

“So Many Voices”
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 Texts: Proverbs 1:7; Eph. 5:21

The challenge facing the new believer is enormous. First, there is the state of the world. It seems as if the world is so far gone as to be past redemption and that it has certainly gotten worse of late. I guess whether you think it is too far gone, or not determines whether you are an optimist, or a pessimist. For what it's worth, optimist, or pessimist, the world is what it is. So I am preaching a series of pastoral sermons, this being the first, at building a tool chest—*something practical for all more experienced believers to have in reserve*—that they might counsel, encourage and disciple those coming behind us. [“Building a godly life” would be a fine label for this toolbox—and I might suggest that you run off copies to hand out as the Lord leads. New believers will thank you.] Now God, undaunted as ever, by the state of the world—even in these “disunited states!”, still chooses to bring people to faith and He starts them out working what is good according to His good pleasure, renovating and regenerating them, despite the world setting. Though very mindful, as only God can be *because He is the author of history(!)* of what has gone before, what is and what lies ahead; God is still gathering in His elect. Playing it where it lies has always been God's approach. That fact should serve as a check on despair as well as a source of hope. The bewilderment of the new believer passes and the ignorance is gradually reduced.

There are, my friends, a few vital spiritual constants in God's creation. First and foremost is the fact that God is always God—God is ever fully, completely, entirely and perfectly divine. *That never changes*. Secondly, God's character is also fixed: He is holy, awesome in power, glorious in majesty always. And, thirdly, from what scripture tells us, He desires to be worshipped and adored **for whom He is**, above and beyond any and all His many attributes. *These three assertions very personal matter*. They are not abstractions, or philosophical categories despite the reality that some people choose to “philosophize” over God. The paramount reason for this is that **God is a Person, a supreme, personal, spiritual being**. He has always been what He is now despite whatever ideas we might invent, or systems we might devise concerning Him. (That is what “theologies” are at best. Just our ideas about God and His dealings with us.) It is probably true that none of our “theologies” are quite adequate for describing God. *Our language is limited as well as our capacity for understanding!* What serves as a check and balance for all these “theologies” is scriptural revelation (our “standard for truth”). Scripture insists that divine justice, love, mercy, judgment and severity (for God does reward the righteous and punish the wicked with perfect and entire equity) coexist and harmonize with each other. There's no partiality, we say, with God; unless one considers His choice of **a people for himself** to be more than a sovereign preference, or a “free choice of Him who is freedom itself” . . . at His discretion.

So, building a tool chest. The first order of business for the new believer is to begin to get his head together (and his act!) about all that has transpired in his redemption. Here we encounter a major dilemma: the many voices that he listened to before conversion are still speaking—I was going to say, yammering. I want to draw our attention to the cacophony of all those voices, all speaking at once. They are all, it seems, pressing for first place, or for a command position in your mind.

Therefore, hearing from God is all the more important. We spoke of hearing from God in His revealed word, in and through scripture most recently. (As recently as last Sunday.) Knowing where the transcripts are and reading them for yourself provides training in voice recognition as well as guidance and instruction. Indeed, Proverbs 1:7 **The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge** was emphasized; and the second half of that verse, **fools despise wisdom and instruction**, is an admonition to be kept in one's heart.

In the further business of getting one's head together, choosing not to be foolish should rank among the top ten of life's priorities *now that you are a believer, and have a new identity*. For upon being spiritual born, your identity is not so much *who you think you are* as it is **who God says you are**. Your identity from family, race, religion and culture . . . and, oh, yes, from gender or sexuality . . . all of that now takes second place to being a child of God, and a servant of the Most High. *We forget that at our own peril*. You might well have suspected that I was going to say, your identity is a "Christian." And you would be right insofar as you are now who you are in Christ; but who you are in Christ is a child of God, a co-heir with Christ, a brother or sister in the Lord and a servant. Christianity is spiritual servitude; it is as if you "get the shirt" and a badge reading "staff."

As a *servant*, our vocation, we have one Master to whom we are accountable, even the Lord Jesus Christ and our duties suitable to your calling follow.

We now wear His livery (yes, the shirt, the badge). For example, we wear His robes of righteousness and these spiritual garments are our uniform—yes, that is what "livery" means—and wherever we go, people can see Whom we belong to, Whose we are!

Love of Christ is another garment. Submission to Christ which is submission to God than spills over into submission to each other. In our urgency to defend our "free will," the subordination of our will to God's will is often misplaced, obscured, overlooked.

