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September 16, 2018

Serving in the Strength that God Supplies 1 Peter 4:7-11

Let me tell you what may well be the greatest threat to the vitality and health and success of any local church. The reason isn't nearly as sensational as you might think. It isn't the attack of Satan, although he undoubtedly is doing all he can to undermine everything we do. It isn't the lack of money, although that is surely an issue that has to be addressed. And it isn't theological disagreements, although they definitely can be problematic if not dealt with in love and humility.

Perhaps the greatest threat to a church being and becoming all that God wants of us is ***the unbiblical idea that spiritual gifts and the ministry they produce is the sole responsibility of pastors and elders and those who work full time for a local church***. It is the notion that you who attend Bridgeway and constitute its membership are merely consumers. You are here only to receive and consume and listen and learn. God has not gifted you with the Holy Spirit so that you might serve others. God has not called you to speak or sacrifice or devote yourself to bless and build up others in the body of Christ.

The professional clergy, to use profoundly unbiblical terms, those who've been educated in a seminary or have been officially ordained to ministry are the only ones who've received spiritual gifts and are the only ones who are responsible to serve others in the church.

This, I suggest, may well be the greatest and most dangerous threat to any local church, Bridgeway included.

If you doubt what I'm saying, let me remind you of something the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians. I'm sure you've heard it before, but it will serve us well to listen to it again.

“And he [Jesus] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds [or pastors] and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-13).

My purpose as your pastor, the purpose of every other pastor and of the elders, is not to do all the work so you can sit back and coast. My purpose, our purpose is ***“to equip the saints [that's you] for the work of ministry.”*** Who does the work of ministry in the local church? Well, obviously pastors and elders do. But the primary focus of what pastors and elders do is to equip you, all of you, so that you may be able to do the work of ministry. The failure to recognize this and the failure to make certain it happens is a sure-fire recipe for disaster in the local church.

There are countless places where this same emphasis is found in the NT, but today we will look at only one: 1 Peter 4:7-11, especially vv. 10-11. I have quite a few observations to make about this remarkable passage, but I don't think I'll tell you how many. You'll just have to wait and see!

Context

Let me begin by setting our text in its context. *Eschatology* is one of those technical, ten-dollar terms that theologians like to toss around to impress people with their intelligence. But it's really a very simple and very important word. The Greek word *eschatos* simply means “last” or “final,” and thus Eschatology is the study of last or final things. It is the study of events leading up to and including the second coming of Christ and the end of human history as we know it.

Eschatology is designed to encourage and sustain us in practical righteousness. It is precisely because we know that Christ will return and put the world to rights that we are to be obedient to the Word of God.

We see this clearly in our passage today. Did you see the word “**therefore**” in v. 7? It is *because* the end of all things is at hand that we are to pray for one another and love one another and be hospitable to one another and to serve one another.

I want you to think about how you should react to the reality of Christ’s impending return. I want you to think about what kind of person God wants you to be in view of the end of all things. As Peter put it in his second epistle, chapter three, I want to focus on “what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness.”

The NT writers believed that with Christ’s death, resurrection, and exaltation to the right hand of the Father, the “last days” have dawned (see Acts 2:17, Hebrews 1:1-2; 2 Tim. 3:1; 1 John 2:18). ***But Peter didn’t know if the last of the last days or the end of the end times would come in his lifetime. Christ’s death and resurrection mark the beginning of the end, although neither Peter nor we know when the end of the end will come.***

One might think that the reality of the end would lead Peter to call for extraordinary deeds of great power, works that would capture the attention of the world and gain for us fame and glory. No. It’s the simple, basic tasks of everyday life that must be pursued: ***Praying for one another, loving one another, hosting one another, and serving one another.***

Our first responsibility, in view of the impending end of all things, is to ***pray for one another.*** Peter here calls for mature and level-headed intercessors (v. 7b).

Our second responsibility, in view of the impending end of all things, is to ***keep on loving one another.*** Peter here calls for earnest and passionate affection for one another (v. 8).

Our third responsibility, in view of the impending end of all things, is to ***graciously and generously host one another.*** Peter here calls for happy hospitality (v. 9).

Our fourth and final responsibility, in view of the impending end of all things, is to ***use our spiritual gifts to serve one another.*** Peter here calls for grace-empowered, Christ-centered service (vv. 10-11). It is this fourth responsibility that will be our focus today.

