

## ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 8: KINGDOM PROFIT

Luke 19:11-27, Exodus 18:13-22 (NASB)

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Having a heart of service is central to an essential church. Christ came not to be served, but to serve, and sends us out to do the same. But what exactly is our status as bondslaves of Christ? Are we slaves who are abused until we die an early death? Are we the kind of servants who stand quietly in the corner until we are asked to bring the soup? Or are we servants like Joseph in Egypt who had charge over many things? Just how much initiative are we supposed to have in serving Christ? A story from the history of Alliance missions will shed some light on this question.

The Dani people of Papua Indonesia are distributed among the river valleys in the southern section of Papua. The Dani on the western and southern side began coming to Christ first in the middle of the last century. Whenever Gordon Larson and his fellow missionaries saw a response to the gospel among these stone-age tribal people they would set up a "witness school" to train leaders. The graduates of these schools were called "witness men," and they had a crucial role in the spread of the gospel among the tribes which had not yet heard of Christ.

Larson wanted to bring ten witness men from the Ilaga Valley on an evangelistic trip to the Northern Baliem Valley to preach Christ to a different segment of the Dani. The danger was that their party would be seen as a raiding party or spies, and be attacked. They started with forty people including wives and children, but the Dani leaders decided to send back to the village for an armed escort party. By the time the group was done filling out it was three hundred people carrying all of their food and supplies on their backs.

They first approached some Dani tribesmen living in the West Baliem, and they called across the river: "We have come to bring you the living words. Would you like to hear them? You are our relatives. We have not come to make war" (Russell T. Hitt, *Cannibal Valley*, Harrisburg: Christian Publications edition, 1962, p. 226). Larson and one of the witness men named Kaga-paki swam across the river and began to share Christ with them. Kaga-paki started with the creation and the fall of man, and covered the entire redemption story right through the gospels. The people listened with rapt attention until midnight, mostly because it was coming from one of their own, speaking their language, and using ideas with which they were familiar to communicate the eternal truth of Christ. But imagine how sloppy Kaga-paki's presentation must have been! He had only been a Christian for a few years, he was a graduate of a new and very basic discipleship training, and, after all, he was a stone-age guy! Not someone upon which we would normally base an important outreach today.

Larson and the witness men considered this a very positive beginning. They continued traveling until they reached their first stop in the Northern Baliem. Tiom was the base of ministry for Australian Baptist missionaries. Some three thousand Dani people attended the Sunday service there to hear the witness men speak. They then spoke in the village of Maaki, and then journeyed to their main destination at the Pyramid station. Alliance missionaries Henry Young and others greeted them and briefed them that the spiritual ground had already been plowed up to some extent. The Dani in that region had heard the remarkable stories of other Dani turning to Christ and burning their fetishes and

charms.

A crowd of more than five thousand arrived to hear the witness men speak. Ceremonial dancing and singing went on for hours. Finally the people sat down quietly to listen. Larson gave his witness men a final briefing and pep talk. And then the stone-age witness guys--the guys with pig's teeth in their noses, the guys with g-strings and cowry shell necklaces--preached the gospel of Jesus Christ at great length. The pile of charms and fetishes began to grow to huge proportions: magic stones, bows and arrows taken from enemies, pig tails, dried animal entrails, strings of beads, and anything that was used to influence the evil spirits. The mound of fetishes stretched seventy feet long, four feet wide, and two feet high. And then the witness men delivered the call: "Will you follow Jesus Christ and no other?" The Dani responded by lighting the mound on fire. Up toward heaven the smoke of their repentance rose, and the Northern Baliem Valley was never the same. While some missionaries feared that this people movement might be a temporary group event, the ongoing faith of these new Dani believers in the months and years to come proved the reality of what they had done (Hitt, pp. 224-233, *passim*).

