

Work, Work, Work (Rom 12:1–8) ZCC 7/21/13

1 Therefore I urge you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. 2 Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what is the good, well-pleasing, and perfect will of God. 3 For I say, through the grace that was given me, to every man who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think reasonably, as God has apportioned to each person a measure of faith. 4 For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members don't have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Having gifts differing according to the grace that was given to us, if prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of our faith; 7 or service, let us give ourselves to service; or he who teaches, to his teaching; 8 or he who exhorts, to his exhorting: he who gives, let him do it with liberality; he who rules, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. (World English Bible)

I'm going to try and follow the example of one of my favorite people this morning. I want to get a point across to each of you—but I don't want to preach. When Jesus was walking and talking in the flesh, he almost never preached—he taught, but he mostly told stories when he taught. Sometimes he used real life and true stories—sometimes he used parables to make his points. I want to follow his example today—but not with a parable because this is a true story. I think the story will help us understand Paul's point in today's passage much better than I can do it.

I have a story to tell you but the story is also an object lesson. Who knows what an object lesson is? [Wait for answer.] Right—you know, I was thinking this morning that this is the second object lesson in a row because—last week I brought hats and we talked about hats.

So I guess I need to have another object to show you today. I have one—in fact, I have several. Let me take a minute to hand them out. They are not all exactly the same but they all serve the same kind of purpose—so ignore the differences. As I hand them out, take a look and then pass them on to someone else. See if you know or can guess what these are—some of you won't have a clue what you are looking at and some of you will know exactly what these are and what they are used for. If you know, please don't tell the others. [pass out the keys and wait]

Years ago when I felt a sense of calling into ministry, one of my first “panic moments” came when I realized that I didn't fit any preconceived notion of a preacher that I could think of. In other words, I couldn't imagine God taking who I was and managing to squeeze me into the shape and style and the person of any preacher I ever knew.

My life experience and skills, who I was, didn't seem to fit in with the expectations I knew others would have and I wasn't even sure I could meet my own stereotypical understanding of what it meant to be a minister or pastor or preacher.

For some time I worried about that—but at some point I came to the conclusion that if God had wanted someone else, he would have called someone else.

With all that behind me, I began to embrace ministry based on who I already was. That includes lots of things—like having been a military cop and a commercial artist and a motorcycle rider and even being a mechanic and a handyman.

What that all means is that when I was a pastor, my “pastoral” work in the community involved a lot of different things. I've done emergency plumbing and helped figure the pitch of a roof and helped rebuild docks after a hurricane. I'd regularly get calls about computers and cars and even lawnmowers—from people in the church or community wanting to know if I could come help them. I guess you would say my ministry in Smyrna was the hands-on kind.

One summer, I got a lawnmower phone call—seems that there was a mystery of sorts. Mr Bell lived in New Hampshire or Maine or somewhere in the northeast but he still maintained his mother's house just down the road from me. In the Summer, he would come back veery couple of weeks and stay a few days—taking care of things like mowing the yard.

The mower was working fine a couple of weeks ago, he said, but now it just wouldn't go. Since I am a sucker for a mystery, I gathered up some tools and some jumper cables and I went to take a look. Algie told me he was going to the store for a few minutes, but that the mower was behind the house and I could start checking it out.

Well, I climbed aboard and turned the key—and I didn't need the jumper cables because it started just fine. So, I tried the levers—I clutched it and put the blades into gear and let out on the clutch and the blades turned just fine. Well, two things down and no problems in sight.

I pushed the clutch back in and put the gearshift into second and NOTHING happened. I pushed the clutch back in and let it back out. NOTHING. I put it into reverse. Nothing. I tried every gear and nothing happened. Funny—everything worked except it wouldn't go—just like Algie said. I guess if someone would push you you could have mowed the yard.

I picked up the front of the mower and set it up on concrete blocks where I could see the clutch assembly and everything was in order as far as I could see. I checked and rechecked the drive belt—but found that it was tight enough and turning properly—and it was. I triple checked—to make sure there wasn't a bad place on the belt but there wasn't.

