing congregation? Hard-hearted unbelievers writing you off? Long hours? No. The most common and most painful cause is the threat from the inside: strife between members, between members and leadership, within the eldership, sometimes from amongst elders' wives.

Life in community is a jostling together of egos and sometimes horrid stuff is exposed. Proverbs 26 has quite a lot to say about this, recognizing some stock characters. For example:

*a) The fool at the front. (Proverbs 26.1,9-10)*

Sometimes in church there is someone who has inappropriately been given honour, status or position. Something like leading the women's meeting. It might be historical or a family thing. Sometimes such a person needs confronting, sometimes not. See verses 4-5. You are probably not the person to make that call, by the way.

Forbearance will mean that you will refuse to be defensive if the fool at the front is hostile towards you, v2. Just don't encourage or rely on such a person.

*b) The sluggard on the sidelines. (Proverbs 26.13-16)*

There may be passengers in the church, looking to be made comfortable, feeling free to ignore a challenge or invitation to help. They are good at excuses which are either

spurious or expose worldly priorities. They miss out because they will be underfed, under exercised, flabby Christians, v15.

Forbearance means being careful in judging others. Some whom appear to be lazy may indeed be lazy. But some who appear lazy may need encouragement or support. Be patient with everybody, 1Thessalonians 5.14.

*c) The busybody at the back (Proverbs 26.17-19, 23-24)*

This person has opinions and is happy to take sides in a quarrel. They excel at making cutting observations, cruel jokes or gossiping. These are dangerous people, demolition workers who might need a formal warning from the eldership, Titus 3.10-11.

Forbearance will mean that you refuse to join in with gossip. Resist the temptation to speak needlessly of another person. Sometimes people will oil their way into your company and confidence because you are the pastor's wife, Proverbs 26. 23-24. Learn to recognize their hidden agendas.

### **The human heart**

What a lot of filth lies in the human heart. There are three references to this in Proverbs 26.23-25. See also Matthew 15:18. Of course that includes our own hearts. Distrust yourself. We are never going to get beyond needing Jesus who hung out with tax collectors and sinners, Luke 15.1.

Forbear because you will have to give account, Matthew 12:36. Here are the Pharisees who gossiped maliciously, who pretended to be so interested in spiritual things while looking for a reason to accuse. They slandered, dissembled and flattered. How did Jesus handle this? He challenged from Scripture, he continued to do good. He did not quarrel, he cared for the bruised reed, he understood the source of mischief, he saw how the heart was exposed and he had confidence in the ultimate reckoning.

### **Church rubbish**

Don't be surprised at the rubbish which crops up in church life. There is of course a place for church discipline. But in the petty irritations of church life, we are called to forbear. Don't keep records. Let things go. We live in an age of rage, but the gospel

calls us not to be easily offended. I Corinthians 13 was written for the church, not for weddings.

As one of E. Nesbit's *The Wouldbegoods* said:

'Doing wrong is easier far

Than any of the right things I know about are.'

As those who have received and daily receive God's generous mercy, be generous and merciful in your attitude to others. If all the truth was known about you, how much would you be hoping for mercy? Bear with each other. Forgive as the Lord forgave you, Ephesians 4.32. That is not the same as reconciliation. But it is an attitude which will keep you sane, sweet and still serving.

This motley band of redeemed sinners which makes up the church includes you, and me. God delights to save the 'funny' (weird) people and that is good news for us. The deepest secret to being amongst 'them' – the congregation – is to delight in the grace and patience God shows.

And always view your fellow Christians as those for whom Christ died.