## A MANDATE FOR KINGDOM PROFIT

These Alliance missionaries acted with sacrificial zeal on the knowledge that they had been given a mandate to bring profit to Christ's kingdom, and they passed that zeal to the tribal believers of Papua Indonesia. Jesus told a parable where he explained exactly what he expects from us in between his ascension into heaven and his return for his church. Luke records in 19:11 and following: **"Jesus went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately. So He said, 'A nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return. And he called ten of his slaves, and gave them ten minas and said to them, 'Do business with this until I come back.' But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.' When he returned, after receiving the kingdom, he ordered that these slaves, to whom he had given the money, be called to him so that he might know what business they had done. The first appeared, saying, 'Master, your mina has made ten minas more.' And he said to him, 'Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, you are to be in authority over ten cities.' The second came, saying, 'Your mina, master, has made five minas.' And he said to him also, 'And you are to be over five cities'"** (Luke 19:11b-19).

The master of these slaves considered them to be capable and treated them accordingly. Their ability to do his work was never in question. He gave them each a *mina*, which was worth about two or three months' wages--at least tens of thousands of our dollars. He then gave them a challenging mandate; **"Do business with this until I come back,"** meaning that they should use the money to make a profit for their master. They were treated as entrepreneurs--business people who would put the money to work to make a profit for the master who would return as a king.

The key to these slaves' position before their king was that they were commissioned with a combination of responsibility and authority. If someone put tens of thousands of dollars in your hands you would have an immediate sense of responsibility at least to preserve it. But the master went beyond that and gave them the additional responsibility of making a profit with the money by their own initiative. Notice carefully that he never said not to risk the money or do anything dangerous with it. That is because he also gave them delegated authority to trade for him. They were to use their own

wisdom and energy to make a profit for the kingdom with no micromanagement from above.

The first two of the slaves made a good profit, one at ten-to-one and the next at five-to-one. As Peter Drucker often wrote, gain occurs when a person with the ability to exploit a given opportunity meets that opportunity. Neither the opportunity alone nor the ability alone is enough. These first two slaves pleased their master, and their reward consisted of a quantum leap of both more responsibility and more authority. They had proved their worth and were granted to rule over cities for their king.

I do not think that the main issue in this parable is the difference in the size of the profit or the reward. The main contrast is between these faithful slaves and the third one, about which Luke wrote: **"Another came, saying, 'Master, here is your mina, which I kept put away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you, because you are an exacting man; you take up what you did not lay down and reap what you did not sow.' He said to him, 'By your own words I will judge you, you worthless slave. Did you know that I am an exacting man, taking up what I did not lay down and reaping what I did not sow? Then why did you not put my money in the bank, and having come, I would have collected it with interest?' Then he said to the bystanders, 'Take the mina away from him and give it to the one who has the ten minas.' And they said to him, 'Master, he has ten minas already.' 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more shall be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away'" (Luke 19:20-26).**

This slave did absolutely nothing with what the king gave him. He refused to surrender to the king's authority, he rejected his own responsibility to do what he was told, he excused himself by claiming to have been afraid, and he finished it all by condemning the king to his face. Pretty lousy slave!

To interpret the meaning of this behavior we need to know what the money represents in this parable. Jesus was speaking this against the Jews, so it refers to everything associated with the privilege of knowing God according to God's word. In the case of Christians it would have a special focus on the knowledge of the good news of redemption by grace through faith in Christ. Both Jews and Christians have been commanded by God, in their time, to put the word of God to work to make a profit for his kingdom. The unfaithful slave chose not to do that.

This is crucial to understanding how an essential church works. Each of us has been commissioned as a kind of spiritual entrepreneur. We all have a different knowledge of the word of God, different gifts, and different opportunities. Some of us will get a bigger profit—as God defines profit—for the kingdom than others, as the parable states. But notice that God does not say to the slave who made his one *mina* into five: "Well, you failed. You should have gotten ten like that other guy." On the contrary, the slave who made five is granted the same exact type of reward as the other, with a commensurate variation in extent.

We need to start the engine of kingdom profit with the unshakeable confidence of the Lord's blessing no matter how it turns out by human evaluation. Because the treasure we are given is the word of God, we cannot fail, as Isaiah spoke: **"So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; /It will not return to Me empty, /Without accomplishing what I desire, /And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it"** (Isaiah 55:11). Our guarantee of success is not based on our own human abilities or efforts.

