

Testimony To Sonship - Rose Marie Miller

If you had told me ten years ago that I would be writing an article on team ministry, I'd have laughed. Just keeping my marriage vows had been team ministry enough for me. My husband Jack, is a pastor, church planter, seminary professor, and evangelist - with almost a limitless supply of energy. He says it comes from understanding the book of Galatians and building his life on justification by faith. My life's pattern generally veers toward the how-to's, to the law and its duties. Given that combination, my feeling was the less team ministry I had with Jack the better. Where he saw opportunities, I saw work, loads of it.

I had good reasons to feel that way. We live in an ancient three Story house on the outskirts of Philadelphia. Once our teenagers left this large old home in the early 1970's, Jack and I agreed to take in people who were in desperate need. This was our team ministry: taking in people like drug addicts, homosexuals, state hospital drop-outs, and refugees from motorcycle gangs. We had some dramatic conversions during this time and from this work sprang the seeds that blossomed into New Life Presbyterian Church of Jenkintown, Pennsylvania.

Jack's role in our ministry to these troubled people was to be the representative of grace. He gave the gospel to everyone in the house. I was the law, motherly but firm and resolute. It was needed. Some of these people were really burdened and it took firm measures to keep them under control. During this time, I was a growing puzzle to my husband. He would tell me how gifted I was, how effective my work was becoming, with the result that it made me feel guilty. I really should say, even more guilty, because there was a dark cloud over much of my life. Even seeing the beautiful conversions taking place in our home and the new lives developing did not give me much lasting joy. No matter how well things went for me, I always felt I should have done more. I could see countless flaws in the best things I did. Intact, my own private view of myself was that I never could do anything really worthwhile.

I remember an experience back in the sixties which typified my attitude. Jack received annual invitations to speak on "Skis and Skeptics", evangelistic weekends in the Pocono Mountains. Jack approached the events with typical enthusiasm, earnestly seeking to win every skeptic to Christ. Me? I loved the skiing and at night slipped up to my room with my favorite Agatha Christie novel under my coat. While Jack fought for the lives of the skeptics downstairs in the lodge, I unraveled the mysteries of Agatha snuggled under the covers. Only the skiing and Agatha made these weekends bearable. Actually, I used to pray that no money would come in so that I would not have to go. Nowhere in me could I find the wisdom and the compassion needed to reach out to these college

students. I felt that I didn't have anything to offer anyone. I felt as if I barely knew Christ as a real person myself. The more I thought about it, the more I was paralyzed. "What to say? How to say it. When to say it?" and then afterwards, "Did I say it right?"

But it was hard to get Jack to hear how I felt. I often complained to him, "You don't listen." But all I gave him to listen to were problems of my own and those of the people we lived with. Worse yet, I expected Jack to act as Holy Spirit and solve these problems. Jack, for his part, didn't listen to the deeper struggles of my heart. The pressure built inside me until July 1978 when we vacationed in Tennessee, taking with us one of the troubled young people living in our home. One evening walking by the lake, I blurted out, "I feel like I am walking under a dark cloud. God seems far away and I don't even know if I believe He exists." Up to this point Jack usually had ready answers, but now he was shocked into silence.

As soon as we returned home, Jack handed me a copy of Martin Luther's Argument to the Book of Galatians, I read, "For in the righteousness of faith, we work nothing, we render nothing unto God, but we only receive, and suffer another to work in us, that is to say, God." (xii). I was eager to hear about another righteousness for me. At that time we had living with us a charming, cultured young person who continually evaded and resisted our efforts to get him to take responsibility in the home. I could forgive the living illustrations of Romans 1 that we had taken in before. But I couldn't forgive this fellow's expectations that we serve him hand and foot. I couldn't love him. I felt so guilty that I would have loved another's righteousness to do it for me, but I didn't know what I had to do to get it.

I kept reading Martin Luther and a year later during a conference in Switzerland the Lord made it clear to me what I needed to do. Jack was speaking at a conference on family relationships and one sunny day I chose to go skiing. I chose the mountain too, one that was way beyond my skill as a skier. Within ten feet of the top I fell and lost one ski. Although I could have turned around at the top and gone back down the gondola. I did not. For two hours I slid and bumped and fell down that mountain. When I got back to the hotel, weary and aching, I slid into a hot tub. I was very angry at God. Wasn't it His fault that I had made such a fool of myself? After all, He knew how high that mountain was. He could have kept me from going.

