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The Father's Delight

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What greater sound is there than that of children laughing? I'm still hooked on it and mine are in their mid to late teens. As their father, nothing touches me more deeply nor gives me greater pleasure than watching them explode in laughter at some new experience or story. Long after they've left the room, I still find myself enjoying their joy.

Have you ever wondered what brings that kind of delight to God's heart? Well, wonder no more. Jesus already told us.

His disciples had just returned from going through the villages of Palestine sharing the good news of the kingdom. They had watched blind people see for the first time; lepers weep in joy at the touch of their new skin; and people oppressed by demons dancing in joy at suddenly being returned to their right mind.

To get the impact of this, we have to remember who they were. We think of them now as "The Apostles", men of great wisdom, character and training. We forget that at the time they were simply bad fishermen, tax collectors and who knows what else. Far from being highly respected religious people, they were normal, every-day people who had been infused with God's life, power and a bit of his wisdom.

Here, for the only time in Scripture, we are told that Jesus was "full of joy" and declared: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."

What gives the Father pleasure? Revealing his life to people the world would have little regard for. That's the point here, isn't it? His emphasis is not who God hides things from, but who he reveals them to. And he delights to reveal himself to people like Peter, Bartholomew and Matthew those who still fought over who would be first in the kingdom, who still didn't understand the full import of Jesus' mission, who couldn't even figure out most of the stories Jesus told.

And he delights to reveal his will, his plans and his power to you as much as I enjoy hearing the laughter of my children.

A Kingdom without Hierarchy

What demonstrates the magnificence of Jesus' kingdom over every other institutional arrangement of our world is the fact that Father wants direct contact with everyone in his kingdom. He established no

hierarchy to feed his plans through, but invited every one of us to a relationship with him close enough so that he could give us his life and direction first hand.

This was God's plan from the beginning. Ezekiel chastised the shepherds of Israel for abusing the sheep only for what they could get out of them. "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "I am against the shepherds (and) will remove them from tending the flock. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them. I myself will search for my sheep and look after them." (34:10-11)

Jesus wasn't looking for better shepherds, he would be the only shepherd anyone would need for he who would look after his sheep individually and draw them to himself without a human mediator. "My sheep know my voice," he said. "A stranger they simply will not follow." "There shall be one flock and one shepherd." (John 10:4, 5, 16, 27)

Why then do we have so many today who claim to be shepherds, and so many separate flocks divided up by their care? Aren't we missing something incredibly basic in this kingdom, that it was designed for only one shepherd. He can lead each of his sheep. Even the youngest among him know his voice, can understand what's true and what is a lie. He wants us to trust that.

But we don't.

We live in an age that is enamored with experts. That's not a bad thing if you need heart surgery, car repair, and or a house built. But Jesus offered us a kingdom without human experts a place where every son and daughter is directly linked to him. Why is it then that we fall into the trap of deferring to others, especially leadership, as having greater insight than the rest of the flock? Nowhere in Scripture are leaders or institutions made the test of sound doctrine, the managers of the body's ministry, or the final check on personal obedience. Quite the opposite, every time such things are needed, it is referred to the body itself, not its leadership.

Why? Because we are all connected to Jesus, the only expert in this kingdom.

While leaders are encouraged to teach only that which is sound doctrine, the proof of that is in the ears of the body of Christ. Are we hearing Jesus' voice in what is being said, or the voice of a stranger? Don't forget, every false teaching that emerged in the early church came from those who aspired to be leaders.

"Do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." The leaders in Galatia were pushing the body toward legalism so that they could boast in how well their flock looked. Paul said that their teachings bore no resemblance to the gospel and when he corrected it he didn't appeal to the leaders to kick out the false teachers, he appealed to the body to ignore their ravings.

When those who claimed to be leaders in Ephesus exalted themselves over the lives of others, John went

directly to the conscience of God's people. "You have an anointing from the Holy One," he said, "and all of you know the truth." (1 John 2:20-21) John didn't appeal to a church tribunal, to the leaders or even to his apostleship. He appealed to the fact that Jesus was able to make his truth known in each of those who were following him.

He knew what was coming. Diotrephes, one of their own elders, had decided he wanted to be first among the body able to decide who could and who couldn't have place in the body and would punish those who didn't follow his wishes. Hope for the body didn't lie in trusting their leaders, but in trusting the Spirit's voice in each of them.

Breeding Insensitivity

Instead of encouraging that sensitivity, however, leaders often end up undermining it. I knew a young man would share frequently during our worship gatherings. He seemed to have a heart for God, and there was often a nugget of truth in what he shared. Just as often, however, it was buried beneath a load of self-focus that made him appear harsh and his words confused. Every time he shared someone would tell me that they struggled with the content and character of his words.

Not wanting them to misjudge the brother, I would hear them out but try to convince them that they may not be seeing things clearly. They were letting his weaknesses prevent them from hearing what the Lord was speaking through him. Because he was recognized as a regular contributor to our services, I felt I had to defend him. I didn't realize it at the time but by doing so I was only training people to be insensitive to the Spirit. That 'anointing' had alerted them to be cautious about what they were hearing. They knew not to give it a lot of weight and instead of teaching them to trust that, I tried to get them to be more 'open,' clearly communicating that they weren't competent enough to judge such things.

Another time a couple came to me confused. They felt God had called them to give up some of their duties in the church to become more active in a civic organization where they had frequent opportunities to share the Lord with people who didn't know him. They had talked to their pastor who said they were being deceived. Their gifts were far more useful in the church than in a secular organization.

"What should we do? We don't want to be rebellious, but we feel God has called us to go." At the heart of their dilemma lay this question: who best hears the voice of Jesus for our lives, and how does Jesus want to communicate with his body?

