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Excellence in the Ministry, Part 7

What a sad legacy that Gehazi left us. As a servant of Elisha and so a servant of God, he seemingly began so solid! And yet his true colors were revealed when after Elisha instructed Naaman regarding what he needed to do in order to be healed of his leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14). After Naaman was healed and offered to give Elisha money, and Elisha refused (2 Kings 5:15-16). We pick the story up in 2 Kings 5.

2 Kings 5:20-21a, "But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, thought, 'Behold, my master has spared this Naaman the Aramean, by not receiving from his hands what he brought. As the Lord lives, I will run after him and take something from him.' So Gehazi pursued Naaman..."

After some discourse, Gehazi received money from Naaman. Gehazi then deposited it in his house and then rejoined Elisha... who was a prophet... to whom Gehazi knew God revealed

the secrets of men (2 Kings 6:11-12)!

2 Kings 5:25b-27, "And Elisha said to him, 'Where have you been, Gehazi?' And he said, 'Your servant went nowhere.' Then he said to him, 'Did not my heart go *with you*, when the man turned from his chariot to meet you? Is it a time to receive money and to receive clothes and olive groves and vineyards and sheep and oxen and male and female servants? Therefore, the leprosy of Naaman shall cleave to you and to your descendants forever.' So he went out from his presence a leper *as white as snow*."¹

How incredibly sad! Gehazi did so much for the cause of the Lord in serving Elisha, but we remember him as one who loved comfort, provision, and so possession more than he loved God's Kingdom!

Yet such "servants" have always been amongst God's people. Demas was one such man.

2 Timothy 4:9-10a, "Make every effort to come to me soon; for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica..."

And how about Judas? After Judas rebuked Mary for washing Christ's hair with her costly perfume because the ointment could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor, we read this:

John 12:6, "Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it."

Think of many of the crowds that followed Christ. The Lord exposed their true motive when he said this:

John 6:26b, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled."

This no doubt is why Paul felt the need to exhort the wealthy in the body of Christ.

1 Timothy 6:17, "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy."

Though we are saved, as sinners it is so easy to lapse into a living where we feed our securities, wants, desires, and needs! In fact, it was into this pitfall some in Thessalonica fell in their service of Christ! Rather than continue as they had begun, "*in the name of Christ*" they became wards of the church. And so, rather than giving a blessing, they lived to be blessed... which is the opposite to the life of love and service to which Christ calls us!

We pick up Paul's exhortation to this church in 1 Thessalonians 4:9:

1 Thessalonians 4:9, "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for *anyone* to write to you..."

This was an important exhortation which Paul gave to this body. Paul first addressed "The Issue" driving this section in his prayer in chapter 3.

1 Thessalonians 3:11-12, "Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also *do* for you."

In fact it clearly was this prayer that prompted Paul to address the Thessalonians' moral purity (3:13; cf. 4:1-8) and then their love (3:12; 4:9-12)! Evidently, love of the brethren had become a problem in Thessalonica! And so our text was given to address an issue which involved the body life of the church; specifically, their love for one another! In this regard it is important to note that Paul is NOT giving a generic call for an increase in love in the body. Rather, this passage is a corrective exhortation because there were some in the church in Thessalonica who were abusing love! In fact, Paul will return to "The Issue" in chapter 5.

1 Thessalonians 5:14-15, "And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly [note that word], encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men."

The key term here is "unruly" (ἄτακτος [*ataktos*]) which refers to a disorderly, undisciplined life. It speaks not simply of laziness, but an irresponsibility and so negligence when it comes to ones responsibilities. This is exactly what is addressed in our text.

1 Thessalonians 4:11, "...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life [as we'll see, the idea here is a life that is not crying out for financial aid and assistance] and attend to your own business [this speaks of a life which is NOT a busy-body, poking their nose into the affairs of others] and work with your hands [some in Thessalonica quit working expecting the church to provide for their needs], just as we commanded you"

You have to understand that a common practice in Paul's day revolved around the Institution of Patronage. This is where a wealthy individual paid for the living expenses of a philosopher, musician, or some other desired position in the household. Accordingly, there literally were thousands upon thousands of men/women in the ancient world who lived off the good-will of a benefactor. Because they were prized for something that was NOT needed every day (their wit, voice, oratory skill, etc.), they got the reputation as ones who sat around and involved themselves in the affairs of others. On the whole they truly became lazy busy bodies! G. L. Green described it this way:

Clients were attached to patrons of higher status and economic solvency, hoping to receive from them benefits such as food and representation, while they gave their patrons honor and augmented their status in society by showing up for the morning greeting at their home and giving them public support [this is no different from the entourage that oft-times will attach themselves to famous people]. The more clients a person would have, the more important he or she would appear to others. Honor was the name of the game. Perseus (1.54–55) satirizes a patron, saying, ‘You know how to present a shivering client with a threadbare cloak, and then you say, “I love the Truth; tell me the truth about myself!”’ (Green, 2002, p. 208)

Some in Thessalonica endeavored to be the “client” of the church in this regard. And so rather than serving any useful purpose, they became wards of the church! That is what was behind Paul’s treatment here!