The Counter-Cultural, Counter-Intuitive Nature of Serving Others

In my message on Colossians 1:24-29 I pointed out how incredibly counter-cultural Christianity is. I tried to demonstrate from that passage that faithfully following Jesus will invariably put you at odds with mainstream culture. For example, the world says to do whatever you must to get as much stuff as you can and keep it all for yourself. The Bible says to be “content” with what you have (1 Tim. 6:6-7), and if you do get more, give it away. The world says to hate and “get even” with those who mistreat you. The Bible says to love them, and to bless those who persecute you (Rom. 12:14). The world advocates free sex. Get as much as you can from as many people as you can. The Bible says, “abstain from sexual immorality” because “God has not called us to impurity, but in holiness” (1 Thess. 4:3, 7). As you can imagine, the contrasts could go on seemingly forever.

But today I have one thing and one thing only in mind that I want to present for your consideration. It can be expressed in any number of ways:

Whereas the world says that happiness is found in getting, the Bible says that “it is more blessed to *give* than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

Whereas the world says get others to serve you, the Bible says to serve *others* for *your good, their good, and God’s glory* (1 Peter 4:10-11).

Whereas the world says get more wealth in order to increase your joy, the Bible says that your experience of joy enables you to give in the midst of your own poverty (2 Cor. 8:1-2).

Whereas the world says that he is greater who sits leisurely and lets others serve him, Jesus says that the “greatest” among you is the “one who serves” (Luke 22:26).

I think it's clear that there is no greater contrast between the perspective of the non-Christian world and the perspective of the Christian church than that which we see when it comes to the subject of serving others and giving to others and helping those in need.

Why does the Bible place so much emphasis on the importance of serving? Is this God's way of *punishing* us for our sins? Is this his way of making certain that we remain *humble*? Is serving something like the *membership fees* that we must pay to stay in the Church? Sadly, many think of their service in the local church as the way in which they *pay back* God for his grace. No! You can't pay back God for his grace. Grace never incurs a debt, as if somehow you and I are now required to recompense God for all the good he has done. The only proper response to grace is to posture yourself to receive more, and in doing so direct all the attention to God as the giver, the benefactor, the generous and abundant donor who overflows in mercy for broken people.

Ten Truths that Highlight the Centrality of Serving Others in the Kingdom of Christ

We're going to spend the rest of our time today talking about serving. That may not sound sexy. It may not give you a buzz. You may be hankering for something more sensational. But let me remind you of how Jesus himself described his own purpose in coming to this earth:

“the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28).

We talk about growing up as Christians and define it primarily as becoming more and more like Jesus. If that is in your heart, I would simply ask you to think about your commitment to serve. So let's look at what Peter says about it in vv. 10-11.

(1) **“Each”** has received a gift. No one is exempt. No one is unqualified. No one is left to himself or herself without the powerful enabling presence of the Spirit. We must overcome and reject the clergy / laity distinction. It isn't only pastors and elders who have spiritual gifts. No educational qualifications are listed by Peter.

Every Christian has at least one (“as each” – v. 10a); no Christian has them all (1 Cor. 12). Spiritual gifts forever shatter the myth that there are two kinds of Christians: those who minister and serve and those who are served and ministered to; those who have spiritual gifts and those who don't. All have at least one gift and all of us are to minister and serve.

No Christian can refuse to contribute to the life of the body of Christ without quenching the Holy Spirit! There is no such thing as passive membership in the body of Christ! To belong to the body of Christ is to have a function; it is to have a ministry. You may choose to sit back and do nothing, but if you do you are sinning!

No one can claim to be an exception to this, perhaps by insisting that he/she has been taken up into some heightened personal flight of spiritual fancy outside and beyond the community of faith.

How important is it that we acknowledge the reality of spiritual gifts in the life of the individual believer and in the local church? Among the countless answers I could give, let's consider just one. Is **knowing Jesus** a vital part of the Christian life? I know it's a stupid question! But few of us realize that God “gave gifts to men” (Eph. 4:8) such as prophecy and teaching and the like “until we attain to . . . **the knowledge of the Son of God**” (Eph. 4:13b). God has graciously given spiritual gifts to help us grow and deepen and expand and increase in our knowledge and enjoyment of “the unfathomable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8).