In this "spiritual" setting, we read and begin to understand what Paul wrote/meant in Ephesians 5:21: **Submit yourselves one to another in the fear of God**. The exhortation to submit to God doesn't appear quite so strange if we have grasped that we are members of the same household, that we are family and all of us are on staff, we exist to serve God and one another. That is our meaning, our place and our purpose and by this "vocation," we bring glory and honor to God—our redeemed purpose in life. So we bask in the delight of Him who first delighted in us—and we are rewarded for doing what we are told to do by the God who enables all our service!

This analogy of putting on Christ, likened to the wearing garments is new to the new believer; but it is not new to the student of the word—which is another shared activity of all believers.

I spoke just now of our vocation as a servant. I must expand that statement because it is very clear that we have a dual vocation, not a single one. We have a *general* vocation and we have a *particular* vocation. Our *general* vocation details certain duties to be performed by all of us (knowledge, faith, obedience, repentance, love, justice mercy and truth etc.). (Gouge, Vol. 1, p1) For us, those general duties might look like this:

**“Awake, sleeper,
And arise from the dead,
And Christ will shine on you.”**

15 Therefore [b]be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, 16 [c]making the most of your time, because the days are evil. 17 So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not get drunk with wine, [d]for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to [e]one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; 20 always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to [f]God, even the Father;

“It is the duty of Christians to set forth the praise of God, in order to be serviceable to each other.” (p. 2) When we come to *particular* duties these are customized to us individually, “according to the places where divine providence has set us . . . in nation, church and family.” “Accordingly, Paul, who, like Moses, was faithful in all the house of God (Num. 12:7), after he had sufficiently instructed God’s church in the general duties that belong to all Christians, regardless of sex, state, degree, or condition (Eph. 4:1-5:21), proceeds to lay down certain particular duties, which apply to particular callings and conditions (Eph. 5:22-6:9). Among these particular duties, he notes those that God has established in a family.” V. 21: **Submit ye one to another out of the fear of God**, or as some would render it, **out of reverence for Christ**—which would be comparable in weight. (Gouge, Vol. 1, p.1)

Not to be lost on us, this order (*general to particular/ give thanks to God, do good to man*) also conforms to the priorities set in the first and second tables of the Ten Commandments: **Love the Lord your God . . . and love your neighbor as yourself.** “The service which we perform one to another in the fear of God is an evident and real demonstration of the respect we bear to God” (or, not). (p. 2) Let your sincerity of love be evident.

However, it is vital to remember, regarding our service, that our goodness adds nothing to God—He remains God, glorious and majestic, perfect and entire regardless, *whether we serve Him or not; whether we even exist, or not!* Actually, it is a grace that we can do good to our neighbor *as unto the Lord* and so honor God because we cannot do good unto God at all. So, do as much good as you can for as long as you can. Your reward awaits you.

Therefore if we make a great show of our praise and worship and sing loudly in “outer works of religion” and neglect service to our neighbor, we are but hypocrites in a gong show. Jesus is clear about His followers fulfilling both vocations. And that, as He says, is just doing our job! How can we claim to love our God whom we do not see, if we neglect to love the neighbor that is plainly visible to us? *Who would believe us?!*

*“The reason why all are bound to submit themselves one to another is because everyone is set in his place by God, **not for himself, as for the good of others.**”* (p. 6) **Let no man seek his own** (wealth), **but every man** (seek to secure) **another’s wealth** so as to have enough to thrive and prosper). (1 Cor. 10:24) In one fell swoop greed,

selfishness, and covetousness die within the family of God; such things are contrary to the will of our King. He looks after us so that we will not sin in ungodly self-advancement. It is one of the fringe benefits of belonging to the family of God. On second thought, maybe it is not so fringe! Maybe it is the heart of trusting God.

So, how does this mutual submission, **each to one another** work out in real time? Well, it means that *magistrates* (judges, elected officials and representatives) exert themselves to procure the wealth, peace and well-being of their people (as did Mordecai in serving the Jewish population in captivity). And, *ministers* by making themselves servants to their people, not seeking their own profit, but the profit of many, **that they may be saved** (as did the Apostle Paul). *Fathers*, by well-educating their children and not provoking them to wrath, Eph. 6:4 (as did King David) and *husbands* by dwelling with their wives according to knowledge, giving honor to the wife as to the weaker vessel (as did Abraham, but with wisdom and discretion—not abdicating their headship, nor withdrawing from home management(!)). As *masters*, *CEO's* and *business owners* by doing what is just and equitable to their *servants*, *staff* and *employees* (as did the Roman centurion). And *everyone* by being of kind affection towards one another, and serving each in love, according to the rule of Christ. ***This is how the rule of submission works itself out in a society that is ordered in a godly manner.*** And, for the record, it does not emerge from within society as if determined by inner dynamics; rather it comes from God, it is heaven-sent and the Holy Spirit first converts and then transforms the believer. The process of sanctification, the growth of holiness **without which no one shall see God**, originates with God in the miracle of regeneration.