Now, what Paul says in this verse clearly did NOT fix the problem! Accordingly, Paul returned to this topic again with greater force in in 2 Thessalonians 3.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-8, 10-12, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we *kept* working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you [Do you see? Paul’s love for this body meant that he came to bless, not to be blessed! That is the standard set when it came to life in the body of Christ!...] For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies [that is the exact issue Paul addresses in our text, v. 11. In fact, Paul even uses that vocabulary in 1 Thessalonians 4!!!...]. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.”

Piecing it all together, we conclude that some in the church in Thessalonica- perhaps believing that they were in the final state (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2)²- quit their jobs, adopted the life of a taker/leach (living off the work of others in the body), and so sat around and stuck their nose into other people’s business.³ In so doing, they had become wards of the church- evidencing a life that is the exact opposite of love! Clearly they had lost sight of the fact that they had been placed in the body of Christ NOT to get, BUT to give (1 Peter 3:9)! Accordingly, Paul gave a very specific call.

1 Thessalonians 4:10b, “Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for *anyone* to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you

do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. [Paul here is speaking to the church as a whole. On the whole they didn't need more acts of love; they were doing just fine. Yet on the other hand...] But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more."- you must see that Paul's focus here was NOT getting more love from loving people, BUT shaking the recalcitrant in the church to service/love like the rest of the body! You may be wondering, "Why wasn't Paul more direct if this was intended to be a rebuke?"

In this regard, I appreciate the words of Gordon Fee- commenting on Paul's rebuke:

Thus Paul eases into this word of admonition in a most remarkable way, as though he knows that he needs to say it but is somewhat hesitant at the same time. Both the verb he uses here and the gradual succession of verbs in the admonition itself tell the story." (Fee, 2009, p. 161)

And that story, as Fee goes on to say, is one of rebuke! William Hendriksen added:

Paul was probably the most tactful missionary who ever walked the earth. He wishes to avoid giving offence, and he desires to give credit where credit is due... He never flatters (see on 1 Thess. 2:5), but he is gentle as when a nurse cherishes (or as when a father deals with) her (his) own children (see on 2:7, 11). (Hendricksen, 1972, p. 104)

So Paul is giving a rebuke to the idle amongst the people of God in Thessalonica! They needed to know that ceasing to work and choosing to live off the generosity of others was NOT a mark of spirituality, BUT a mark of laziness which cares more about oneself than the body. This constituted a sin against Christ's church as they no longer endeavored to serve/build up others, but rather used the body as a tool to their own self-fulfillment, benefit, and gain! In the words of Gordon Fee:

Paul the tentmaker, who himself refused to burden these new believers by living off their kindness (2:9), recognizes that the ultimate matter here is not "work" per se, but the meaning of love within the newly formed people of God as a divinely created *familia*... Thus in the end the emphasis on their loving 'each other' lies not so much on their need to do so, but on the way they should do so... the emphasis will be on what love for others will not allow a person to do. (Fee, 2009, pp. 157-160)

And that is, live for themselves all the while viewing the body as an institution placed there by God to advance themselves!

I return to the question raised at the beginning: "How many in the body of Christ today are there NOT to give, BUT to get?"

John 6:26, "Jesus answered them and said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not

because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled.’”

Such people have always been amongst God’s people! Yet how much more so in a consumer culture like the one in which we live? In our day, most people in the United States do NOT follow Christ, attend church, go to Bible studies to get a meal. They have a cuisine of a different sort! We have a more sophisticated pallet! Most go to church or gathering that will

- Meet our needs.
- Make us feel good about ourselves.
- Encourage us.
- Excite us.
- Inspire us.

This is little different than the perspective of those in Thessalonica who Paul rebuked!

Family of God, you have to see: Christianity is a religion concerned NOT with getting, BUT with giving! That is a major tenant of our faith!