(2) One of the more debilitating obstacles to life in the local church is the fact that people are obsessed with discovering their spiritual gift and frustrated that they have not as yet figured it out. So they do nothing. I want to recommend an approach to you today to overcome this. **Stop gazing at your navel and step out and serve someone. Let your gift find you.**

So, what's my gift? I'm not opposed to the use of spiritual gifts inventory tests. But I think Scripture would have us take a far more practical, almost pragmatic, approach to discovering our spiritual gifts, an approach that is at its heart need-based. Let me explain what I mean.

The next time you're in church or in a small group or just hanging out with other believers, pause momentarily and ask a few questions, such as: Is anyone physically hurt or suffering from chronic pain? If so, take your hands out of your pockets, lay them on your brother or sister, and pray for God's healing power.

Is anyone you know distraught or discouraged? Are some finding life too frustrating to bear? If so, take them out for a cup of coffee and listen to their story. You don't have to theologize about their predicament. They're not looking for explanations. They just want someone who cares enough to spend a few minutes with them. Just listen to them. Then love them.

Is anyone struggling financially with few prospects to get them out of the hole? Do something courageous. Give them your last \$100 and trust God to supply your need.

Is anyone confused about some verse of Scripture they just read in their devotional time? Perhaps you're just as befuddled as they are. So sit down with your friend and put your heads (and hearts) together, make use of a concordance, a study Bible, perhaps a commentary, and pray for the Spirit to shed light on your thinking.

Is anyone struggling with sin (well, of course they are!)? Offer to pray for them. But before you do, sit quietly together and ask the Lord to guide your thoughts and speak words of wisdom to your soul. If you sense something, or a thought comes to mind, share it with them. It might be the key that opens the door to their heart and brings freedom from bondage.

Does the person you just prayed for report hearing voices in their head? Do they struggle with paralyzing shame, virtually bombarded on a daily basis by accusing thoughts and self-contempt? If so, speak the Word of God over them with authority. In the name of Christ, command any demonic spirits to leave and never to return. Pray for them to be filled afresh with the Holy Spirit.

Is anyone overwhelmed by the clutter in their garage and that ever-increasing mountain of dirty laundry? Offer to spend Saturday with them, helping out, picking up, washing, drying, folding, and putting away clothes.

None of this sounds especially spectacular (well, maybe some of it does). So what am I getting at with these questions? Simply this. If we spent less time obsessed with some introspective search to identify our spiritual gift(s) and more time actually praying and giving and helping and teaching and serving and exhorting those around us, the likelihood greatly increases that *we will walk headlong into our gifting without ever knowing what happened. God will more likely meet us with his gifts in the midst of trying to help his children than he ever would while we're taking a spiritual gifts analysis test.*

So, look for a need and meet it. Find a hurt and heal it. Be alert to the cry for help and answer it. Listen for the voice of God and speak it. Identify someone's weakness and overcome it. Look for what's missing and supply it. What you'll find when you do is the power of God, the energizing, enabling, charismatic activity of the Holy Spirit that will equip you, perhaps only once, but possibly forever, to minister hope and encouragement to those in need. So, if you're still wondering what your gift(s) might be, act first and ask later.

(3) We **"receive"** spiritual gifts, we don't earn them. They are not a reward for holiness. They are God's gift freely given. There is no standard you have to meet, no heightened level of maturity you must first attain. However, whereas "gifts cannot be earned, . . . they can be spurned" (A. Wilson). So thank God for what he's enabled you to do in serving someone else.

(4) We are commanded to **"use"** our gift or gifts. The apostle Paul agrees with Peter on this. He writes this in Romans 12:6 – "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us *use* them." So, both Peter and Paul issue the same command to all of us: use your gift to serve. ***If you are not serving, you are sinning.*** This is a command, not an option.

(5) All gifts are designed to **"serve one another"**, not ourselves. We serve for the good of others. Paul says that all spiritual gifts, from the working of miracles to mercy, are for the "common good" (1 Cor. 12:7).

(6) Gifts are a *stewardship* from God. He has entrusted to us his Spirit. What are you doing with what God has given you? Are you making good use of it? Or have you ignored it, suppressed it, denied it, compared it with others and concluded that yours isn't that spectacular or not that helpful?

This means that spiritual gifts are a trust ("good stewards"); i.e., they are less a privilege and more a responsibility. In a very real sense, then, my gift is not really mine. It is only entrusted to me for the sake of others.

