

For Our People and for the Cities of Our God

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon highlights the essential characteristics of effective teamwork in ministry, focusing on humility, diversification, and reliance on God's guidance.

Scripture: 2 Samuel 10:11, Daniel 3:16, 1 Corinthians 12:4, Galatians 1:10, Ephesians 4:1, Ephesians 6:10, Philippians 1:20

Topics: "Team Ministry", "Godly Leadership"

Description

John Piper delivers a sermon on the importance of teamwork in ministry, drawing inspiration from the relationship between Joab and Abishai in 2 Samuel 10. He emphasizes six key characteristics of effective team ministry: humility, diversification, mutual helpfulness, strength, benefit to God's people, and surrender to God's sovereign guidance. Piper highlights the need for humility to foster unity, the value of diverse gifts in ministry, the importance of supporting one another, the necessity of drawing strength from God, the goal of benefiting God's people, and the ultimate surrender to God's will in all endeavors.

Transcript

February 1, 1981

2 Samuel 10:11-12

I want to paint a word picture this morning of a relationship in ministry for John Piper and Glenn Ogren as they try to give pastoral leadership to the people of God who are Bethlehem Baptist Church. It is a picture that should shape his goals and my goals and your prayers for us. The picture comes from the words of Joab, David's mighty man of battle.

In 2 Samuel 10 the king of the Ammonites has died and his son, Hanun, ruled in his place. David wanted to show kindness to Hanun so he sent his delegates to express consolation to the new king for the loss of his father. But Hanun was convinced by his princes that David's intent was evil and so he humiliated the delegates and sent them away. David was very angry about this, and when the Ammonites heard about his anger they sent for help to the Syrians to build an offensive against Israel. When David heard this he sent Joab and all the mighty men against the Ammonites. As it developed, the Ammonites were arrayed at the walled city to protect it, the Syrians were gathered in the open field and Joab, with the Israelites, were sandwiched in the middle.

So Joab took charge of one group of men and set himself against the Syrians and the rest of his men he put in the charge of Abishai, his brother, and set them against the Ammonites. In verses 11 and 12 Joab gives this great word of challenge and faith to Abishai and it is my word to Glenn Ogren:

If the Syrians are too strong for me, then you shall help me; but if the Ammonites are too strong for you, then I will come and help you. Be of good courage and let us play the man for our people and for the cities of our God and may the Lord do what seems good to Him.

What a vision for teamwork There are six things in the word of Joab that I think should characterize every effort at team ministry in the church. I'll mention them and then hold up each one briefly to challenge us all. All teamwork should be characterized by

- 1) humility;
- 2) diversification;
- 3) mutual helpfulness;
- 4) strength;
- 5) benefit to God's people; and
- 6) surrender to God's sovereign guidance.

First of all, HUMILITY. "If the Syrians are too strong for me, then you shall help me." Joab was a mighty warrior, but not so foolish as to think himself wholly self-sufficient. "Abishai, my brother, I might be inadequate for the task today." And he was not ashamed to ask for help. Humility willingly acknowledges its own finitude and need. It is open to be helped and it is open to being taught and it does not resent good advice or counsel.

One of the reasons that humility is an absolute essential in team ministry is that no lasting unity is possible without it. This is taught, for example, in Ephesians 4:1-3:

I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The sequence of virtues in this text is significant. One leads to the other. The goal is unity in the bond of peace. But you can't have unity unless you can forbear each other, that is, endure each other's failures and idiosyncrasies. But you can't endure each other if you are not patient; you can't be forbearing if you have a hair-trigger in the rifle of your emotions. But you can't avoid having a hair-trigger unless you are meek and lowly. The proud person will always be resentful and impatient. Therefore, humility is essential for patience and patience for forbearance and forbearance for unity. If Glenn and I (and all the rest of us) are to be united we must, by God's grace, be humble.

The second characteristic of team ministry illustrated by Joab is DIVERSIFICATION. Abishai was sent against the Ammonites, Joab went against the Syrians. It is wise battle strategy, when the enemy is widespread and diverse, that we not engage all the troops in one place. It is also wise to have everyone doing most of the time what they are best at. And it is a solid Biblical principle that God has given all of us different combinations of gifts. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:4f:

Now, there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

There is an awful temptation among people in general and especially in us ministers to think of our varied gifts as making us inferior or superior to each other in the church. But this is a great mistake and Paul tried to overcome it when he said,

God has arranged the organs of the body each of them as he chose ... there are many parts yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.' (1 Corinthians 12:18-21).

Joab cannot say to Abishai, "I have no need of you." Piper cannot say to Ogren, "I have no need of you." There is diversification in gifts and therefore diversification in ministry. But everyone on the team is essential.