It really was a mystery—so much so that I sat down and thought through the whole situation, detail by detail—and started checking system by system. Each and every part was working. The battery was good, it had plenty of power to turn the starter. All the safety switches were connected and the battery cables were tight. The starter was fine—from solenoid to bendix to motor. The key and switch were fine. There was oil and gas in the motor and when you turned the key, it started and ran just as well as ever. You could feel the levers working the linkage and the clutch was tightening the belt properly—and the belt itself was in pretty good shape.

I was really stumped. How did such a thing happen with no reason?

About that time, Mr. Bell got home and I asked him when it started to act up. I needed to know what was different now than before—one my rules for finding a mechanical problem is the ask the question, “what changed?”. “Well,” he said, “I had a flat tire and I took it off and took it up to Eddie-Bo’s and had it fixed and when I put the wheel back on, it wouldn’t pull itself any more.”

A little lightbulb suddenly appeared over my head and it wasn’t because I own a Ford. I pulled the little plastic caps off of the axles and had Algie get on the mower and start it up, put it in gear, and let out on the clutch. AHA! The left axle was turning and the wheel wasn’t. I pulled the wheel, went home and scrounged up a piece of key-stock and put it into the slot in the wheel and the matching slot in the axle—the keyways—and I put the clip back on the axle, put the cap on and went home.

Do you know what key-stock is? That is what you were just holding—well what I handed out is a bit different. Those are woodruff keys, but they serve the same purpose and work the same way as square key stock—I just couldn't find any square keys at the parts store yesterday.

The key fits in a slot—actually two slots. In this case, there was a slot in the hub of the wheel and a slot in the axle. The key-stock or key goes in each slot at the same time and transfers power from one piece to another. When Mr. Bell pulled the wheel to take it for repair, he didn't know there was a key and it got lost in the dirt or somewhere else along the way. When he put the wheel back on, he didn't know anything was missing.

Think about all the parts which were working perfectly—the pistons and the valves and the fuel lines and the muffler and the sparkplug and the coil and the levers and the key and the battery and all the wires and the tires and wheels and the transmission and the switches and so much more—literally thousands and thousands of parts—some of them worth hundreds of dollars—each one doing exactly what it was supposed to, and yet the mower was useless without that 80 cent piece of flat key-stock.

Let me re-read some of our scripture from before: Romans 12—beginning with the 4rd verse:
4 For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members don't have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Having gifts differing according to the grace that was given to us, if prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of our faith; 7 or service, let us give ourselves to service; or he who teaches, to his teaching; 8 or he who exhorts, to his exhorting: he who gives, let him do it with liberality; he who rules, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

All of my life I have heard people say that God didn't give them a talent or that God didn't give them abilities like he did other people. Clearly it is scriptural to say that we don't all have the same abilities—but then there are lots of jobs to do in the church—both the greater kingdom of God and in this specific church. I believe that God grants to every church the resources, in people and in funds, that are needed to do the work he has for them. God has given us and will give us what we need and who we need to do his work here and in the kingdom.

In order to do our work, it is imperative that each of us identify and utilize the specific talent or talents that God has given.

Algie Bell had a \$3000 mower—but couldn't mow his yard. The tires were up. The blades were sharp. The motor purred like a kitten. The steering wheel turned and the seat was soft and accommodating. Why wouldn't it go? [Wait for answer.]
That's right—it wouldn't go because of an 80-cent piece of keystick.

We all have abilities and talents God wants to use—they are different talents but important nonetheless. To compare the kingdom of God and this local church to Algie's mower—maybe you are a steering wheel. Maybe a gear-shift. Maybe a wheel or a tire. Maybe a blade. Maybe you are the motor—or maybe just a part of the motor like a crankshaft or a valve or another part.

Maybe you are none of those. I personally suspect that you have more talents and abilities than you think, but what if you really are a piece of key-stock? Does that make you unimportant?

God has put you here to meet a need or to do a piece of his work. If you don't, it may be that the whole lawnmower will be dead in the water until another key can be located.

Let me encourage you—if you are a member of this team—act like it and put your talent to work. If you are a Christian but not a member of this team, consider Zion—maybe God wants to put your talent to work here. We will be happy to put you to work, according to your gifts. If you are on the outside looking in, if you are not yet a child of God—then I would love to talk with you about that as we sing our closing hymn.