(7) God's grace comes in a wide variety of expressions. It is God's "*varied grace*" that is on display when we serve one another.

The word "varied" points to the fact that no two people will always receive the same gift, and even if you have a gift that another shares it won't always manifest itself in the same way. God's gracious enabling of us is diverse and will look different depending on the person who makes use of it. The important point to remember is that you don't have to be like others. In fact, you should never try to be like others.

It also means that no two people will always operate with the same degree of accuracy or effectiveness in the exercise of their spiritual gift. So stop comparing yourself with someone else.

(8) Here Peter divides all gifts into two broad categories: *servicing and speaking*. Speaking gifts include teaching, prophecy, apostleship, tongues, interpretation of tongues, exhortation, word of knowledge, word of wisdom; while serving gifts include giving, leading, administration, mercy, helps, healing, miracles.

Some of you have only one speaking gift; some have only one serving gift. Some have several speaking gifts. Some have several serving gifts. Some have both several speaking gifts and serving gifts. But no one has no gift!

Please note closely that Peter doesn't say that those with speaking gifts are more important or essential to the church than those with serving gifts. That is a mistake based on the idea that visibility and public recognition are important to God. They aren't. Those who serve quietly behind the scenes and never utter a word on a microphone from a platform are just as valuable and regarded by God as those who preach every week or prophesy.

(9) Serving requires *God's strength* or power. Greeting is to be done in God's power. Teaching our kids is done in God's power. One reason you've found it difficult to step up and serve is because you don't think you can pull it off. Too weak. Too busy. Too unqualified.

Everything the Christian man or woman does, if it is to be virtuous and glorifying to God, must be done conscious of the fact that God is the one who supplies the strength for everything, God is the one who empowers every deed, God is the one who stirs our spirits and moves our wills and sustains our good intentions and inflames our affections.

Peter's reference to "serving" here cannot be restricted to only a few spiritual gifts. All service is carried out by the power that God supplies. That means that the prayer which Peter commanded in v. 7 is undertaken in the strength that God supplies. And the love that we feel for others is expressed in the strength that God supplies. And the hospitality we show to one another is awakened and sustained by the strength that God supplies. And the exercise of all spiritual gifts finds its source in the strength that God supplies.

(10) The ultimate purpose of serving by means of one's gift is so that *God would be glorified*. He is honored when you make use of the grace he has bestowed. Therefore, it stands to reason that *when you sit idle and uninvolved you are robbing God of the glory that he might otherwise have received had you been faithful to serve others in his name*.

It's critical that we know this so that when someone hears you praying or sees you loving or is the recipient of your hospitality or benefits from the use of your spiritual gift they will instinctively give God the glory rather than you.

Look again at v. 11b – "in order that in *everything* God may be glorified through Jesus Christ!"

“Oh my, how those people do pray. Thank you, God! Wow! They certainly know how to love one another. Thank you, God! My, my, their hospitality is so joyful and devoid of grumbling. Thank you, God! I was so blessed by that teaching and that word of encouragement and that financial gift. Thank you, God!”

This also means that *it is entirely possible to appear to “serve” others all the while you are dishonoring God.* If your service is not consciously undertaken in “the strength that God supplies” it will end up being for your glory and not his. And if you find serving others always burdensome and weighty and just one more obligation or moral duty that you have to fulfill, or others will think badly of you, it is obvious that you are “serving” in the strength that you yourself supply and not in the strength “that God supplies.”

Conclusion

Finally, there’s something profoundly significant in the fact that Peter chose this place in his letter to insert a doxology. Why does he ascribe glory and dominion to God after urging us to use our gifts to serve others? You would think that this doxological outburst would be saved for something more sensational. You would think that he might have inserted it following his description of the atoning sacrifice of Christ back in chapter one. Or perhaps he would have encouraged us to engage in heartfelt worship after what he said about the purpose of the church in chapter two. Would it not have been more fitting had he broken out in praise following his discussion of Christ’s resurrection and exaltation at the close of chapter three?

But here it is, so seemingly out of place. But it’s not out of place. And the fact that you and I think it is just goes to show how warped our priorities and values are. The fact that God has so graciously given each of us spiritual gifts to enable us to serve others in the strength that God supplies ignites in Peter a celebration of God’s glory and eternal dominion!

That ought to tell you something about how high serving is on *God’s* list of priorities and values. Ought it not also be equally as high on ours?