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A Spiritual Health Advisory for  
Those Who Would Serve God

a sermon on John 13.1-20  
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Occupational hazards ... There was a time when coal miners frequently contracted a disease known as black lung. Tiny particles of coal accumulated in their lungs and caused health problems. I knew a guy who worked in a facility that made nuclear fuel for the navy. He told me the people who worked there suffered a high rate of cancer. Of course, not all on-the-job risks are physical. Some are spiritual. The things we do day in and day out have a way of shaping our souls. This is true both of your job and your ministry in the church. Ministry has a way of shaping your soul, usually for the good, but ministry always brings temptations as well. In my preaching seminar at Beeson, we saw a video of a sermon by a Baptist pastor and scholar named Joel Gregory. It came from the passage where Jesus tells Simon Peter that Satan has been given permission to sift Simon like wheat, but Jesus has prayed for him. Dr. Gregory rang out a haunting refrain, "There is no service without sifting." When you come to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be sifted, especially if you serve as a leader.

Leadership in the church exposes one to certain risks. Call them temptations. Call them occupational hazards. Or, call them diseases of the soul. You can think of them as spiritual sickness that anyone can catch, but your risk increases when you serve as a leader. In fact, not only does the risk increase with leadership, so does the potential harm to yourself and others. Leaders must take care, then, to guard against these dangers. Toward that end, this sermon is a spiritual health advisory. I am going to share with you the basics about one of the most common and deadly spiritual diseases to which leaders are especially susceptible. Remember, you do not have to be ordained to be a leader, and although not all of you are leaders, you are all ministers. So this sermon is for you, whether you are a leader or a minister. If you are neither, then be aware that Jesus is calling you to some kind of ministry. He has created you to know him and to serve others in his name. He is calling you, so heed this warning now, because you never know where God will place you or how he will use you.

I have given a name to this dread disease you need to know about. I call it *personal personal glory obsession*. It's not hard to define. Personal personal glory obsession is when you serve in order to get praise, recognition, or status. Your ministry feeds your ego. You like to point to your service and say, "Look what I have done!" Yes, I'm talking about pride, but personal glory obsession is a bit more complicated than just too

much pride. Personal glory obsession is when you minister from the wrong motivation. Ideally a person comes to ministry this way: She is broken. She finds grace in Jesus Christ. His healing grace makes her strong, and it includes a call to serve. Then, out of love for God and others, she takes up the challenge of service. Love motivates ministry. At least it should. Sometimes other things motivate ministry, and they cause problems. For example, guilt can motivate you to do ministry. But, it cannot *sustain* you in ministry. Guilt will never give you joy or carry you over the long haul the way love can.

Sometimes our brokenness motivates ministry. We serve in order to find healing or to feel better about ourselves. We bypass the step I mentioned earlier where the grace of Christ heals us, and we go looking to heal ourselves through ministry or church leadership. This is so common it is an epidemic. I recall in seminary knowing students who were lost, broken, and confused. They imagined that if they got a theological education and became a pastor, the broken pieces of their life would fall into place. They soon learned, however, that leadership does not make you stronger. It tests you. You get sifted.

Symptoms of personal glory obsession include the following: (By the way, I do not have anyone in mind as I list these; I do not presume to diagnose this condition in others. Your diagnosis is up to you.) You crave recognition and praise, but you fear criticism. You need the praise to feel good about yourself. You can't stand criticism or not getting your way. You tend to take things personally. If the session or pastor or choir director rejects your idea, you feel offended and rejected. If someone does not show proper appreciation, you feel offended and rejected. You spend time worrying whether you get the respect you deserve. You stress over petty things. You think you are better than others because you have a leadership role. You think the church, or part of its life, revolves around you. You think it is *your* church (in reality the church belongs to Christ, not those he appoints to care for it). You think of your leadership office in terms of rights and privileges rather than obligation and opportunity. You forget that before we get to the verse, "therefore God highly exalted him," we have to go through "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." You are ready to follow Jesus to the skies, but not to the cross. You are jealous of other people's gifts and success.

The opposite of personal glory obsession is an attitude that says, "I will serve wherever and however I am needed. I'm just thankful for the opportunity to share my gifts" – then in humility rejoicing in the gifts of others. I had the privilege to see this beautiful, Christ-like attitude in our church recently. I won't name the name because that sets a dangerous precedent. But the difference between this person's attitude and someone with personal glory obsession is stark. The one is so lovely, the other so ugly.

Those are among the more prominent symptoms. How is this disease caught? You might think it comes from an inflated ego. Some people love themselves too much, right? They want everyone to know how great they really are. Maybe ... but I am not so sure. I suspect personal glory obsession comes from our brokenness. You are insecure. You are small inside. You are afraid. You feel unworthy, perhaps. So to fix this you seek greatness. If everyone around you sings your praises, maybe you will start to believe it yourself.