But the Lord had something better to cover me with than all my ready excuses. Sunday morning during a communion service, Jack broke a large loaf of French bread to be passed around. In the crack of that bread, I suddenly saw Jesus broken for me. And finally I understood what Luther was saying, that Jesus'

righteousness covered all my own unrighteousness. And what did I need to do to get it? Just accept His work for me. As I sat there with tears streaming down my face and one small kleenex to stem the tide, I saw that trip down the mountain as a picture of my record of self-righteousness. I was struck by the obvious fact that I hadn't needed to go down the mountain the way I did. The other way was to enjoy a cup of tea on the mountaintop restaurant and go back down on the gondola, admitting that for me the skiing down was an impossibility. I suddenly saw the past as so much self-effort that had produced "good things," but could not deal with failure or defeat. Now I understand that Christ's righteousness covered all of that. All my excuses were gone and I accepted Christ's perfect record as what I needed. All my self-righteousness made me a spiritual paralytic, but Christ's righteousness brought peace. God reached into my life and dealt with my fundamental sin.

About a year later we were invited to speak together at a church. What happened in Switzerland was still very real to me, but other than telling women about it, I had trouble seeing how it could help them. So I decided to teach them about women of the Bible. After I spoke, a young woman came up and said, "I have to talk to you." As we sat talking in her home, with her children playing under our feet, she confessed. "I hate my husband, I hate my kids, I hate being a pastor's wife." Several years earlier I would have told her how to discipline her kids or how to submit to her husband, but the how-to's had never worked for me. They always seemed to involve me again in the vicious cycle of self-sufficiency, self-effort leading to failure, and self-accusation. All I had for her now was what Jesus had done for her. "You have to yield to the righteousness of Christ," I said. "Is that all?" she wanted to know. "Yes, that's all. She knelt down to pray and confessed that her life was filled with her own righteousness, that now she wanted Christ's, and she came off of her knees different, with a heart to love her husband, children and her work. She then told all the women in the church about the change and they too wanted to know about how to be different. I told them the same truth - and they experienced a change too.

I felt like a spectator to God's work. Here I was being the team member Jack wanted by just telling the women about Christ. This is the only church we spoke in together in which the men lagged behind in their response to my husband's teaching.

The message of justification by faith began to give me purpose and identity in our team ministry. I no longer wondered, "Just who am I? Wife or junior partner?" I knew that we were partners together in the gospel. I could speak with conviction about the power of the gospel to dispel the dark clouds of guilt that hang over our lives: it worked for me. I began to study the book of Galatians in earnest. When we took a day off, my conversation was no longer

filled with my problems, rather I had things to share with Jack about how the book of Galatians applied to my needs and to those around me.

In December 1979 Jack received an invitation from a Ugandan pastor, a former student at Westminster Seminary, to minister to the church in Uganda as it emerged from the blood and violence of Amin's eight year reign of terror. Jack prepared to go with his usual enthusiasm, and I prepared with fear. God still was molding this "team."

In Uganda, we stayed in a hotel filled with returning exiles, Asians, and Indians. We made friends and prayed with people of all religions through one crisis after another, including insecurity, sickness, loneliness, bad food, and no water. During this time we saw more evil in two months than in twenty-three years of ministry. The physical and emotional brutality began to wear away at my soul. I did not know how to handle all the evil I heard about and saw. Arriving in Kenya for two weeks of rest, we went to Mombassa. a fashionable resort for Africans, Asians, and Europeans. On the first evening there, we went to a small park overlooking the Indian Ocean. I was simply content to rest and enjoy the beauty of the scene, but with us in the park were many Muslims meeting to enjoy friendships and the balmy evening air. Jack and some other missionaries with us began to preach, and soon I heard him say. "My wife will now tell you how a Christian marriage works." Not only did I not want to speak, I was ready to terminate our "team ministry" right there. I stood up, however, and spoke reluctantly, and later was overwhelmed with a deep sense of guilt, despair and defeat. Anger and resentment smoldered in me.

On the way home I couldn't hold it in any longer. With tears streaming down my cheeks I said to Jack, "Why couldn't I cope? What is wrong with me?" Jack turned to me and said, "Rose Marie, you act like an orphan. You act as if the Holy Spirit never came and could never help you through any impossible situations like Uganda and Mombassa."

I knew he was right. All I could say was, "Lord, I am sorry, please teach me how to be a daughter. In Uganda I had seen lots of orphans. One had tried to steal my purse as we knelt to pray in the market place. They would kill almost as quickly as steal. Because they had no father to look after them they made sure they took care of themselves: lying, cheating, stealing, and deceiving to get along. I had been acting like them, as if I had no father, as if I didn't have His authority, His power, His spirit, His heart and His ear. Although I knew I was justified by faith, I still thought that obedience was more or less up to me. I now began to discover that I could rely on God's promise, and, by "faith working through love," do my work. During this time I began to study the book of Galatians. I no longer asked, "How can I study this to help other people?" It was

life and breath for me, food and drink. I had to understand how to live a Christian life and be on the front lines with my husband without always collapsing. I also began to study the book of Romans, another book that for years I had avoided because I couldn't understand it. Now it too was a delight to read, study and teach.