## THE MINISTRY PLAN OF THE AGES

I think that most of us wish that a benevolent church hierarchy would set up a bunch of highly-managed successful programs, and then we could just plug in somewhere without a lot of fuss. We wish we did not have to think hard thoughts about what gifts we have been given and what our opportunities are to make a profit for the kingdom. Let's take the time to look at Old and New Testament evidences that God has always conferred both responsibility and authority to believing men and women to use in building his kingdom.

Moses ran into this issue when he first led the people of Israel out of Egypt. He knew the truth of God, he knew his responsibility to the people of God, and he labored to fulfill his responsibility—alone! The key event where Moses learned the principle that God always gives responsibility with authority is recorded in Exodus 18 beginning in verse 13: **"It came about the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening. Now when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, 'What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?' Moses said to his father-in-law, 'Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws.' Moses' father-in-law said to him, 'The thing that you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people's representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do. Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you'"** (Exodus 18:13-22).

I am aware that there are some Bible interpreters who think that what Moses did here was the beginning of the end for the people of God, that he listened to pagan advice and set up a false civil government which would eventually become their primary persecutor. My response to that is that Jethro, though of pagan birth, was Moses' father-in-law and most likely a believer in the God of Israel. Secondly, this plan for oversight was not civil government, but a ministry to the people of God. Thirdly, the plan was to give Moses both oversight of the other leaders and all of the hard cases. Fourthly, divine providence also works through human instruments, and we would assume that Moses would not have followed Jethro's advice if he did not think it came from the Lord.

But notice how the plan gave, in an organized fashion, both the responsibility to apply the word of God to particular cases and also the authority to do so in a carefully defined way. God would get the glory for leading his people every time Shlomo ben Judah or Moishe ben Simeon gave the life-giving truth to an Israelite in need of wisdom and guidance. What a tremendous profit this plan brought to the people of God—at least to the extent that the leaders were faithful to do it! God's word is among our greatest treasures, bringing salvation, life, and health to our souls.

Jesus did exactly this with his disciples. First he sent out the twelve with the responsibility to preach the gospel and the authority to do miracles. Then he sent the seventy in the same way to prove that this pattern was not only for apostles. Then, in the Great Commission, he sent us all out with the responsibility to make disciples with the word of God and the authority which comes from his all-surpassing power resident in our souls.

What gifts has God given you? You have the word of God, one spiritual gift or more, and your human giftings, abilities, and resources. These things are worth more than you know. He has given you the responsibility to communicate the good news of Christ. And he has given you the authority to go and do it with his blessing and power. The twelve and the seventy whom Christ sent out were commissioned with tremendous freedom. You have that as well.

Essential churches move forward not primarily by human central command and organizational resources, but by individual disciples and groups who move out on their responsibility to make profit. They do so on the explicit authority of Jesus Christ and under the guidance of human leaders God has appointed. So do not wait for the perfect church program to come along to give you the excuse to avoid your responsibility to make profit for the kingdom. If you are a genuine believer in Jesus Christ with new life in him you already have what God is giving.

If you are a leader, do not use the excuse that you cannot move out because you don't have the good people that you need. Gordon Larson and his fellow missionaries had recent converts from stone-age tribal life to work with! He could have said: "This is hopeless!" He could have quit when it came to pass that his planned trip to share Christ with other tribes ended up as a moving mass of three hundred people with baskets and pigs.

I am moved by the simple obedience of the witness man Kaga-paki. Under the instruction of faithful missionaries, this man became the instrument of a gospel flame which swept across the Baliem Valley, consuming the idolatries in many hearts as it burned.

We may not have the same kind of opportunity as he did, but we have the same Jesus. The leaders of our church will indeed set up various programs to assist us in the work of the gospel. But the programs are genuinely hopeless without believers who will accept their responsibility and authority to make profit for the kingdom. Look carefully for the opportunities God provides! If Kaga-Paki can do it, so can we because the wisdom and power come from the throne room of God.

Perhaps the greatest privilege anyone can experience on this earth is to choose simple faithfulness to Christ and discover that, in the process, we have become instruments in the hands of the living God. You are offered that privilege. Go, make a profit. It's essential.