

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
October 6, 2024

## **A Sacrificial Ministry**

Ezekiel 44:10-16

At first, it looked like Ezekiel might have a promising career in professional ministry. After all, he came from a priestly family. It's likely that his father, Buzi, was a priest in the Jerusalem temple. With that type of background, maybe Ezekiel would have been expected to follow in the footsteps of his ancestors, especially his father, and enter the clergy. Maybe he even envisioned himself in that role, wearing the holy garments that priests wore, leading in worship, administering the sacred rites for sacrifices in the temple.

But in 597 BCE those aspirations would have been overturned. That's the year when King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon launched an attack on Judah. It was both a military and a cultural assault. Eventually, God's people were taken into exile, removed from their land and their temple. This was more than just a moment. It was an ongoing trauma, and much of what we see and hear in the book of Ezekiel is an expression of coming to grips with and processing the tremendous injustice, disruption, and loss involved in the people's experience of exile.

Ezekiel the aspiring priest was among the first wave of prisoners hauled off into exile. While in an Israelite refugee camp in Babylon, Ezekiel has a vision in which God's glory—the physical appearance or manifestation of God's significance when he shows up in person—begins to leave the temple. God has had enough of his people's idolatry and injustice. His people have no longer sought out or acknowledged his work among them, so God abandons the place of worship. As one commentator has summarized it, "The glory has left the building."<sup>1</sup>

Through these experiences, Ezekiel's call shifts from being a priest to being a prophet, a messenger who delivers God's word of judgement against his people. The way that they've given their allegiance to other gods has led to the rampant social injustice and unrighteousness among them. They've rebelled and broken their covenant with God. Their relationship with him is ruptured. And now God has apparently abandoned them. Ezekiel even delivers a warning that Jerusalem and its temple face imminent destruction. What's more, these words of judgment extend beyond just God's people and their holy city. Ezekiel goes on to pronounce God's judgment upon the nations around Israel.

And yet, near the end of Ezekiel's vision, there's a glimmer of hope that God actually goes with his people into exile, that his presence isn't tied strictly to Jerusalem and its temple. God is making himself available and accessible to the exiles where they are, in the midst of their trauma and disruption. God even points toward the day when he will give his people a new heart, so that they can love him and truly follow him after all.

Today's text falls within the second half of the book of Ezekiel, as he unfolds his profound vision of hope. Hope for Israel, hope for the nations, and hope for all creation. In this final vision report, Ezekiel is transported to a high mountain where he's given a guided tour of the temple, then sees God's glory enter it and fill it. Next comes a set of rules governing

access to the temple and the activities carried out within it. That's where we find the verses I read earlier.

Now in one respect, these rules are long and complex. They go into great detail about the people, place, and procedures that comprise the worship of Israel's holy God. But for all their intricacy, these regulations essentially aim to show what life in God's household will be like. As one interpreter has captured it, "These are the 'house rules' for living in God's presence."<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of living in God's presence is worship, which we've gathered for here today. Today's text concludes with the Lord saying of the priests, "They alone are to enter my sanctuary; they alone are to come near my table to minister before me and perform my service" (v. 16). Within that verse, we hear two of the words that so often characterize our worship, namely, "minister" and "service." When it comes to the second of those two, think of how frequently we refer to our worship gathering as a "service." After last weekend's memorial gathering for Hassie Mitchell, I had many people come up to me afterwards and comment on what a nice or beautiful "service" it was. That term "service" often comes quickly and easily to our tongues when we want to name what the church is doing when it assembles.

But we need to remember that the primary object of our "service" is God. True, we as worshipers benefit from the experience. Through the music, prayers, offerings, Scriptures, and especially the proclamation of the word of God, we're uplifted, strengthened, convicted, restored, renewed, encouraged, inspired, and blessed, among other things. And yet, the worship experience isn't primarily about what we get or what we gain, how we are served, though that's good. Instead, it's primarily about what we give to God. As pastor Dan Kimball says, "It is not about God's service to us. It is purely an offering of service and worship to God—offering our lives, offering our prayers, offering our praise, offering our confessions, offering our finances, offering our service to others in the church body."<sup>3</sup> Only when these kinds of things have happened can we fully and faithfully say that we have been to a worship "service."