The ways God had been blessing me had been wonderful. I didn't suspect what He would teach me next. Since 1979 Jack and I had been going to Uganda twice a year, and in December 1982, driving to Kenya in our old Land Rover, I said to Jack, "This is it! I'm never coming back to this country. For all practical purposes this "team ministry" is over." God gave Jack grace to be quiet, and just say, "Well, I'll have to go alone, but for shorter periods of time. And in June 1983, Jack, our son-in-law, Bob, and another young man went for a month together. On the day before their scheduled return, the telephone rang. Bob was on the line. He said, "Dad has had a heart attack. It did not take me long to decide what to do. "Tell Jack I'm coming out," I said. But before I went, I said, "God, you know how I feel about this country. Please go with me" And in the quiet of my heart the promise came very sure, "My presence shall go with you and I will give you rest."

The next day I was on the way, not knowing what I would find when I got there. I knew what the hospitals were like; I had been in them. I knew the scarcity, but this time I knew that God was with me, and that His presence was far more real than the evil, and the problems I would encounter. I went with joy. Our whole congregation and many others were praying. The church even sent an old friend to accompany me and minister to Jack. Now I began to understand in a fuller way what it means that I am not an orphan. I have the Spirit, I have the promises, I have the Father's love. I have the sacrifice of Christ. My husband lived, and now our team ministry is more effective than before, and not so riddled with my confusions and unbelief. Perhaps Jack's perspective on our partnership says it best:

"While I lay on a hospital bed in Uganda, the presence of Rose Marie was like a light to fill the room. I am home now, up to about 80% of my work load, but it is a load Rose Marie shares with me. In her part of our ministry Rose Marie does counseling with women, but even more important to her is her Bible teaching using the books of Romans and Galatians. Tuesday afternoons she instructs the wives of missionaries preparing to go to Uganda. Thursday afternoons she teaches a class mostly made up of single women. We are so in tune with each other that she may ask me to drop in for some part of her class to teach and we don't miss a beat."

“Saturday mornings I have the primary responsibility for teaching Galatians to our students in our Leadership Training program. Rose Marie also takes key lectures and gives a vivid account of the meaning of Galatians in relationship to her own life. By this time we know each other so well that a few months ago, when I was called out of a Saturday morning session, Rose Marie completed the lecture on Galatians that I had just started. The students told me afterwards, “It was an excellent presentation. We would have been sorry to have missed it. Her uniqueness is that she lays a sound theological basis in justification by faith and sonship - for all that she presents. She has a wealth of superb illustrations from her struggles and triumphs with the people who have lived in our home, and from the country of Uganda.”

“But I think there is another base for God’s giving us unity in team ministry. We pray together a great deal. We have a rule: ‘Never sit on a problem waiting for it to hatch a lot of worries. Stop and pray.’ We also have prayer meetings for the church in our home. On Thursday mornings we meet with people from the church to pray from 7:00 A.M. to noon. I believe that prayer is, along with justification and our adoption as sons, the primary foundation for our ministry. Personally I do not see how it is possible to have an effective ministry without the freedom given by a justification through grace and the power given through prayer.”

“What did I need to do before this team ministry was possible? As a husband, I had to repent of my dominance and learn to listen to my wife, to show love in that way. I also had to teach her justification by faith and the meaning of our sonship through union with Christ. Once I repented, I expected her to be liberated with me. No way. So after a time, in desperation I gave her Luther on Galatians, and the change was amazing. I have seen some great changes in people, but Rose Marie’s whole being was liberated by Luther’s commentary.”

The gospel has also changed my expectations for us as a team. I no longer expect Jack to be the Holy Spirit. I have the Holy Spirit. I know I am already justified by grace. I’m not constantly demanding Jack’s approval and sponging off of his emotional life. Now I can give love to him as well as receive. I don’t expect Jack to be perfect. If he makes a mistake in our team ministry, I know that his sins as well as mine are covered by the righteousness of Christ. I no longer expect to find any wisdom or compassion in myself. It’s all in Jesus and He has enough for everyone that I meet.

So deep is my sense that God accepts me just as I am, that I can live free of the expectations of others. As I talk to pastor’s wives and women in ministry from different parts of the country, they tell me about what others expect of them: to be the model wife, mother and housekeeper, as they also minister in the church.

I know that the expectations of others can be overwhelming and where I do give you a list of practical helps on how to be the perfect pastor's wife, it might only add to the pressure you have. Instead I tell women involved in team ministry that they don't have to be perfect, because Another is perfect for them. Women in ministry respond with such wonder and joy, that I'm convinced that this is the overwhelming need today: for Christians to hear the gospel.