

If Anyone Serves

1 Peter 4:11

There are two kinds of people on earth today;
Just two kinds of people; no more, I say.
Not the sinner and the saint, for it's well understood,
The good are half bad, and the bad are half good.
Not the rich and the poor, for to rate a man's wealth,
You must first know the state of his conscience and health.
Not the humble and proud, for in life's little span,
Who puts on vain airs, is not counted a man.
Not the happy and sad, for the swift flying years
Bring each man his laughter and each man his tears.
No; the two kinds of people on earth I mean
Are the people who lift, and the people who lean.
Wherever you go, you will find the earth's masses
Are always divided in just these two classes.
And, oddly enough, you will find, too, I ween,
There's only one lifter to twenty who lean.
In which class are you? Are you easing the load
Of overtaxed lifters, who toil down the road?
Or are you a leaner, who lets others share
Your portion of labor, and worry and care?

(Ella Wheeler Wilcox, *Masterpieces of Religious Verse*, p. 422)

Well, there may be two kinds of people in the world, just like the poet said: lifters and leaners. Which are you? Today's message is directed to both kinds, since both kinds are found in nearly every church—at least every church I know!

In his first letter, Peter has been preparing his readers for the last days just before Jesus comes back. He told them in 4:7, "*The end of all things is near.*" His next sentence begins with the word "*therefore,*" indicating that the things which followed are things which need attention as we prepare for that great day of His return.

Peter first said, in verse seven, that they were to be clear-minded and self-controlled, because the absence of those qualities in our lives would affect our prayer lives. In verse eight, Peter told his readers that they were to "*love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*"

Next, he wrote that we are to “*offer hospitality to each other without grumbling,*” and as we examined that command we began to understand why hospitality is such an important aspect of our preparing for the return of Christ. In verse ten, Peter said that we are to use the gifts which God has given to every believer, and that that gift should be used to serve others.

In the first half of verse eleven, Peter told them that the one who speaks should be very careful of what he says and how he says it, because he should speak “*as one speaking the very words of God.*” Implied in that command is the understanding that since these are God’s Words, then those who listen should be careful how they listen. These instructions are all the more urgent in our day, because we are so much nearer to the return of Christ than were Peter’s original readers.

But then Peter focused on the heart of the matter. In the latter half of verse eleven, Peter wrote, “*If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*” When we read those words, we discover two implications for those of us who truly desire to be ready when Jesus returns.

1 **Whoever serves must serve with God’s strength and not his own.**

Look at it again: “*If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides.*” Why would it be necessary to say that? Wouldn’t it be understood that we must depend on the strength God gives us? The reason Peter wrote this in the first place was because he knew, perhaps from his own experience in denying Jesus, that we humans are very prone to attempt to do almost anything without the power and strength of God. We are confident, and the more we serve Him and others, the more confident we become, so that we no longer feel the urgent necessity of depending on His strength for our service.

It happens to preachers quite frequently. We become confident in the task of standing before many people several times every week, so if we’re not careful, we find ourselves rushing into the pulpit with scarcely a thought as to where the power and strength to preach in the Spirit originates. But the same thing is true of anyone else who attempts to serve God. And the longer one has served in a particular position, the more likely he or she is to try to do without the power of God in service.

Unless we keep all this in perspective, pride causes us to forget where the strength for serving God comes from in the first place! A missionary once spoke of his difficult work in translating the Scriptures for a tribe of natives in a country where he worked. He found it extremely difficult trying to translate the word “pride” with a word close enough that they would understand the idea. He finally had to settle on a word which described the ears being too far apart—someone with a big head! That certainly describes what pride does to a person. But pride not only separates our ears from each other—it also tends to separate us from each other, and from God.

A prominent Christian businessman once described his bout with pride: “It is my pride that makes me independent of God. It’s appealing to me to feel that I am the master of my fate, that I run my own life, call my own shots, go it alone. But that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can’t go it alone. I have to get help from other people, and I can’t ultimately rely on myself. I’m dependent on God for my next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I’m anything but a man—small, weak, and limited. So, living independent of God is self-delusion. It is not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humanity being an attractive little virtue; it’s my inner psychological integrity that’s at stake. When I am conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God, and not man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of myself. And that is the national religion of Hell!”

(Illustrations for *Biblical Preaching*, Michael Green, editor, p. 288)

One theologian once made the statement that wherever the church has exhausted itself by serving itself, there hangs in the air the stench of death, for that church is at that moment dying (Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*). I believe a similar thing holds true for any believer in Christ: whenever that believer has succumbed to the subtle temptation to serve self and self alone, that Christian’s spiritual growth has been halted. You see, God doesn’t give us the strength to save ourselves. He gives us strength to serve Him and others. God did not save you to be a sensation, to impress others with how dedicated you are or how much you know; He saved you to be a servant.

I read this little statement in a copy of the devotional booklet *Our Daily Bread*: “We may easily be too big for God to use, but we can never be too small.” You see, whoever serves must serve with God’s strength and not his own.

