

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
September 22, 2019

Good Stewards of God's Grace

1 Peter 4:1-11

I once visited a lady who attended another congregation, and who was careful about not getting too involved in the work of that particular church. She enjoyed going to the Sunday morning worship service and sharing in fellowship with her friends, especially those who shared the back pew with her. But she was very clear in telling me, "I will not join that church, because I know that as soon as I join that church, they'll give me a job to do."

A job in the church. It reminds me of Mindy's recent announcement in which she notified you that the Nominating Committee is "on the prowl." It's that time of the year when we ask you to consider your places of service in the life of our congregation. In fact, next Sunday, we'll actually vote on the Nominating Committee's recommendation for our 2019-2020 officers and committees.

Yes, you heard me right. I used the word "committee." I know that the term often sends people scattering. When it comes to committees, there's no shortage of skepticism or criticism. For example, a source known as Bradley's Bromide says, "If computers get too powerful, we can organize them into a committee—that will do them in." Or as Sir Barnett Cocks put it, "A committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured and then quietly strangled."

It's easy to grow cynical about committees. I realize that they frequently get a reputation for being too slow, too institutional, and too devoted to the status quo. But at the same time, committees play a key role in helping us carry out our mission as partners in the gospel. Committees are where we work to discern the will of God together. In the give and take of committee life, we learn what it really means to labor together, to be accountable to each other, to share the work of Christ, and to pursue a common goal, rather than doing an end run around the congregation in order to pursue personal agendas.

In today's text, Peter writes to the congregation, knowing that the Nominating Committee has been at work for several weeks, seeking individuals to serve in the church. This is especially evident in verse 10, where he says, "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." Notice that Peter doesn't view the congregation as essentially a collection of jobs that need to be done. He knows that the Nominating Committee is doing more than just posting its annual version of the church want ads.

Instead, the church is a community of people who are charged with managing something that they didn't create. Peter calls it "God's grace." He means God's power and strength, working in and among the fellowship of believers to accomplish his saving will in their lives, and to bring others into the life of God's people where they can join in glorifying God. And according to Peter, God's grace takes many different forms in the life of the congregation. Some people manifest the grace of God by their giftedness in proclaiming, through sermons or spiritual sayings or other ways in which God speaks into the life of the community. Others manifest the grace of God by their giftedness in various forms of service, such as

administration or hospitality or giving. Keep in mind that the gifts referenced in our text aren't meant to be exhaustive. They're simply examples of how God's power and strength are given abundantly in the church, so that believers can listen to God and act for one another's mutual benefit.

So by this point, we can see that the church is way more than just a collection of jobs to be done. The church is actually the relational realm where God's power and strength get displayed in the way that we exercise our gifts. These gifts come from God and are returned to God by the ways that we use them for his praise.

J. R. R. Tolkien wrote a short story about a young boy named Smith Smithson, who received a rare gift at his village's celebration. It was a piece of cake containing a silver star. As Smith wears the star on his forehead, it shines with light and allows him to travel to magical lands and possess special powers and privileges. One day he's traveling home from one of his fantastic journeys when Alf, the Master Cook and baker of the cake starts walking beside him. Unbeknownst to Smith, Alf is actually the king of all the land, and the one who actually chose to give Smith the silver star.

As they near Smith's home, Alf (the King) says, "Do you not think, Master Smith, that it is time for you to give this thing [the magic silver star] up?" And Smith replies, "What is that to you, Master Cook? And why should I do so? Isn't it mine? It came to me, and may a man not keep things that come to him so, at least as a remembrance?" The King says, "Some things. Those that are free gifts and given for remembrance. But others are not so given. They cannot belong to a man forever, nor be treasured as heirlooms. They are lent. You have not thought, perhaps, that someone else might need this thing. But it is so. Time is pressing."¹

Within the time that God gives us, you and I are supposed to take the gifts he has loaned us, and be good stewards of them for the sake of the church and its witness in the world. And we don't have forever to do so. Notice how the instructions in today's text are framed by the expectation of a final reckoning. "The end of all things is near. Therefore . . ." (v. 7). In view of God's coming judgment and the setting right of all things through Christ, we're supposed to faithfully utilize the forms of grace that he has entrusted to each of us in our life together as his people. These gifts didn't originate with us, and we don't own them. When all is said and done, we'll be accountable for whether we've neglected them or used them.

