

The Service of The Church

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Bible Text: 1 Peter 2:1-12
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Let us turn in the New Testament to 1 Peter 2. 1 Peter 2, we shall read verses 1 to 12.

1 So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation-- 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. 4 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." 7 So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," 8 and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. 9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

And I'd like us here to look at verses 9 and 10 of this passage, and in particular in a few moments, to identify just a short phrase and to focus our attention on it.

My subject this evening, "The Service of The Church." We're living in a very impatient age for Christians as much as for others. What should we be doing? We must first know who we are, what the church is, otherwise we will do wrong things, or fail to do right things. What the church does in the world will depend on self-understanding. Are we a

social agency? Are we a society for performing religious ritual? Are we a private club? I stop at that ridiculous point. We're none of these.

1 Peter 2:9 and 10. He reminds readers, I think, of three things. He reminds the readers of the salvation which they have received and you'll see him putting it in three pictures, the before after pictures, "called you out of darkness into his marvelous light"; before and after, "once you were not a people, but now you are God's people"; before and after, "once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." It's the doctrine of salvation that he sets before his people, reminding them of it. But then also in chapter 2, verse 9, he goes on to deal with our status, four great phrases, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession." They're God-possessed with security. But all that we've received by grace is for a reason. The Greek word "that" is in the middle of that verse, a very strong word of purpose here, so that, as a result. Salvation and status are not ends in themselves, they have a higher goal in view. What is it? So "that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you." So that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you. Here is the service we are called to offer to God, the church as a body to do it, the members as individuals, and all of us helped by our deacons chosen by the people as this verse has it, to proclaim God's excellencies.

The testimony of the RP Church of Ireland says this of the deacon, "This order of officers needs to be responsible for compassionate outreach, practical administration, and other forms of service in the church." For us as individuals, and this evening especially for our deacons, the whole Board one-by-one hears the service that we're called to offer to God. This service provides us with three things and I want to look at them each in turn with you.

The first is overriding purpose. Overriding purpose, something that is high and holy and masters all. We live in the middle of the tragedy of many purposeless lives, young people who are unemployed and meaningless, dead-end people working in jobs in which they have no interest or no pleasure, those who seem to make it but they're unfulfilled and they're unsatisfied, for those who have lived to retirement but there's nothing more to live for and they look lost. What is it all for? Many people don't know. The shortness, the uncertainty of life seem to mock all efforts. Yes, vanity of vanities. No point or purpose in life. People try to deaden this purposelessness: more possessions, more pleasure, drink, drugs, violence, immorality. The incidence of suicide is rising rapidly in one of the richest societies history has ever seen.

Are we as Christians exempt from this? We should be but are we? Is it not too often true that we can lead busy, worthy, religious lives without ever asking ourselves what is all this for? I spent years, well over 40 years, being busy and preaching, visiting people, attending committees, writing, teaching in college, but why was I doing all these things? What was the great purpose? And friends, what is your life? Yes, we've got our daily work, our family, the church, other responsibilities. We get occupied with these, trying to do our best in them, but we've scarcely a moment to think why these are the means but what is the end? And friends, if we fail to ask that question, our lives, without realizing it,

become purposeless. Our work becomes drudgery. We lose our energy, our enthusiasm, our excitement. The answer is in these words: the grand purpose for all our living is to communicate God's purposes, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you.

This ties everything together. It makes sense of all. It gives a reason for every moment of every day. Nothing is meaningless. In every second of existence, I am to show, as a Christian, what God is like and why. You remember Paul, "Whether therefore you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." That's the goal. That's the purpose for it. That's why we're here. Do all to the glory of God. And I expect most of us would have least reached the end of the first Shorter Catechism. Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

And friends, that is the purpose of the church, to proclaim God's excellencies. That's what we're for. That's why we're here. If we do this, we're fulfilling the reason for our existence, to proclaim God, to proclaim God's excellencies, and if we don't, then we're nothing. We're useless. We're futile. And friends, we've got to get this and keep it clear in our thinking. No more emptiness. No more drudgery. But this exciting and transforming vision which leads us into these words, the overriding purpose. The overriding purpose.

But then, secondly, I think in these words we have put before us the awesome responsibility. The awesome responsibility to live every moment for God's glory. Reflecting God means that we are mirrors of God. We are reflecting him to the world and God has put us, hasn't he, on a vast stage and the audience is on earth and in heaven, and the Lord is saying to his angels, "Look at my people. Learn more of my glory from them." At every moment, every one of Christ's people is on show. As Paul again puts it in Ephesians 3;10, "so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God may now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm." That's why we're here. That's why we're living on earth, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly realms.

And friends, what thrills me about that is this is a ministry which is unique to human beings. No one else performs it or achieves it. Angels declare God's praises, so does creation, but only human beings can praise him as the God of salvation. There's nothing else in all creation can set that across to others, the God of salvation, things into which the angels long to look.

His excellencies, Peter says, not so much his qualities or his attributes, glorious though they are, but the wonderful works of salvation. Something of God can be seen in you or me which is not visible in any other part of the universe. That's what we're called to live for and to do. That is our responsibility.