There is of course grave danger in this disease, both for the afflicted and the church. Brittle, petty people cause all kinds of mischief in a community, often without intending it and always with the full assurance that they are in the right. Whenever church members start caring more about “my rights and privileges” than about the needs of others or our mission, then our unity and our mission suffer. This past week marked the fiftieth anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s famous speech, “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” That attitude is even more important in the church.

Personal glory obsession is nothing new. Jesus’ disciples had a bad case of it. Our scripture reading describes part of the Last Supper from the gospel of John. At the last Supper, Jesus poured out his heart. He was about to die. The cross was already crushing his spirit. He was overwhelmed, and he wanted to comfort his disciples. He wanted to explain things to them, to prepare them. What were they doing? John does not tell us this, but the other gospels do: They were arguing about which of them was the greatest! John hints at this when he records Jesus saying, “You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.” Who is greatest? Well, at that table Jesus was the greatest, and everyone knew it. Yet look what he did! Washing feet was an unpleasant necessity in that time and place, a job usually given to slaves. Jesus and his disciples were alone for the Passover. They needed privacy and intimacy. That meant one of them would have to wash feet. Obviously no one wanted to. Maybe that’s how the argument about who was greatest broke out. “I’m not going to wash feet. I’m more important than you.” I’m speculating beyond what the text says, but who knows? Jesus seized the opportunity to show them what true greatness looks like.

Simon Peter, naturally, is not ready for this grace. You heard his protest and its outcome. Peter was one of those dominating personalities. He didn’t have to argue for his greatness. He could smugly assume it. After all, he was the one Jesus nicknamed, “The Rock.” It never occurred to Simon that Jesus might be referring to his head rather than his character. He had been the one to declare, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” He had been on the mount of transfiguration. He was Jesus’ best friend.

Did he need the grace symbolized by the washing of his feet? He did. Peter had a sifting coming. It wasn't until he was broken by his own cowardly denial and then blessed with the grace of forgiveness that he became the leader Jesus always knew he could be.

Jesus action in washing his disciples' feet points us toward the treatment and cure for personal glory obsession. First, you need grace. You need to confront your own smallness, brokenness, and ugliness. Then, you need Jesus Christ to forgive your sin and heal you. You need to take to heart the new identity he gives you. He loves you enough that he died for you – that gives you worth. You have nothing left to prove. He calls you by name and makes you a child of God – that gives you security. You have nothing left to gain. His grace sets you free. Free to love. Free to serve. Free to lead if he calls you to be a leader.

Second, you need to follow his example. Don't take your ideas about leadership uncritically from the culture. Learn leadership from Jesus. A godly leader is humble, compassionate, and concerned for what is right. Leadership in the church is about giving, not getting. Yes, serving can make you feel good. It brings you joy. But your motivation is love. Love God, love his people, love the world he died for. When you find your ego muscling in on your ministry, push it back.

Suppose you want to be the chair of a committee, but someone else gets the job. Naturally you are going to feel a bit of resentment. You can't help that. What matters is: What are you going to do with that resentment? Are you going to reject it and say, "I've got to swallow my pride and get behind this other person and make the work of our committee successful"? And then you do your best to do that? Or do you nurture your resentment and feed it and let it poison your ministry?

Suppose you have been working hard at a particular job in the church. It is something that has to be done. It is not especially rewarding. You don't mind doing it but you don't derive great pleasure from it either. All you want is a simple word of appreciation. That's fair. We all need encouragement. I think we as a church do not do enough to recognize those who labor faithfully among us. One reason we do not is because we are always afraid that when we recognize one person, another will feel slighted. And it is difficult to recognize everyone. So many people do so many things, often behind the scenes. So we don't thank our elders, our deacons, our liturgists, the folks who set up fellowship coffees, and those who clean up after dinners as we should. We do not thank our teachers, our musicians, and our ushers as we should. I could go on. I need your help with this. When you see someone working faithfully in our church, thank them. Remind them that their ministry is important. Also, if you have not received the thanks you deserve, know that your ministry matters. In ministry we always work to please God, not people. The only thanks that really count come from

him. But it is right for us to encourage one another, so let's try to do that. But let's also be patient with one another when gratitude seems to be in short supply.

We all need encouragement. There's nothing wrong with feeling good about a job well done, especially in the church. The crucial test is: What motivates your ministry? Is it love for God and his people? Or is ministry an attempt to deal with your own brokenness? Do you rejoice in the gifts and ministry of others? Or are you jealous and resentful?

If God has called you to leadership in this congregation, I want you to answer his call and serve confidently. Give God and his people your very best. Above all, strive to follow his example of leadership. Say to him, "Lord, give me the grace to serve you well." Say to all of us, in the words of that beautiful hymn we've learned in recent years,

"Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you;  
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too."

Amen.

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