The third characteristic of good team ministry is MUTUAL HELPFULNESS. "If the Syrians are too strong for me, then you shall help me; but if the Ammonites are too strong for you, then I will come and help you." Diversification in the church is not so ironclad that we can't leave our appointed bailiwicks and help one another. Fundamental to all successful teamwork is that the team members be for each other not against each other. Competition in ministry is anathema to the Spirit of Christ. My goal must be Glenn Ogren's joy and success in ministry. Glenn's goal must be my joy and success in ministry. At the top of our list of priorities must be a zeal to help each other love God and fulfill our ministries.

On this point a warning is in order. There will always be carnal people who are factious and will try to align themselves with one pastor against another. They gain a sense of power and significance from being on the inner circle of one leader over against another leader. But that will not happen here, God willing, There will be no Piper party or Ogren party, because Piper and Ogren will be much in prayer together before their one Lord, Jesus Christ, and our goal will be to help each other not compete with each other.

The fourth characteristic of effective team ministry is STRENGTH. "Be of good courage and let us play the man." More literally, the Hebrew simply says, "Be strong and let us show ourselves strong!" When the battle begins do not limp away, weak and fearful. ATTACK! "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Ephesians 6:10). The power that we need does not come from within ourselves. It is the strength of God's might with which we must be strengthened. When we put on God's armor we get God's strength. May God grant us to see with the eyes of our hearts what is the immeasurable greatness of His power in us who believe, according to the working of His great might which He accomplished in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and made Him sit at His right hand in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:19,20).

May God grant us great spiritual power in our work together; and May we never flag in courage and zeal "for our people and for the cities of our God."

And that is the fifth characteristic of good team ministry: BENEFIT TO GOD'S PEOPLE. "For our people and for the cities of our God!" Joab said. Even though it must be our goal to help each other, yet we must always ask, "Help each other do what?" And the answer is, "Benefit God's people." No Christian team lives for itself alone. We strive for gospel humility, we employ our diversification, we live in mutual helpfulness, we maintain strength not for ourselves alone but for the benefit of God's people.

Notice that it is not our first aim to please the people, but to benefit them. Paul said to the church at Galatia, "Am I now seeking the favor of men or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still pleasing men I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). Our first aim is not to please men but to bless them. If we do that with all our hearts, then we will have the approval of those whose approval matters, those who want above all what God wants.

And what is the benefit that we should aim at above all? Almost exactly a year ago I preached here as a pastoral candidate and I chose for my text a word from Paul in Philippians 1 to state as clearly as I could what my goal in ministry would be and what benefit in the people I would be aiming at. It hasn't changed. Paul said,

It is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not at all be ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be magnified in my body whether by life or by death ... I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your advancement and joy of faith (Philippians 1:20,25).

Here is the great goal we must have for our people, Glenn: whether they live or whether they die, that Christ might be magnified in them. That they might so live in their homes, so live at work, so live in their leisure and so die that Jesus Christ might appear to all around them as a magnificent God. And since they will magnify this Christ only by trusting Him in all that He has done and said, therefore, our practical goal must be "the advancement and joy of their faith."

So, our ultimate goal for the people is that they magnify Christ in life and death. And our practical goal as a means to that end is the advancement and joy of their faith. "For our people and for the cities of our God!" --that their confidence and joy in the risen Christ might soar and that Christ might be magnified in the whole world.

There is one final characteristic of team ministry that Joab illustrates: SURRENDER TO GOD'S SOVEREIGN GUIDANCE. "Be of good courage and let us play the man for our people and for the cities of our God, and may the Lord do what seems good to Him!" And may the Lord do whatever seems good to Him. O, may we always approach our work in this way, bowing together before God and saying: "God, we aim to be humble, to be diversified, mutually helpful, strong in the Lord, working hard for the benefit of your people, but, O God, we acknowledge You are sovereign and we are finite, and we would say no more than Joab: in all our plans and all our labor You do what seems good to You!"

I remember another team who surrendered themselves to God's sovereign will one time. Their names were Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel, chapter three. They refused to bow down to the idol Nebuchadnezzar built. And when he threatened to throw them into the furnace they said,

O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it be so our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up (Daniel 3:16-18).

God can save us, we believe He will save us. But if in His sovereign will it seems good to Him to let us burn, be it known to the whole world, we will not cease to worship and obey Him alone. Whether by life or by death He will be magnified in our bodies. Does not that kind of absolute abandon to the will of God make your spine tingle? O, that the pastoral team of this church might be that surrendered to God's sovereign guidance.

Let us be humble with all the lowliness fitting for finite sinners. Let us diversify according to our varied gifts. Let us come to each other's aid whenever there is need. Let us be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Let us spend ourselves tirelessly for the benefit of God's people--for the advancement and joy of their faith. And finally, may we give to the winds our fear and abandon ourselves boldly and joyfully to the sovereign guidance of God. Amen.

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