

Ministry to the Lord

by Watchman Nee

Watchman Nee emphasizes the importance of ministering directly to the Lord rather than merely serving the needs of the church or people.

Scripture: Ezekiel 44:15, Luke 17:7, Acts 13:2

Topics: "Ministry to God", "Spiritual Service"

Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the distinction between ministry to the House of the Lord and true ministry to the Lord Himself. He warns that many believers may be engaged in church activities and outreach without genuinely serving God, often driven by personal inclinations rather than divine direction. Nee highlights the importance of drawing near to God in solitude and waiting for His commands, rather than rushing into service based on human needs or good intentions. He calls for a deeper commitment to ministering to God, which involves offering our lives and efforts in a way that satisfies Him first. Ultimately, true ministry is about prioritizing God's desires over our own busyness and striving.

Transcript

Let us note at the outset that there is little apparent difference between ministry to the House of the Lord and ministry to the Lord Himself. Many of you are doing your utmost to help your brethren, and you are labouring to save sinners and administer the affairs of the church. But let me ask you: Have you been seeking to meet the need around you, or have you been seeking to serve the Lord? Is it your fellow men you have in view, or is it Him?

Let us be quite frank. Work for the Lord undoubtedly has its attractions for the flesh. You may be thrilled when crowds gather to hear you preach, and when numbers of souls are saved. If you have to stay at home, occupied from morning to night with mundane matters, then you think: How meaningless life as! How grand it would be if I could go out and serve the Lord! If only I were free to go around ministering! But that is not spirituality. That is merely a matter of natural preference. Oh, if only we could see that much of the work done for God is not really ministry at all! He, Himself, has told us that there was a class of Levites who busily served in the Temple, and yet they were not serving Him; they were merely serving the House. However, service to the Lord and service to the House appear so much alike that it is often difficult to differentiate between the two.

If an Israelite came along to the Temple and wanted to worship God, those Levites would come to his aid and help him offer his peace offering and his burnt offering. They would help him drag the sacrifice to the

altar, and they would slay it. Surely that was a grand work to be engaged in, reclaiming sinners and leading believers closer to the Lord! And God took account of the service of those Levites who helped men bring their peace offerings and their burnt offerings to the altar. Yet He said it was not ministry to Himself.

Brothers and sisters, there is a heavy burden on my heart that you might realise what God is after. He wants ministers who will minister to Him. "They shall come near to me to minister unto me; and they shall stand before me to offer unto me the fat and the blood. They shall minister unto me" (Ezekiel 44:15).

The thing I fear most is that many of you will go out and win sinners to the Lord and build up believers, without ministering to the Lord Himself. Much so-called service for Him is simply following our natural inclinations. We have such active dispositions that we cannot bear to stay at home, so we run around for our own relief. We may appear to be serving sinners, or serving believers, but all the while we are serving our own flesh.

I have a dear friend who is now with the Lord. One day, after we had a time of prayer together, we read this passage in Ezekiel (44:9-26, 28, 31). She was very much older than I, and she addressed me like this: "My young brother, it was twenty years ago that I first studied this passage of Scripture."

"How did you react to it?" I asked.

She replied: "As soon as I had finished reading it, I closed my Bible, and kneeling down before the Lord, I prayed: 'Lord, make me to be one who shall minister to You, not to the Temple.'" Can we also pray that prayer?

But what do we really mean when we talk of serving God or serving the Temple? Here is what the Word says:

But the priests, the Levites, the sons of Zadok, that kept the charge of my sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from me, they shall come near to me to minister unto me; and they shall stand before me to offer unto me the fat and the blood, saith the LORD God (Ezekiel 44:15).

The conditions basic to all ministry that can truly be called ministry to the Lord are drawing near to Him and standing before Him. But how hard we often find it to drag ourselves into His presence! We shrink from the solitude, and even when we do detach ourselves physically, our thoughts still keep wandering outside. Many of us can enjoy working among people, but how many of us can draw near to (God in the Holy of Holies? Yet it is only as we draw near to Him that we can minister to Him.

To come into the presence of God and kneel before Him for an hour demands all the strength we possess. We have to be violent to hold that ground. But everyone who serves the Lord knows the preciousness of such times, the sweetness of waking at midnight and spending an hour in prayer, or waking very early in the morning and getting up for an hour of prayer before the final sleep of the night.

