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The Office of Deacon, Part 9

Colossians 1:24-25, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, ²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known"

Think back in your minds to the time of the Exodus when God's people had rejected the life of faith and so were sent to live in the wilderness "forty years, until the entire generation of those who had done evil in the sight of the Lord was destroyed" (Numbers 32:13). Moses remained their leader. Yet what was his job? Was it not to shepherd God's people, watch over them, and so ensure that the next generation made it to the Promised Land? Moses was not tasked with these things:

- Make God's people happy.

- Ensure that they multiplied.
- Provide them with their heart's desire: food, water, meat.

Moses' job was to make sure that the nation eventually made it to the Promised Land with faith intact. That the children of Israel did not go after the foreign gods and religions of the nation's surrounding them. And Moses was to help them maintain their vigilance and not return to the land of Egypt.

Now imagine if God took you from your place today, transported you back in time to the Wilderness Wandering, and charged you to help Moses in His calling. What would be your focus? We know it wouldn't be to

- Make God's people happy.
- Ensure that they multiplied.
- Provide them with their heart's desire: food, water, meat.
- Nor would it be to please yourself or to endeavor to be fulfilled.

Rather, your focus would be the same as Moses' getting God's people to the Promised Land mature, passionate, and hungry to serve the Lord.

This is the same calling that God has placed upon those in church leadership, the deacons and overseers. When the Apostles were over-burdened by the demands of ministry, they established an office whose focus and job would be the Ministry of Mercy so that the Apostles could continue to give themselves "to the word of God and prayer" (cf. Acts 6:1-7). Now whether you take Acts 6 to be the first diaconate or the model for the diaconate is quite irrelevant. What is important is that we see that the deacon's call is a facet or subset of the pastoral ministry of the church. As such, the end of their calling is one and the same as the overseers: getting God's people to the Promised Land mature, passionate, and hungry to serve the Lord.

Now it this end that we are looking at Colossians 1:24-2:7, a passage in which Paul addresses his calling as a minister in Christ's church. Yet as we've seen, he speaks in generalities allows us to derive principles concerning every Minister/Servant of Christ's Church, including deacons.

- The Object of the Deacon's Ministry: He is a Servant of the Lord, Colossians 1:24b.
- The Earthly Focus of the Deacon's Ministry: He is charged by God with Serving the Church, Colossians 1:25a.
- The Compulsion of the Deacon's Ministry: His Divine Commissioning, Colossians 1:25b.
- The Goal of the Deacon's Ministry: The Maturation of the Body of Christ, Colossians 1:25c, 28-29; 2:2.

The Passion of the Deacon's Ministry

Colossians 1:25, "Of *this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the *preaching of* the word of God.":

the word behind the phrase, “that I might fully carry out” is πληρώω (plēroō) which means “to fill something completely.”

The term minister, is not a weak term, but rather denotes strong fortitude. It is the word behind the command.

Ephesians 5:18, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit.”

The goal of Christianity is not a casual relationship with Christ in which His Spirit directs and controls us from time to time. Rather, to be “Spirit-Filled” is to be driven and directed at all times by the Spirit of God through His word. In Colossians 1, it is not used in the passive as in Ephesians 5, but the active. Accordingly it was Paul’s passion in life “to fulfill completely, unto its entirety” the ministry which God had given him. Not surprisingly he told the Ephesian elders this:

Acts 20:24, “But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.”

Can you say driven? Paul was ever mindful of God’s calling such that he lived his life to fulfill it! In fact in the last letter he penned before his death, he wrote:

2 Timothy 4:6-7, “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.”

Though he faced certain death, yet that which continue to weigh most heavily on Paul’s mind was the completion of the calling which God had placed on his life. What an important example for office-bearers of Christ’s church! Sadly today, ministry in the church is viewed as optional. Officers serve not out of compulsion, but out of their surplus; which is why when difficulty comes or pleasant opportunity arises, there is little consideration given: the ministry is easily given up! Now, if ministry in Christ’s church is optional, and service is something we do out of excess, then it makes perfect sense to abandon a church or a calling when circumstances summon us. But if ministry in Christ’s church is a stewardship given to us by God (which it is) upon your salvation God entrusted to you gifts which are intended for service in the body of Christ (which they are!) then I hope you see that fulfilling the call that God has placed on your life in the form of the church is not an option!

So must be the understanding when it comes to the call of the Diaconate! It is NOT something you do as it is convenient, BUT that which you must do on account of the gifting and calling of God! When Jeremiah understood that from eternity God had deigned to place him on this earth to be a prophet, he got busy fulfilling his calling (e.g. Jeremiah 1:5). Paul fully carried out the preaching of the word of God knowing that he had been “set apart from his mother’s womb” to do nothing less (e.g. Galatians 1:15). When David came to understand that from eternity God placed His call on him to serve as king, he was emboldened to serve the Lord (e.g., 1 Chronicles 28:4-5).

This must be the conviction of every officer in Christ’s church. As this is the case, what therefore

ought to be the passion of the Deacon? Fulfilling the calling God has placed on their life! Living in such a way that they know that if Christ were to summon them, they could say regarding the call:

2 Timothy 4:7, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith."

All of this and more is implied by the phrase, "that I might fully carry out the *preaching of* the word of God." Now again, for Paul the general call of ministry which brought with it a stewardship in the form of Christ's church was fulfilled as he "...carried out the preaching of the word of God." For the deacon, the only modification we make to this statement is the tool in his hand. Each officer must serve with the conviction that, "Of this church he has been made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on them for the church's benefit..."

