

Jesus called them together, and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

(Matthew 20:25-28)

Judges 13-16 (Samson)

Personality Cult

Before the Altar of God, all come as equals; equal in creation by God, equal in the curse of sin and their need for redemption and forgiveness through the Blood of Jesus, and equal in that every member of the Body of Christ is gifted by the Holy Spirit for a particular job or function within the Body of Christ, the church. All believers are to come under the control of the head (the "brains of the outfit," if you will), Jesus Himself.

Now, under the Lordship of Jesus, some people are given multiple jobs to do, sometimes in positions that affect a number of other believers. Often, these are people that you see in what we consider positions of authority in a church – deacons, elders, board members, teachers of Sunday Schools (sometimes heads of the entire Sunday School department), etc. And others are called to be shepherds of the flock as ministers, chaplains or church pastors. These are positions of service to the Body of Christ, in addition to the "prime directive" of all believers, the Great Commission. In parable after parable, Jesus spoke of the fact that those in such positions will answer to God for how they used their calling and His gifts and provisions for them. This point is reiterated by the Apostle James, who said quite plainly that "not many of you should presume to be teachers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." (James 3:1) The reason is simple; God cares for His people, and does not like to see them led astray or have their effectiveness for the Kingdom diminished by erroneous or bad teaching, or by being misrepresented by those who have the wrong ideas about Him to begin with.

Unfortunately, we see today with increasing frequency people in leadership positions who seem not to follow so much the words of Jesus, but the philosophy of George Orwell in *Animal Farm*: "All men are created equal – but some are more equal than others." Pastors or ministers who have forgotten – or, worse, *ignored* – the idea that that last shall be first, and edify themselves with increasing frequency more than the people whose spiritual needs they are charged to care for.

The Book of Judges is an account of God's efforts to return wayward Israel from its fascination with the gods of the Canaanite peoples she was originally charged with driving out and destroying from the land He promised

to Abraham and his descendants. God gave Israel this mission after first trying to persuade the Canaanites to abandon their false gods by having Abraham and his son and grandson live among the Canaanites, enjoying the blessings of the Lord and (by extension) showing their neighbors who the *true* God was around here. When the lesson went over the heads of the people of Canaan, God gave them time to repent while Israel stayed in Egypt for 430 years, until the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites.

Once God freed the Israelites (and showed the Egyptians that Ra, Isis, Osiris, etc. weren't all that), He brought them back to Canaan to carry out His judgment on the people there for continuing to worship false gods and reject the one true God. But Israel failed in its mission, and the gods of the Canaanites became a snare to them and the people began a vicious cycle of worshipping God, then the Baals, then God again, then the Baals again. So God established judges to free the Israelites from the oppression of their neighbors and lead them back to worshipping God alone.

The last of these judges recorded in the book was Samson. But as you read his account, you find a man definitely gifted by God, but who got full of himself and fell short of the goal God had for him. Up until Samson, the judges of Israel were concerned with turning people back to the Lord, and the book focuses on their efforts and exploits. Samson, however, was more focused on his own needs than those of his fellow Israelites.

From birth, Samson was set apart for God as a Nazarite; his mother was not to eat anything unclean or from the grapevine and was not to drink wine or anything fermented. The same restrictions would apply to Samson, and (as a sign of his status before God) no razor was to be used on his head. Because of this setting apart of the boy, God blessed Samson with super-human strength, to be used to begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines.

But you soon notice a few things. There are only two recorded places in the whole of the story of Samson where he called upon God, and both of these were for his own needs. The first is after the incident with the donkey's jawbone, where he seeks water from God – not asks, humbly, but *demands*; “You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” (Judges 15:18) The second is, after he has satisfied the desires of his flesh on Delilah, and blown his strength, his calling and just about everything else in his life in the process, he asks God to strengthen him one more time “so that I may with one blow take vengeance on the Philistines for my two eyes.” Note that he asks not for a great victory to show the Philistines who the *true* God is around here and to honor Him, but for payback because the Philistines captured him (after he showed his disdain for the things of God by playing around with his Nazarite vow with a woman of the Philistines), blinded him, and put him to work grinding grain – in short, for humiliating him, even though it was his own fault. It is true that God was gracious to Samson and his last victory was his biggest, but it was such an unbelievable waste of God's blessing and resources that I believe it was

placed in Scripture more as a warning to others who would answer the call of God on their lives; *Don't be this guy*.