God has set everyone in place, amongst superiors, equals and subordinates. Scripture says and life reinforces, ***all are not leaders, are they?*** *I take this to mean leaders in a gifted way such as Moses and King David were—Moses was to find excellent men (out of all Israel) to set over the people to give judgment. Able men who fear God, who are trustworthy and who hate a bribe, Exodus 18:21ff . . . place them as chiefs over thousands, hundreds and fifties and tens.* Now these “administrators of justice” would copy Moses’ example: **warn them (the people) about the statutes and laws, and make them know the way in which they shall walk and what they must do** (v. 20). We are told that Moses implemented this plan of action (v. 24) **And they (the chiefs appointed) judged the people at all times. God has set every one in place, amongst superiors, equals and subordinates.**

In later times, this designation of **chiefs over tens** survives as the number required to form a synagogue! Apparently there weren’t ten Jewish heads of household in Philippi, *hence no synagogue*; which is why Paul went to the river bank **to a place designated for prayer!** These “chiefs” were to be good, learned men (**able to teach and apt to lead**)—very much in line with the six chosen as deacons in the distribution of food among the widows in the Jerusalem church. In fact there is a blueprint for house churches (10’s), and small congregations (50’s) as well as associations (100’s) and synods (1,000’s) in the organization of the church in our day. The number of 120 plus believers for a church council—such as was convened to fill the vacancy of Judas Iscariot (see Acts 1)—is in line with this biblical precedent for its organized life! One of the items on Jesus’ punch list before ascending to heaven appears to have been guidance on how to get things done in the Kingdom where the twelve were not sufficient to move the church forward.

This above conclusion about leadership (Exodus 18) follows from Paul's line of questioning in 1 Cor. 12:28-30 as well as that Mosaic template. **Not all are apostles, not all are prophets, or teachers**—all of whom were **God appointed in the church** as well as elders and officers in the body of Christ. Scorn and disdain amongst the members is ruinous for all . . . where leadership is avoided, through cowardice, or false humility, worse than nothing prevails. If politics is how things get done, then politics are in. If we **fear God** and **submit to one another** our politics will be wholesome and beneficial to all.

The world is in a sorry state but God has initiated a rescue plan (He sent His Son to die for our sins) and God has supplied direction on how to organize our lives so as to insure justice. Of course, you would have to read His word to gain access to that counsel. If we follow His counsel, *which is accessible in writing*, some of the bewilderment goes away! Both the knowledge of our rescue and guidance on organization go in the tool box! And so does this word on our placement in the world between leaders, equals and subordinates. This runs contrary to our ideas on equality. We even think of everyone as a leader. That is not true, by design. Equal treatment before the law synchronizes with divine placement. And so does personal accountability. We are all accountable to one Master and due to our placement the nature of that accountability differs—more is expected of leaders. Of course.

Next, obviously not in spiritual priority, we are to hold firm to the truth that God is always God. This is terra firm-a, the sound foundation which assures us that we have the right tools and that they function properly in this created order. God is still ingathering His elect and the work of the church is on-going. After getting one's personal house in order, there is the house of the Lord to be attended to. This is not an elective option. The world needs to see the body of Christ loving God and each other to convince them of the reality of our faith that **they might believe in Me, that I was sent from heaven, that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me . . .** and that we, being one with Christ are even now one with the Father, forgiven and reconciled. This is our identity as well as our calling and it is not an individual thing any more than it is a take it or leave it thing. We are all Christ's servants! We practice mutual submission within family and in the church. It's God's way.

And that means we are all tuned in to one voice, His voice. We are all people of the word, His word. The bible unites us. It is definitely in our tool box, well worn and well-read. We engage with the word first hand—reading it for ourselves and the benefit is this: it speaks to us! It adds wisdom and knowledge and that improves our walk, we walk wisely, prudently. We practice praising God in all things. We gain skill as we use the tools in our toolbox. It may not be a piano, but we practice anyway. And those who are most skillful make sure to tutor those coming up behind us. That makes for joy and continuity.

Amen.