Friends, that is why sin is so serious. It's not just that it hurts others, that we hurt ourselves by sin, it's not just that it grieves and angers God. All that is serious enough but it becomes far worse because we become cracked, dirty, distorting mirrors. We are in the world to reflect God but then when we fall into sin and betray him and go away from

him, how are we reflecting? What are we showing? What are we saying of our Savior? We're shouting out lies about God. We're casting dirt on God's honor and God's glory so that other people can mock and blaspheme. For the Christian, sin is not just breaking some set of church rules, it is lying about our blessed Savior. It is providing nails for the jeering crowd to drive into him. Ugly, shameful, mean. Would you lie against your best friend? Yet our whole lives may be speaking untruths about our God at which the devils jeer.

We are professing people of God. We bear the name of God. Others will judge God by what they see in us. Surely this should affect profoundly the way we live and serve in the church. We are the people of God. Look at us. This is our God. Our common life in particular in the fellowship of the church saying, "This is what God is like." We need to think of our own congregation, are we declaring God's praises or are we doing the work of Satan? We should feel the burden. Yes, great issues are involved. May God forgive us for our failures. May God help us to grasp that noble, awesome responsibility which is ours to live for his glory.

But that brings us, thirdly and lastly, to the unlimited opportunity. To the unlimited opportunity. We know, of course, that some aspects of Christian service are not open to all Christians. For example, preaching pastors, elders, missionaries, deacons, serving God, not everyone is called to serve God in that way. And there's also some work for which we don't have talents or opportunity: doctors, nurses, teachers, farmers, mechanics. We can't say this is the task of every Christian to do these things, but every believer can proclaim God's excellencies, every believer can proclaim God's excellencies, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you. You. No exceptions, but everyone who is called by God lives to proclaim his excellencies. By our very existence, we are to proclaim his excellencies. In our homes, as we go to worship on the Lord's day, as we meet together, our very buildings, statements more powerful than we may realize.

It comes, of course, primarily in worship. Here is the central calling of the Christian and the church of Christ. Psalm 96 says, "Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day." The worship of God, the putting God at the central place and, friends, this is a danger for those of us who are earnest, central Christians, men and women with a very high view of the ministry of the word, for whom the pulpit is central. Yes, the pulpit is central but I think we should value all the elements of worship more highly than we sometimes do. Should we talk about the preliminaries, those are the things that happen before the sermon. Is that a good word for them? Some of you will remember that a long time ago, maybe 40 years ago in central Belfast, a very very well-known preacher came to preach in a church not far from the train station, and it was a very cold day and we were shivering and shaking, we had all left our coats out in the cloakroom and everybody was cold, and the minister, the pastor was introducing the final singing before the sermon and he invited the people who were cold to go and get coats during the singing. Go and get coats during the singing, while we're praising God, and some of us will go and get nice comfortable coats. Why not say let's get our coats and then let us glorify our mighty Lord? The phrase "let us worship God" is not a code for let us get

ready to stand up, but that's how some people interpret it. We must give it the whole being. Psalm 103, "My soul the Lord bless, all within me bless his holy name."

And we proclaim God's praises by telling others, by telling others about our God, what he has done, what he means to us. Here's a great privilege given to the church as a whole and to every believer, preaching, telling, speaking the gospel, personal witness. And friends, it's not simply for the sake of church growth, it's not even primarily to persuade others, although we long for this, it's for the sake of the Lord himself to bring glory to his name.

And yet, proclaiming God's excellencies is even wider. Quite simply it means living God-like lives, reflecting him in our behavior, bringing glory to him by the sort of people we are. It means daily work done faithfully and conscientiously. One of the great glories of the Reformed faith, contacts with other people, showing kindness and sympathy and understanding, bringing up families in faith, accepting and discharging responsibilities in the work of the church. And friends, that is where deacons, in particular, are especially gifted and valuable. Caring for others on our behalf, that is the responsibility of our deacons. Caring for our pastor financially and practically and personally. Watching over our church building, that building which is the center of our work for the Lord God. Using their own gifts practically and touchingly for those in need in and around our congregation, our deacons filled with the love of Christ, using their gifts.

I will never forget the year quite a long time ago when we made a good decision, an obvious decision, and a very worthy decision. We told our deacons that they did not need to tell us what they had done with a certain amount of money. We allotted a certain amount of money to the deacons every year and we said, "Men, we love you, we know you, we know where you are with Christ. Use that as Christ would call you." And they did it and they still do it to the glory of God.

In and around the congregation. Then our deacons help us in combining and using our givings, the givings of all of us in this congregation, to the Reformed Presbyterian Church, for the missions, for the general work of the church, and then giving more widely to godly bodies, to various needs, to many many lands and places. It was a joy for me to remind myself yesterday by looking in our statement the number of countries and the number of peoples to whom we sent money in the last year through the love of Christ for them. And it also means that our church grows widely, godly body, meeting various needs, many lands and places.

But it also involves as we are in ourselves and from watching others, expressing love, worshiping God, includes growing old serenely. We have it in the church, here in this congregation, men and women for whom our hearts are filled with love and gladness and they have walked with Christ all their lives and they still do, and we know that our deacons are there if they have any practical need. For bearing pain submissively, cheerfully, for receiving ill treatment without anger, for receiving disappointment with courage, for dying with faith and hope, and all of these proclaim the excellencies of God.

We're called to do it that way and in many other such ways. How this should transform our lives. How this should encourage and energize us even today. How surprising will be the verdict of eternity for ourselves, our brothers and sisters, those who guided us, led us, and provided for us. As Paul puts it in 1 Timothy 3:13, "For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus." Amen.