



# ROD AND STAFF: TOOLS FOR A SHEPHERD

## Testimony under construction: The Messy Middle.

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Impacted by a testimony of the transforming work of God in someone's life, we are often left in awe of God's faithfulness and with fresh hope for what He will do in us and in others we are praying for. We often forget that in most cases transformation in any area of our lives is a process and the actual experiences leading up to a magnificent testimony were not pleasant happy times for all involved. Listening to the spewing poison of bitterness while trying to find the right place to interject a word on the need to forgive, rushing to the hospital to pray for a person who overdosed again, dashing about in the middle of the night to stop someone from buying drugs, watching and weeping as a person reaps hard consequences of actions taken contrary to your counsel, being accused of all manner of malice by the one you are sacrificially reaching to. All this and more may occur in what I refer to as the messy middle. Some will move rapidly through this zone, perhaps without a hint of it, while others find victory only after months or years. Which victor is more spiritual? Which is more victorious? Do we welcome both overcoming types (and all in between) into our church family? Didn't God send both? How long will God suffer with any of us in bringing us into maturity? He will not contend with us forever (Ps. 103), but history is evidence that His patience greatly outlasts ours.

Have you ever ministered to someone who has been in the messy middle? They are moving forward towards overcoming in an area but not without setbacks and skirmishes. They are not displaying the maturity we might expect or hope for. Especially when this person is an adult, our perceptions and patience towards them may not be terribly generous. Depending upon your own gifting, you may find the messy middle life giving or nerve grating. Generally speaking, this phase is harder to tolerate for the prophetically motivated (generally no tolerance for gray situations, "there's the right way and there's the wrong way") and the mercy motivated (worn down because of feeling the person's pain almost as if it is their own). However, exhorters tend to thrive in these times as long as the person is showing an earnest desire to move forward even if it is only millimeters at a time, but if the person stops responding, the exhorter is just as likely to write the person off. May the Lord grow each of us up in our gifts, strengthening our weaker areas.

Whether feeling stretched or thriving, here are a few biblical principles that can guide us when we are working with someone in the messy middle.

- 1. Don't minister in this alone.** (Eph. 4:16, Rom. 15:14, 1Cor. 3:5-9) Healthy growth as a believer happens in the context of community. As much as it may appeal to our heroics to be "the only one" who is going to lead this person through the messy middle, it is not the way God designed it. Love requires that we look to what is best for the one we are ministering to. A team approach answers the issue of having the gifts that thrive best available at different points along the way. Just like a constructing a house, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, siders and so forth all come and use their strongest skills to build it. A team approach also allows us to give a consistent message to the person. We can also encourage one another to continue on during the roughest times.
- 2. Gentleness** (Gal 5:23, 6:1) Gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit. As such, true gentleness is not possible for us apart from His work in our lives. Gentleness is also an attitude as much a methodology. Choice of words, tone of voice, physical touch, and time spent all reflect gentleness. If you attempt to act gently while harboring a harsh attitude, your actions will eventually betray you.