This begs the question: How then ought a Deacon to fulfill his calling? He must fulfill the ministry of mercy with passion. John Newton wrote this:

I apprehend the man who is once moved by the Spirit of God to this work, will prefer it, if attainable, to thousands of gold and silver; so that, though he is at times intimidated by a sense of its importance and difficulty, compared with his own great insufficiency (for it is to be presumed a call of this sort, if indeed from God, will be accompanied with humility and self-abasement), yet he cannot give it up. (Spurgeon, 1979, p. 33)

The Consolation of the Deacon's Ministry

Colossians 1:24a, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake..."

Colossians 2:5, "For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ."

Two times in this pericope Paul makes reference to his "rejoicing" the word used is *χαίρω* (*chairō*) which has a rich backdrop in the Bible. In the Old Testament, it did NOT denote merely an inward joy, BUT a joy which was shared in by the community and so "festal joy." In the New Testament, the concept of "festal joy" is seen, for example, in the woman who finds her lost dowry or the shepherd who finds his lost sheep, both of which call upon the community to rejoice (Luke 15:5-7, 9; Romans 12:15).

However, it goes beyond a communal joy to include the deep-seated conviction that it is well with your soul. As such we are called to "rejoice in the Lord" (cf. Philippians 3:1; 4:4, 10). As the object and cause of our rejoicing is the Lord, when we His servants behold the outworking of His providence, the consequent reaction is rejoicing in and with the body! Truly, it was this that characterized Paul's ministry. He was a man filled with joy in the Lord on account of what God was doing through him such that he sought to share his joy with the brethren.

And it is this that must characterize all servants of the Lord, a rejoicing in the Lord on account of His workings in the lives of God's people. Yet this outlook is absent from so many leaders in their service in the Kingdom. Dr. John MacArthur observed this:

The sad reality is, however, that many Christians... have lost the joy of serving the Lord. They grudgingly carry out their responsibilities, with solemn faces and somber spirits. Like Jonah, they are hesitant, angry, bitter, and resentful. They are reminiscent of Elijah, who 'requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers."' (1 Kings 19:4) (Dr. John MacArthur, 1992, p. 72)

Yet we must be reminded of the exhortation of Christ:

Hebrews 12:2b-3, "...who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. [What ought we therefore to do?] For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart."

Jesus never lost the joy of His ministry, even when faced with the terrible reality of the cross. And unlike Him, most if any of us have "...not resisted to the point of shedding blood" (v. 4). So how can we not work out our calling in the "joy of the Lord"? Truly, a sad, long-faced servant of Christ reflects a heart of unbelief. If you are in the service of an omnipotent King whose work cannot be thwarted, then there is much for which to rejoice! Notice two reasons why Paul, as a minister of Christ, rejoiced: First Paul rejoiced because of the privilege of being used up by God.

Colossians 1:24, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions."

Like the rest of the Apostles, Paul's joy wasn't in suffering pain, but in being used by God even in suffering (cf. Acts 5:41; James 1:2; 1 Peter 4:13). At the writing of Colossians, Paul was in prison suffering. Yet he understood that:

- He was NOT suffering on account of Rome, BUT on account of Christ.
- He was NOT imprisoned by Rome, BUT by Christ.
- He was NOT ultimately chained to a Roman soldier, BUT to Christ.

To be summoned by God for His purposes unto His glory thrilled the apostle. And so it should all ministers in Christ's church! Dr. John MacArthur wrote this:

A Christian who has lost the joy of the ministry does not have bad circumstances, but bad connections. You do not lose the joy of serving Christ unless your communion with Him breaks down. (Dr. John MacArthur, 1992, p. 72)

The first reason Paul served with joy was because he had the conviction that even in suffering, he was fulfilling the purpose of the Lord. He was being used up for Christ!

Secondly, Paul rejoiced because God's people grew and developed.

Colossians 2:5, "For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ."

Knowing that the kingdom resided in the hearts of God's people, one of our greatest joys as servants of Christ is seeing God's Kingdom come to fruition over time in the lives of His people. As such we read such shocking statements as those in 1 Thessalonians.

1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? [we'd expect it to be Christ- which is most certainly was. Yet notice what Paul wrote here...] Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy."

Philippians 4:1, "Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, so stand firm in the Lord, my beloved."

3 John 4, "I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth."

We have seen this exhortation many times so I won't belabor it here. The point I want you to see is that when it comes to fulfilling our calling as servants of Christ, our greatest joy and consolation is this:

1. Not only are we being used up by God,
2. But He is using our work to secure the standing of His people "in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming!"

If you come to understand this, and in your service as an elder, deacon, mom, dad, student, and the like you will fulfill your calling mindful that in and through all things you are standing on holy ground!

- Has your service raised the ire of God's people such that they are biting you? Rejoice, for God has deigned to give you suffering intended for Christ.
- Has your service gone unnoticed, nobody cares? Rejoice, for God not only notices, but He cares such that He will reward you on that day.
- Has your service seemed fruitless and so in vain?! Rejoice, God is using your labors to raise up an army of servants who will bring to pass the realization of the Kingdom of God on the earth.

1 Corinthians 15:58, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not *in vain* in the Lord."

Our consolation in ministry is NOT just a pat on the back or the praises of man or the knowledge of a job well done but being used by God unto the maturation of the body of Christ! It is in this we "rejoice!"

Works Cited

Dr. John MacArthur, J. (1992). *Colossians and Philemon: MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

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About the Preacher

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