The other word in our text, closely coupled with "service," is "minister." We often use it to refer to ordained clergy, particularly pastors, or to the other individuals in places of significant leadership in the church. Minister of music. Minister of children and youth. Minister of outreach, and so on. We also use it, though, in a verbal sense. "Minister" is something we do as part of our life in Christ with his church. Individually, we minister to one another and to others outside our community of faith. Together, as a congregation, we minister to people, both within and beyond our fellowship of believers. We minister to our community and to the larger world.

The word "ministry" is derived from a Latin term which means "the service of a greater by a lesser." At the core of the biblical concept of ministry is the idea of humble service. Service to God and service to others. In the New Testament, Christ himself becomes the pattern and embodiment of ministry. He came not to receive service but to give it.

We recall particularly how Jesus washed the disciples' feet, demonstrating to them and to us that self-giving love is the hallmark of ministry. In fact, the ministry we carry out isn't primarily our own but Christ's. I like the way that one person has put it when he says, "It is not our ministries that make Christ present; it is the present, living Christ who makes our ministries possible."<sup>4</sup> So we simply participate in where Christ shows up and what Christ is doing. We continue the living Christ's own work of restoration and healing. True, his death for our sins fulfills and completes the reconciliation that was accomplished through the

temple sacrifices. But the fleshing out of that reconciliation belongs to everyone who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord. Although certain persons are set apart from the community for special roles and functions, ministry is the responsibility of all believers. What's more, ministry isn't our right or possession but a gift from God.

And what does this gift look like? Warren and David Wiersbe summarize it this way:

The foundation of ministry is character.  
 The nature of ministry is service.  
 The motive for ministry is love.  
 The measure of ministry is sacrifice.  
 The authority of ministry is submission.  
 The purpose of ministry is the glory of God.  
 The tools of ministry are the Word of God and prayer.  
 The privilege of ministry is growth.  
 The power of ministry is the Holy Spirit,  
 and the model for ministry is Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Though their focus is more on professional clergy, these writers characterize ministry in a way that applies to all of us in the congregation of Christ's people. In particular, I would note the fourth item: "The measure of ministry is sacrifice."

Whether in the temple in Jerusalem or on the cross outside the city walls, God's work of reconciling people to himself involves sacrificial giving. It's easy to read through today's text from Ezekiel and overlook the fact that for the people who brought their animals to be sacrificed, this was a costly offering. For those whose economic resources were limited, forfeiting an animal meant not only giving up the animal but its reproductive capacity as well, or the resources it supplied, like milk, and wool for clothing. What's more, Ezekiel insists that animals sacrificed upon God's altar be without blemish. So those who offered them were offering their best to God. These sacrifices were no empty ritual. They were a sign of commitment to God, an expression of the fact that being in relationship with God brings responsibilities upon us, and that God demands sacrifices of us.

Ministry is more than just an item in the Christian's, and the church's, job description. Ministry is, by its very nature, sacrificial. Ministry, this gift of God in Christ, is unmerited and unearned, yet costly. It demands something of us, our very best.

As we come to the Lord's Table today, to share the bread and the cup, reflect on the part that sacrifice is currently playing in your ministry, personally, and as part of this church. Consider important questions, like: What am I giving up in order to be part of the life and ministry of this congregation? Are there ways that I'm using most of my time, talents, experience, finances, and others resources mainly for myself, and then giving whatever is left over to God? What is it really costing me to follow Jesus and to practice his kingdom way here in this fellowship of believers, as well as beyond the church in my daily life in the world?

The death and life of Jesus take shape here in this church by the ways that so many of you already give yourselves, with commitment and sacrifice, to the work of the Lord. And for that we give praise and thanks. But all of us can always use some Spirit-led self-examination to see more clearly where we're failing to give our best to the ministry that God has given us.

As Paul says in our earlier Scripture from Romans, "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is

your true and proper worship” (12:1). This is your service. This is your ministry. A sacrificial ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> Tyler Tankersly, *Sessions with Ezekiel: Holiness and Hope* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2022) Kindle edition.

<sup>2</sup> William D. Shiell, *Ezekiel: God’s Presence in Performance* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2014) 135.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Matt Knightingale, “The Worship ... Service?” Worship Connect. August 15, 2014.

<https://blogs.covchurch.org/wc/2014/08/the-worship-service/#:~:text=It%20is%20purely%20an%20offering%20of%20service%20and%20worship%20to> (October 2, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Purves, *The Crucifixion of Ministry: Surrendering Our Ambitions to the Service of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007) 53.

<sup>5</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe and David W. Wiersbe, *Making Sense of the Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) n.p.