Romans 12:1, “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship.”

After eleven chapters of the richest theology imaginable, Paul gives the “therefore” which in the context serves as a summary of the quintessential nature of Christianity. And what is it? It is the offering of oneself to God to do as He pleases!

Isaiah 6:8, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’”

If you were to read further in the text, you would note that Isaiah offered absolutely NO condition or exception to the offer of himself. It was very simple and quite direct: *Here I am, take me! Use me however You will!* In response to his disciples calling a foul on account of how God deigned to use him, John told his disciples this:

John 3:29-30, “He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. And so this joy of mine has been made full. He must increase, but I must decrease.”

This is an incredible perspective! Do you know what we essentially are in Christ? Attendants at His wedding! You ever see attendants try to out dress or out do the bride and groom? It is unthinkable! The day is NOT about them! And so it is in our lives as well! Each and every day is NOT about us! Truly, in Christ we have become attendants who serve at His whim, will, need, and desire. And so the mantra of every Christian must be with John, “He must increase,

but I must decrease!” Speaking of Peter, Christ said this:

John 21:18-19a, “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.’ Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God...”

The way John said this indicates that he considers all our deaths as appointed for the glory of God.

Did you get that?

According to Psalm 139:16, our days have all been numbered! Yet John 21 takes it one step further; God not only has claimed our lives to be used as He wills, but He also has claimed our deaths, deaths with which to advance His Kingdom purpose! Christianity is a religion of service!

Ephesians 2:10: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Do you remember the word behind “workmanship”? It is ποίημα (*poiēma*) from which we get the English, “poem.” Do you understand the significance of this statement? Our lives consist of a canvas on which God is writing/painting a masterpiece. The picture is NOT about us, BUT Him. Truly, we are nothing less than a trophy of His grace! God gives each and every one of us in Christ this calling:

Luke 9:23-24, “And He was saying to *them* all, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.”

For those of you who saw *The Matrix*, there is a scene when the Judas character says to Neo, “I know what you're thinking, because right now I'm thinking the same thing. Actually, I've been thinking it ever since I got here. Why, oh why didn't I take the blue pill?...”

Christian, when you said “Yes to Christ!” had the Lord told you how He planned to use you to bring glory to Himself, what would you have said? Would it be, “*Why or why did I say yes?*” Wouldn't we all still have said with Isaiah, “Here I am! Send me!”?

Family of God, you must see that contrary to what your fallen nature, this world, and many in the church might suggest, God saved you, set you apart to Himself, and so commissioned you to live your life NOT for fulfillment, pleasure, joy, satisfaction, BUT to the honor, purpose, and glory of the Lord!

1 Peter 3:8-9a, “To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead [Why?]; for you were called for th[is] very purpose...”

God saved you for one purpose; that you might be a blessing! This is the essence of Christianity!

This is what in part is pictured in the sacrificial system. Every sacrifice was a picture of the offering up of the worshipper unto God to be used for God’s glory, honor, worship, and will! In light of this, notice the calling that rests upon the individual members of the body of Christ, describing one of the “therefores” on account of our salvation.

Hebrews 10:24-25, “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.”

In light of this, how is it that you ever could be inconvenienced by God’s providence? How is it that you ever could feel neglected or ignored in a church body? Listen to a foundational element when it comes to our Ecclesiology: The church of God does NOT exist for your benefit! You exist for its benefit and it exists for God’s glory! May God give us the grace to be transformed by the renewing of our minds when it comes to our expectations and anticipations pertaining to the body of Christ.

Works Cited

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End Note(s)

¹ According to J. S. Wright, “2 Ki. 5:27 should be compared with the leprosy regulations of Lv. 13:12–13. When this particular form of skin disease, whatever it may have been, turned the whole skin white, the victim was ‘clean’, and was not segregated. Hence Gehazi was able to continue as Elisha’s servant.” (*New Bible Dictionary*, Third Edition, p. 399)

² MacArthur wrote, “The apostle had taught the Thessalonians about the return of Christ, and

they eagerly anticipated that glorious coming (1:10). However, they were apparently overly anxious about the Lord's return and wanted to make sure they did not miss it. Their zealous preoccupation with Jesus' coming led to the mistaken notion that temporal responsibilities no longer mattered in light of His return." (*1 & 2 Thessalonians*, MNTC, p. 116)

³ You might think that Paul here has in the cross hairs preachers who are supported by the church. Yet that is NOT the case which no doubt explains why Paul addresses the support of preachers in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13.