Unless we really know what it is to draw near to God, we cannot know what it is to serve Him. It is impossible to stand afar off and still minister to Him. We cannot serve Him from a distance. There is only one place where ministry to Him is possible and that is in the Holy Place. In the outer court you approach the people; in the Holy Place you approach the Lord.

The passage we ' have quoted emphasises not only our need to draw near to God; it also speaks of standing before Him to minister. Today we always want to be moving on; we cannot stand still. There are,

so many things claiming our attention that we are perpetually on the go. We cannot stop for a moment.

But a spiritual person knows how to stand still. He can stand before God till God makes His will known. He can stand and await orders. You who are leaders need to particularly consider this. Can you be persuaded to call a halt and not move for a little while? That is what is referred to here: "stand and minister unto me." Don't you think that a servant should await his master's orders before seeking to serve him? The Sin of presumption

There are only two types of sin before God. One is the sin of refusing to obey when He issues orders. The other is the sin of going ahead when the Lord has not issued orders. The one is rebellion; the other is presumption. The one is not doing what the Lord has required; the other is doing what the Lord has not required. Learning to stand before the Lord deals with the sin of doing what the Lord has not commanded. Brothers and sisters, how much of the work you have done has been based on the clear command of the Lord? How much have you done because of His direct instructions? And how much have you done simply on the ground that the thing you did was a good thing to do? Let me tell you that nothing so damages the Lord's interests as a "good thing." "Good things" are the greatest hindrance to the accomplishment of His will. The moment we are faced with anything wicked or unclean, we immediately recognise it as something a Christian ought to avoid, and for that reason, things which are positively evil are nearly not such a menace to the Lord's purpose as good things.

You think: This thing would not be wrong, or That thing is the very best that could be done so you go ahead and take action without stopping to inquire if it is the will of God. We who are His children all know that we ought not to do anything evil, but we think that if only our conscience does not forbid a thing, or if a thing commends itself to us as positively good, that is reason enough to go ahead and do it.

'That thing you contemplate doing may be very good, but are you standing before the Lord awaiting His command regarding it? "They shall stand before me" involves halting in His presence and refusing to move till He issues His orders. That is what ministry to the Lord means.

In the outer court it is human need that governs. Just let someone come along to sacrifice an ox or a sheep, and there is work for you to do. But in the Holiest Place

there is utter solitude. Not a soul comes in. No brother or sister governs us here, nor does any committee determine our affairs. In the Holiest Place there is one authority only - the authority of the Lord. If He appoints me a task I, do it; if He appoints me no task, I do none.

But something is required of us as we stand before the Lord and minister to Him. We are required to offer Him "the fat and the blood." The blood answers the demands of His holiness and righteousness; the fat meets the requirements of His glory. The blood deals with the question of our sin; the fat deals with the question of His satisfaction. The blood removes all that belongs to the old creation; the fat brings in the new.

But such ministry is confined to a certain place: "They shall enter into my sanctuary, and they shall come near to my table to minister unto me, and they shall keep my charge" (Ezekiel 44:16). Ministry that is "unto me" is in the inner sanctuary, in the hidden place, not in the outer court, exposed to public view. People may think we are doing nothing, but service to God in the Holy Place far transcends service to the people in the outer court. Ministry Without Sweat

The same passage tells us how they must be clothed who would minister to the Lord:

They shall be clothed with linen garments; and no wool shall come upon them, while they minister in the gates of the inner court, and within. They shall have linen bonnets upon their heads, and shall have linen breeches upon their loins (Ezekiel 44:18).

Those who minister to the Lord may not wear wool. Why not? The reason is given:

"They shall not clothe themselves with anything that causes sweat" (verse 18 NKJV). No work that produces sweat is acceptable to the Lord. But what does "sweat" signify?

We all know that the first occasion when sweat is mentioned was when Adam was driven from the Garden of Eden. After Adam sinned, God pronounced this sentence upon him: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life...in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" (Genesis 3:19-19). It is clear that sweat is a condition of the curse. Because the curse rested on the ground, it ceased to yield its fruit without man's effort, and such effort produced sweat.

When the blessing of God is withheld, fleshly effort becomes necessary, and that causes sweat. All work that produces sweat is positively prohibited to those who minister to the Lord. Yet today what an expenditure of energy there is in work for Him! Few Christians can do any work today without sweating over it. Their work involves planning and scheming, exhorting and urging, and very much running around. It cannot be done without a great deal of fleshly zeal.