Pastor Thomas Tewell tells about a friend named Andy Eddington. Eddington, who was once the president of Shriners College in Texas, would go to prisons and preach to men on death row in Huntsville, Texas. Tewell used to go with Eddington every now and then. On one of those trips they stopped at a greasy spoon on their way home to Dallas. Eddington loved sugar in his coffee, so he took not one, not two, but three teaspoonfuls of sugar. As the waitress watched, Eddington said, "Ma'am, we're going to need more sugar for this table." This Texas waitress looked at Andy and said, "Listen, bud, before I give you more sugar, you stir what you got."²

In view of Christ's coming, we need to constantly stir up what we've got. Part of our Nominating Committee's responsibility, and part of the purpose of this sermon, is to help you think about and discern what you've got, what gifts God has entrusted to you, not for your own glory but for his. This means taking what God has placed in your hands, and placing it in God's hands, by utilizing it for his redeeming purposes. When you take what comes from God and return it to him as a well-used offering, God is praised and the congregation of God's people is strengthened and enlivened.

When you utilize God's grace to serve others, you contribute to the vibrancy of our church. You show that we're more than just an institution whose aim is to preserve itself, or an organization comprised of job descriptions for Christians. Remember that earlier in 1 Peter, we're told what we are: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (2:9-10). We are people whom God has brought out from the deadliness of sin into life, life according to God in the Spirit. And the strength and power of God operate in the ways that we serve one another, to make us more alive.

True, our congregation, like all churches, needs structure and organization. We need officers and committees. We need positions of leadership and authority. We need a whole range of assignments where individuals can put their gifts and experience to use in order to further our mission. But we're about more than just making progress in our mission. We're also about transformation in people's lives. It's no wonder that in today's text, Peter's exhortations are addressed to people who are going from old ways of living to new ways of living. They're being slandered by people with whom they once associated. They're learning that there's nothing easy about moving from what they used to be to what God intends them to be.

The change that Peter highlights is a move out of self-indulgence to a life of self-denial. It's a life that looks more like the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection. And it takes a community to cultivate and form such a life. A community where the focus is on serving one another rather than just satisfying oneself. Philosopher and theologian Jean Vanier once noted, "A community is only a community when the majority of its members are making the transition from 'the community for myself' to 'myself for the community.'"

That's part of what we do around this time each year. We try to help you figure out what "myself for the community" looks like in your case. What part do you need to play in this congregation? How can you contribute to the aliveness of our fellowship? Are there forms of God's grace that are just sitting there in your life, needing to be stirred up? What gifts has God placed in your hands that can be used for the praise of his glory? After all, the purpose of these gifts, and the ultimate goal of this congregation, is that "in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ" (v. 11b).

Sometimes we get so wrapped up in trying to make sure that all the slots are filled in the church's organizational chart, that we lose sight of the fact that for all the ways we're an institution, we're most of all a relational space where we're constantly unlearning sin and learning holiness. And in order for you to live less by human desires and live more by the will of God, you need others who are part of the same redemption project. You need the help, the exhortation, the encouragement, the mercy, the prayers, and the service of others in the fellowship of believers. That's how God's strength, the power that raises the dead, gets from God into you, and makes you part of the people whose "job" is to bring glory to God. All the "jobs" on our list of officers and committees fall, in one way or another, under the assignment called praise. Praise to the one who is the source and the destination of the gifts that are in this church. How will you use your gifts to serve?

¹ From Matt Woodley, editor, *PreachingToday.com*. Source: J. R. R. Tolkien, "Smith of Wootton Major" (Del Ray, 1967) 41.

² Thomas Tewell, pastor, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY; from a plenary address at the Preaching with Passion Conference (May 31, 2001).