- 3. Appropriate firmness** (Gal 6:1, 1 Tim. 4) While we move forward in gentleness, that does not mean we should forego appropriate firmness. Speaking the Truth in love and setting boundaries are essential parts of helping someone move forward through the messy middle. These boundaries need to be relevant for the struggle. Exercising firmness rooted in frustration rather than love can create hurt, harm the relationship and hinder the person's progress. If you find yourself in frustration, talk to someone else on the team to get perspective. You may find that for the moment you'll need to hand off to someone else with the necessary gift to apply the firmness needed at the moment.
- 4. Recognize and celebrate the small wins.** Look for the opportunities to celebrate points where the person has been met by God and moved further toward freedom. Miriam's song of celebration after the Lord closed up the Red Sea was early on the journey to the Promised Land. We see stones of memorials, scrolls of remembrance, and altars created throughout Genesis to Malachi, marking significant interactions with God. Often, we will recognize those moments easier than the one who is going through the difficulty. In celebrating along the way, we reinforce the reality that God is at work and the battle will be won.
- 5. Be vulnerable ourselves.** (1 Tim. 1:15-17) I remember once sitting across from a couple who asked if my wife Carol and I ever struggled with anything. To them, we seemed to have it all together. It was an eye-opening moment – I wondered how in the world could they have come to that conclusion? We need to use wisdom in this area not to share in a way that diminishes confidence in the idea that we can be of help. Nevertheless, our vulnerability communicates hope for them as well as points back to our need for Jesus. In another conversation, Carol shared some struggles we as parents were having with one of our children. The woman began to tear up. She said, "thank you so much. This is the first time in the seven years that we have been going to churches that I now know I am not the only one who is not perfect."
- 6. Release our own expectations.** (1 Tim. 1:16, Gal. 6:9, 2Cor. 12:15) How long will this messy middle last? Are we there yet? Unlike a road trip, we cannot know how far we are from arrival so we need to be committed to God's timing. We are called to minister to people, not take on projects and with that comes uncertainty. Take for example grief – we are meant to grieve well but not meant to stay there forever – however no one experiences grief in exactly the same way or for the same amount of time. It also has no expiration date by which time it will never return. Likewise, some experience instant freedom from addictions through a single prayer, and others need prayed through many long dark nights of struggle, spread out over a long period time until they, too, emerge free. God was willing to take the children of Israel through the wilderness for as long as it took to bring them to the spiritual response He desired of them. He hasn't changed.
- 7. It is not only about the one we are ministering to.** (1Tim.4:16, Prov. 27:17) When iron is sharpening iron, both will feel the heat. In God's efficiency, we all receive some transformation through ministering to others. It is simply the way it is. The pressure of ministering in the messy middle tests and reveals our character. We do well to take advantage of this exposure to allow growth in our own lives.

**8. Remember we can change no one.** (Phil. 2:13, 1Cor. 3:5-9) The responsibility to respond to the Holy Spirit rests with each person involved. While we can only minister what we receive from the Holy Spirit, the person we are ministering to has to want to be transformed. We can plead with them to take this or that action. We can and should spend hours in intercession for them. Ultimately, though, they alone can make the decision to surrender to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. So likewise, we can take pleasure but not pride in the eventual victory. For while we allow ourselves to be obedient vessels, we can do nothing apart from Him.

However, it is pride that often derails a person's progress and our patience. On their end, refusing to give up control, go back on foolish proclamations, risk losing face with old friends and such can tempt them not to do the right and hard things. On our part, when we begin to judge our efforts or worse yet, imagine others judging us as ineffective because a person should have responded to our ministry and wisdom by now. We may be tempted to prematurely decide the person is incorrigible and give up to save face.

Applying these few principles can strengthen our work with those in the messy middle of transformation. Just as the Lord endured the cross for the joy of all that would be accomplished, we too should draw strength in reminding ourselves of the coming testimony in which we are privileged to be playing a part.

Some suggested activities:

1. Reflect over your own testimony. How did you act during a "messy middle" period? How did others minister to you during that time? Make a list of what things did they say or do that impacted you (both positively and negatively). If possible, contact those who ministered to you through that time and get perspective on their experience of ministering to you through that time.
2. List the gifts God has given you and reflect on how they might be used in ministering to someone in the messy middle.
3. If you are ministering to someone in the messy middle now, consider how it is going in light of the above principles. Seek God for direction on any missing parts.
4. Send any other principles you feel should be added to those I've included here to [bill@lff.net](mailto:bill@lff.net), and I will consider them for a future edition where they can be shared with everyone. Also, if you know of resources written by others about this topic, I welcome your referrals.

Galatians 6

<sup>1</sup>Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. <sup>2</sup>Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. <sup>3</sup>If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. <sup>4</sup>Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, <sup>5</sup>for each one should carry his own load. <sup>6</sup>Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. <sup>7</sup>Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. <sup>8</sup>The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature <sup>a</sup>will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. <sup>9</sup>Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. <sup>10</sup>Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (NIV)