You may be a Sunday School teacher, or a deacon, or the chairman of a committee, or you may be engaged in the service of God in many other ways. Yet you have struggled for years, perhaps, attempting to do something for which you have no

strength, something for which you never had any strength of your own. God's Word for you today is *"If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides."*

2 Since this is God's strength, whoever serves must give God the glory and not take it for himself.

I saw a sign once which read, "There is no limit to the good that a man can do, if he doesn't care who gets the credit." It is so easy to take credit for something which God did. The one thing which prevents us from giving the glory to God is nothing but pride, though it may take a thousand different forms. It is pride that robs us of the pure joy of serving Him just because we love Him. It is pride which sours our outlook on life and looks askance at the motives of others. It is pride which eats away at the fulfillment of a life in Christ. It is pride which strips us of the common sense to know that we are nothing left to ourselves, that if we are anything or have done anything, it is only because of the finished work of Christ on the Cross, and God's pleasure. We actually cannot take any pride in anything we may have accomplished for the Kingdom of God, or in any activity or service in which we are involved. The Kingdom is His, the activity is His, the service is His, and we are His. All things and all persons have been created for His glory, and nothing else.

We cannot take credit for the strength God provides us, though sometimes Satan will attempt to trick us to do just that. You have figured out by now that one of my heroes in the faith is Charles Haddon Spurgeon, an English Baptist preacher of another generation. One Sunday he preached a masterful sermon, and as soon as he finished, the devil whispered to him, "Spurgeon, that was a fine sermon; you preached magnificently."

For a moment he agreed with the devil. But then Spurgeon was met by a loyal deacon at the foot of the pulpit stairs, who said, "Mr. Spurgeon, that was a masterpiece." The preacher interrupted him and said, "My friend, you're too late. The devil told that a few moments ago." (Herbert Lockyer, *The Sins of Saints*)

We cannot take the credit for our bodies, for it is God who created them and gave them to us for our use, and one day will take them back again. We cannot take the credit for our homes or other possessions, for they will be here after we are gone. We cannot take the credit for our families, for they, too, are a gift from God. We cannot take the credit for our accomplishments in life, for it was God who gave us the health and intelligence to achieve them. We cannot even be proud of being

Americans, for we had nothing to do with choosing where or when we would be born. We cannot be proud of being Christians, for we could never earn our birthright.

Pride keeps us from doing many things in the service of God and others. A student at a Bible college in the Philippines became upset over the condition of the men's restroom, since it seemed that they were always neglected in the cleaning routine. Finally he took matters into his own hands and went to see the president of the college to complain about how filthy the restroom was.

Just a little while later, the student noticed with a great deal of pride that the problem was being corrected. But the pride quickly turned to amazement and then shame, as the student realized that the man with the mop and pail in hand was the president himself!

The student commented later, "I thought he would call a janitor, but he cleaned the toilets himself. It was a major lesson to me on being a servant, and of course, it raised a question in my own mind as to why *I* hadn't taken care of the problem!"

Many of us are like that, aren't we? Some of us are quite willing to serve God, but only in an advisory capacity.

Pride is so insidious and so dangerous simply because we fail too often to recognize it in ourselves. We *can* see it in others, of course! We are so proud we do not even see our pride. And there are so many different kinds of pride that, just about the time we think we've got it whipped, along comes another version of the same sin. We may be pleased with the fact that we've never been guilty of some of the more obvious sins that are easy for others to judge. Take immorality, for example. We may never have committed immorality, yet we are so proud that we have not committed immorality.

Immorality and pride are both sin, and both are contrary to the command of God. Yet pride is the most dangerous because either we don't acknowledge its presence in our hearts, or we fool ourselves into believing that there are certainly much worse things of which we could be guilty. Pride is the most dangerous because it masquerades as self-sacrificing service, or commitment, or stewardship, or prayer, or church attendance, or any of a hundred other things which look good on the surface.

“If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.” The one thing which keeps us from admitting that we are incomplete left to ourselves is pride. And the one thing which holds us back from praising God through Jesus Christ is that we are much too eager to take the credit for the things we never could have done, nor even conceived, without the help of God.

Perry Tanksley wrote words which would be good for all our workers to adopt as a personal motto:

*In youth and old age,
In pleasure and in strife,
Lord, help me do Thy will,
Get glory from my life.
And if I, half-forgetful,
Put not Thy kingdom first,
And if for righteousness
I lose my deeper thirst;
Then Lord, in hot displeasure
Purge me from fear and doubt,
And crush me if it's needed
To squeeze Thy glory out.
(To Love Is To Give, Perry Tanksley)*

Does God need to crush you, to squeeze His glory out? Ruth Harms Calkin wrote a little poem once which went right to the heart of the matter before us today:

*You know how I serve You,
With great emotional fervor,
In the limelight.
You know how eagerly I speak for You,
At a woman's club.
You know how I effervesce when I promote
A fellowship group.
You know my genuine enthusiasm
At a Bible study.*

*But how would I react, I wonder
If you pointed to a basin of water,
And asked me to wash the calloused feet
Of a bent and wrinkled old woman,
Day after day,*

*Month after month,
In a room where nobody saw,
And nobody knew?*

Good question. By the way, are you a lifter or a leaner?