Nowadays, if there is no sweat there is no work. Before work for God can be undertaken, there is a great deal of rushing to and fro, making numerous contacts, having consultations and discussions, and finally getting the approval of various people before going ahead. As for waiting quietly in the presence of God and seeking His instructions, that is out of the question.

Yet in spiritual work, the one factor to be taken into account is God. He is the one

Person to make contact with. That is the preciousness of spiritual work that is truly spiritual-it is related to the Lord Himself. In relation to Him there is work to do, but it is work that produces no sweat.

If we have to advertise our ministry and use great effort to promote it, then it is obvious that it does not spring from prayer in the presence of God. If you really work in God's presence, men will respond when you come into their presence. You will not have to use endless means in order to help them. Spiritual work is God's work, and when God works, man does not need to expend so much effort that he sweats over it.

Let us in utter honesty examine ourselves before God today. Let us ask Him: "Am I serving You, or am I merely serving the work? Is my ministry truly unto you Lord, or is it only ministry to your House?" If you are pouring with sweat all the time, it is safe to conclude that it is the House you are serving, not the Lord. If all your busyness is related to human need, you may know that you are serving men, not God. I am not despising the work of slaying sacrifices at the altar. It is work for God and someone has to do it-but God wants something beyond that. The Sons of Zadok

God cannot secure everyone for service to Himself, for many of His own are reluctant to leave the thrill and excitement of the outer court. They are bent on serving the people. But what about us? Oh that today we might say to the Lord: "I am willing to forsake things, I am willing to forsake the work, I am willing to forsake the outer court and serve You in the inner sanctuary."

When God could find no way to bring all the Levites to the place of ministry to Himself, He chose the sons of Zadok from among them for this special service. Why did He select the sons of Zadok? Because when the children of Israel went astray, they recognised that the outer court had been irreparably corrupted, so they did not seek to preserve it. Instead, they made it their business to preserve the sanctity of the Holy Place.

Brothers and sisters, can you bear to let the external structure go, or must you persist in putting up a scaffolding to preserve it? It is the Holy Place that God is out to preserve—a place utterly set apart for Him. I beseech you before God to hear His call to for sake the outer court and devote yourself to His service in the Holy Place.

I love to read about the prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch: "As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Ghost said: Separate me Barnabas and Sau¹ for the work whereunto I have called them" (Acts 13:2). We see there that the Holy Spirit commissions men to the work as they are ministering to the Lord. Unless ministry to the Lord is the thing that governs us, the work will be in confusion.

God does not want volunteers for His work; He wants conscripts. He will not have you preaching the gospel just because you want to. The work of the Lord is suffering serious damage today at the hand of volunteers; it lacks those who can say as He did: "He that sent me..."

Brothers and sisters, the work of God is God's own work, and not work that you can take up at your pleasure. Neither churches, nor missionary societies, nor evangelistic bands can send men to work for God. The authority to commission men is not in the hands of men, but solely, in the hands of the Spirit of God.

Serving the Lord does not mean that we do not serve people, but it does mean that all service to people has service to the Lord as its basis. It is service Godward that urges us out manward. Luke 17:7-10 tells us clearly what the Lord is after. These are two kinds of work referred to here: ploughing the field and tending the flock. Both are very important occupations, yet the Lord says that when a servant returns from such work, he is expected to provide for his master's satisfaction before sitting down to enjoy his own food.

When we have returned from our toil in the field, we are apt to muse complacently on the much work we have accomplished. But the Lord will say, "Gird yourself and give me to eat." He requires ministry to Himself. We may have laboured in a wide field and cared for many sheep, but all our toil in the field and among the flock does not exempt us from ministry to the Lord's own personal satisfaction. That is our supreme task.

What are you really after? Is it only work in the field, preaching the gospel to the unsaved? Is it just tending the flock, caring for the needs of the saved? Or are we seeking to it that the Lord can eat to His full satisfaction and drink till His thirst is quenched? True, it is necessary for us also to eat and drink, but that cannot be till after the Lord is satisfied. We, too, must have our enjoyment, but that can never be until His joy is first made full.

Let us ask ourselves: Does our work minister to our satisfaction or to the Lord's? I fear that when we have worked for the Lord, we are often thoroughly satisfied before He is satisfied. We are often quite happy with our work when He has found no joy in it. Blessed are they who can differentiate between ministry to sinners or saints, and ministry to Him. Such discernment is not easily acquired. Often it is only by much drastic dealing that we learn the difference between ministry to the Lord Himself and ministry to the

House.

Let us seek the grace of God that He may reveal to us what it really means to minister to Him!

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