What were the results of all this? All you have to do is look at the following chapters in Judges. Because Samson, the last of the recorded Judges, had a poor (albeit spectacular) career, Israel's slide into idolatry continued, virtually unchecked. The final two accounts in Judges illustrate Israelite society in those days; Micah, a man who steals silver from his own mother, returns it to her, who then proceeds to dedicate it to the Lord by making what the Lord had specifically forbidden – a cast idol. Later, a Levite – a man from the tribe of Israelites charged with serving before the Lord as priests and caring for the tabernacle and the Holy things – wanders away from his priestly duties and becomes the priest of Micah's household; again, contrary to what God Himself had ordered. This cancer later spreads to almost the entire tribe of Dan.

In the second story, another Levite goes looking for his concubine (contrary to the Lord's command about how they were to take wives for themselves). In the territory of Benjamin, conditions had deteriorated to the point where the fate of the Levite and the woman almost identically mirrors that of Lot and his family in Sodom; all the town's wicked men come by, pounding on the door of the house where they are staying and demanding sex with him. Only this time, there was no angel of the Lord to protect Lot and his family; the Levite's concubine is brought out to be raped and abused until she dies. The Levite then rallies the rest of Israel in a gruesome manner by cutting apart the woman's corpse and sending the pieces to all the parts of the land. Eventually, the first civil war in Israel breaks out as the rest of the nation rallies to fight the tribe of Benjamin, almost exterminating them. When Israel realizes that one of its tribes was nearly wiped out, the people resort to abduction of women from other communities to get wives for the Benjamites to build the tribe up again.

This section of Judges begins and ends with the refrain, "In those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." The pattern is clear; those called by God to lead the people fail in their responsibility, leading to further deterioration of the nation's relationship with God and, finally, moral and societal chaos. This pattern would only be broken by the installation of the monarchy in Israel, and it was far from a perfect solution as the people's hearts were still inclined to turn from God and toward the Baals.

There are other examples in Scripture of priests and those called to minister before God serving themselves instead, with disastrous consequences for themselves and the nation. In 1 Samuel, we find the account of Eli the high priest and his sons Hophni and Phineas, who treated their office – and the things of the Lord – with contempt, demanding the best part of the sacrifices before they could be offered to God and sleeping with the female workers in the Tabernacle itself. The Ark of the Lord would later be captured by the Philistines, and Hophni and Phineas would pay with their lives for their actions. Later, during the years of the monarchy, several of the

Prophets would preach against the shepherds who “fatten themselves on the flock,” yet care nothing for them.

Unfortunately, this attitude did not entirely go away with the advent of the Lord Jesus. We see it today in the actions of some pastors and ministers, despite a mass of evidence (some of it *spectacularly* public) that such behavior always – *always* – comes back to bite one in the behind. In many cases, we see it where a church or ministry has become a “personality cult;” where the focus, the emphasis, the adoration is less on the Lord than on His supposed servant. My wife and I have been in churches where the entrance of the pastor is the “main event” of the service, often accompanied by an introduction not merely showing respect for the office (which is proper), but a huge buildup worthy more of a popular recording artist. We have seen pastors accompanied to the pulpit by an *entourage* of assistants, churches where huge billboards are erected with equally huge pictures of the pastor (maybe with his wife), and not a great deal of humility. This can be especially true if said pastor has a media ministry on television or radio.

Am I saying that pastors are not worthy of respect or honor? Certainly not. One of the problems of today’s society is that too little respect is given to those who have chosen to heed the call of the Lord and serve Him by serving His people. (Of course, in this society, too little respect is reserved for *anything* of God, but that’s another sermon.) But the concept of “service” is the operative element here. True men and women of God are just that – servants. In the first passage of Scripture listed at the start of this message, Jesus Himself sets the pattern. The purpose of ministry is not to get your ego stroked – it is to serve God by serving the Body of Christ; feeding the flock, ministering to the broken and being a witness for the Lord Jesus to a world that desperately needs Him. If people respect you in the process because you are a servant of God, that’s fine; but that’s not why you’re called. Jesus Himself spoke of taking up one’s cross if you wanted the eternal life God offers us through the sacrifice of His Son.