This was 20 years ago and I have long regretted the answer I gave them. I told them they needed to trust the leadership God had placed over them and follow the counsel of their pastor. Even if he is wrong, I told them, God would honor them for obeying him and work things out well for them.

If I could remember who the couple was, I would hunt them down today and beg their forgiveness. At the

time certainly was caught up in the pervasive Bill Gothard mentality of the 70's that God had given us "coverings" in our lives to protect us from making mistakes.

What an absurd conclusion, however, to encourage anyone to defer to another person at the price of being disobedient to God. I can see this couple standing with God someday: "I really had a marvelous opportunity set up there for you to take my light into a dark place. Why didn't you go?"

"Wayne told us we shouldn't." I can hear them answer.

And how would God respond? "Oh, that's okay, then. If Wayne told you not to do what I wanted you to do, then of course he would know best." I don't think so!

Jesus alone is the only shepherd to guide and direct his sheep.

Why then Leaders?

Please understand that the vast majority of leaders I have known in the body of Christ have never wanted to hurt anyone, or take Jesus' place in their lives. But one of the pitfalls of assuming the place of a program manager in the body of Christ is to think your insight better than others who are not so employed.

What begins out of a desire to help people, can subtly become a means to press people to conform to the needs of the program. "We're just trying to help people here and we will be able to do that if everyone will just cooperate with us." Why should they? The reasons are varied, but all have in mind elevating some people above others. "We are better trained, more mature, closer to God, pray more, equipped with a special leadership 'anointing', hold a designated church 'office' or simply because they attend leadership meetings.

It's only a small jump from there to accuse people who don't follow the 'church program' designed by those with 'superior insight' to be closed, defensive, independent, rebellious or unsubmitted. And if they don't give in, they often get whispered about as those who have "stretched out their hands against God's anointed."

It is so easy to paint someone who is seeking to be true to the Lord's direction in them as arrogant. "Who are they to think they hear God better than all of us?" The Pharisees did it to Jesus and his disciples. Their modern-day counterparts still do it to those they cannot press to conformity.

When you hear or see such things being spoken, run as far as you can as fast as you can. Don't misunderstand. The people who do such things often do so with the best of intentions, trying to serve people the best way they can. But that's the problem. It's the best way that they see, and whenever we

remove from people their responsibility to hear and follow the Shepherd we do them a grave disservice no matter how well-intentioned our actions might be.

John calls this elevation of one believer's perspective over another as the spirit of the anti-Christ, because it works against Christ's presence in all of us. It creates a dependency on leaders and by doing so circumvents the very relationship Jesus wants with all of his sheep. Jesus never assigned the proof of his working to leadership. He came to be the shepherd to every member of his flock. This is so easy to forget amidst the way of our world that exalts coaches, managers, directors and even pastors. The role of leadership is not to manage the flock nor provide a buffer between people and Jesus, but to equip the flock to know Jesus better, hear him more clearly and follow him with greater courage.

As such true leaders in Christ's body will not burden the flock with obligations that serve the program needs of the fellowship, but will free them up to walk with the Living God. They will be excited to encourage them to follow what the Shepherd has spoken to them and support them in trusting his anointing in their lives. As such their ministry will not breed a persistent dependency on themselves or the church program, but on Father himself, through Jesus Christ.

That doesn't mean they can't be honest when they have legitimate concerns, but will not make judgments against the motives of people and punish them if they don't conform. They will know that the only way to learn to follow the shepherd is by freeing them to make their own choices, even allowing mistakes to be part of the learning process.

Freedom, not Anarchy

I know some reading this are about to jump through the roof, fearing this will only breed anarchy in the body of Christ, giving people an excuse to pursue their own desires and say they are being led by God.

Paul makes that exact point in the pastoral epistles. "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear." (2 Tim 4:3) But Paul does not even for that reason, inject human leaders as mediators between God and people.

For he knew that what we often do to protect against the abuse of those who are not really followers of Christ devours those who really are. The pressure to conform to a program and the invitation to be transformed by the life of Jesus are two very different things. The former will eventually produce only hurt and emptiness, the later is necessary to help believers embrace the presence of God in their lives.

People who really have a heart for God will not allow their discernment of Jesus' voice to breed greater independence. Quite the opposite.

Those who take the responsibility to be lead of the Spirit will become more diligent students of Scripture,

wanting to understand for themselves the ways and character of God. They will listen to teaching, read other books, but all the while listening for the familiar voice of the Shepherd. They simply will not follow the voice of an imposter.

People who know the voice of the shepherd, will realize the value of a fuller perspective that comes from being linked with other believers. In times of decision or need they will seek out the counsel of other believers, including those they might consider to be further down the road than they. But they won't just do what they are told, they will be listening for that ever-familiar voice of the one shepherd they have pledged to follow.

Finally, they will cooperate with other believers and leaders in the body, since they understand the gentleness of God's character.

But they will not allow any man or institution to drive a wedge between them and their dependence on Jesus and will turn away from those who try even at great personal cost. They know how seductive Jesus-surrogates are; how easily they have fallen in the past because it is far easier to follow a man or a program than it is to put their trust in Jesus directly.

This attitude is so critical for those who would grow in a trusting relationship with Father. It will transform them from being passive learners, who just hear sermons they mostly forget by Tuesday, into those who actively seek the presence and voice of Jesus in their own lives. They find him to be a Shepherd no man could duplicate and a certain refuge in the midst of every storm.

And I also think they get to hear God laugh with delight. For he loves nothing more than to reveal his treasures not to the wise, but to babes in the kingdom to you and me who simply want to love him with all our hearts. This is his good pleasure. It can be ours as well!

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