This is not mere nit-picking due to embarrassing incidents over the years, such as the spectacular fall of some media ministries and the scrutiny building over the rest as a result. The real danger of churches turning into personality cults is the effect – or, perhaps more accurately, the *lack* of effect – such ministries have on the world around them. In the time of the Judges, the failure of their mission led to chaos both for the system God set up for corporate worship by Israel and for its society outside the walls of the tabernacle. This kind of chaos would not be contained – *resolved* is an inaccurate word, since the disease of idol worship within Israel would not be fully broken until her fall and exile – until the advent of the monarchy, with a corresponding loss of freedoms in exchange for what the people felt was greater security.

Does that last statement sound familiar? Perhaps *eerily* so? Like, say, today?

For at least two generations, this nation – perhaps not completely, but in significant numbers – has been turning from God and His Ways. We are

embracing lifestyles and belief systems The Bible specifically warns us against. In some cases, outright hostility to the Gospel can be seen, such as in efforts to bar believers from the national dialogue and some of the demonstrations of recent years in San Francisco openly mocking the Lord. This parallels the situation of Gideon's day, where his neighbors determined he must die, because he tore down Baal's altar. (Judges 6:30). And we are now in conflict with an implacable, determined enemy who thinks nothing of destroying innocent lives to achieve its goals, then re-fitting their twisted ideology to find justification in their faith. And in a time where the influence of the Gospel is needed in the nation like never before, far too many ministers seem interested in growing their churches more for selfish reasons than to please God. If you're the pastor of a huge congregation with a big presence on TV, you look better as a pastor. The desire for worldly celebrity outweighs the fact that whatever adulation you receive comes from a world going mad.

No one seems to connect the two. This is a vicious cycle feeding on itself, which starts by missing the point of Christianity and thinking that being Godly is a good way to make a pile or a name for yourself. (Refer to 1 Timothy 6:5). You may get rich or famous (usually one comes with the other), but most people soon realize what you're really after and you lose credibility as a minister. The world does not see Jesus in you, but a slightly gentler version of Ebenezer Scrooge. And as you lose credibility, the people around you equate the Gospel with your actions, and then the Gospel loses credibility and the nation you *could* have influenced for God is affected by you in quite the opposite way, sinking deeper into the consequences of its own sins. People look at the news these days and already are shaking their heads, thinking the situation can't seem to get any worse – but it can, and will so long as ministers who have the cure for it all leave it on the shelf and spend their energies building up themselves instead of the Kingdom.

This is not to say that all preachers or ministers have given themselves over to the madness; far from it, in fact. The pastor of the church where my family and I are members stands in stark contrast to the picture I have painted. He is a humble man, sold out to the Lord, and who does not shrink from correction when needed. But do you have any idea how long it took my wife and I to find him? We went "church shopping" for about a year, perhaps longer, before we found him and the church he heads. (And *don't* get me started on what *else* we encountered in our searching.) I am certain there are others out there, more than anyone realizes. There are good ministers in media ministry, as well. Often, however, it is the "hucksters" that make it onto the radio or television. Many times, these are the ones preaching the "prosperity gospel," where God wants every believer to be a gazillionaire, so long as your wealth is dedicated to the Lord (and that ministry gets its cut).

I realize that this is a variation on the message written in the open letter to pastors at the beginning of this year, but it bears repeating (which is why I am leaving it on the home page of the ministry's web site all year) because the one thing that can stop all this is for such pastors to **repent**. Stop enriching yourself or getting your ego inflated at the expense of the people

God has placed in your care. You might be fooling your flock, you might even be fooling yourself, but you are not fooling God Himself, Who knows the desires and the secret places of every heart. God is patient, but He eventually reaches the point where such people are removed from the scene for the sake of His Kingdom, either by their own hand as they reach the limits of their humanity or by His.

If you have wandered away from the center of God's will, ask Him to bring you back, regardless of the consequences. If you have never accepted Jesus as your savior in the first place, come to Him in repentance and give Him your life. Better to humble yourself in the sight of the Lord than to be humbled *by* Him as you are removed from the lofty position you have placed yourself upon.

For the Glory of God and the Lord Jesus Christ
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