

## Thank God for Those Who Serve by Serving Him!

A sermon based on James 1:17-25

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Here we are, the middle of October. I can't believe you forgot...again. I thought maybe this was the week you'd do something...after all, the entire month of October is devoted to it (well, so, I guess there's still a couple of weeks left.)

You know what I'm talking about? Breast cancer awareness, certainly worthwhile and a great cause to advocate during this month. But I'm talking about something a little less familiar...clergy appreciation. October has been deemed clergy/pastor/priest appreciation month...and not by me. Did you know that?

Now, wouldn't it be something if you were watching football, and instead of the pink cleats, hats, gloves, towels the players were wearing, they had on clerical collars...or instead of having the national anthem playing and the huge American flag in the center of the field, they had this flag and played the anthem of heaven...maybe a hymn like Amazing Grace or, even better, in my opinion, Jerusalem the Golden?

That's maybe a little overboard. But for one reason or another, they (don't know who) decided clergy needed their own appreciation month and chose October for that. The reality, though, as one pastor wrote in *Forward in Christ* a couple of years ago, is that the effort hasn't really caught on in our circles—largely, he imagined, because the people who usually promote new things in our churches are pastors and those close to them. And, well...they might be suspected of having a vested interest in encouraging this particular one.

Whether churches celebrate this or not, the truth is ministry (and not just for pastors but for anyone who's serving the Lord and his church; the word ministry, at its heart, means "service")...ministry is often a thankless job. I mean, when's the last time you went up to the organist or pianist, for instance, after worship and thanked him/her? When's the last time you sent your pastor or one of the Council members an email or a handwritten card telling them you appreciate the work they're doing to serve you, to build up this congregation, to encourage your faith in Jesus? Have you ever thought to go to the ladies who typically clean up after a potluck and say, "You know, you've done great work helping out here. I'm glad for that. Let me take over for today"? Again, ministry's a largely thankless job.

And on the behalf of those who serve, we're ok with that...in our hearts, we understand the motivation for ministry is not the accolades or the praise. A couple of weeks ago, we talked about our duty to God, and as those who serve God, at the end of the day, we ultimately want nothing more than to be able to lay our heads on our pillows and simply say, "God, we are your unworthy servants; we have only done our duty."

But does that mean you shouldn't/don't need to thank them? Or somehow show your appreciation for them? In our first lesson, do you remember what God said about those who are involved in the work of the gospel – teaching it, sharing it, living it? ***"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation."*** Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:17 – ***"The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor,***

***especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.***” And I’d contend that would apply not just to pastors or elders but to all ministers of the gospel, again, anyone who’s serving the Lord and his church.

So, how can we thank our pastor...our called workers...all those workers, called positions or not, who are serving the Lord? The answer’s simple. Serve God.

If you look through our verses today, you see James primarily focuses on that, us serving God. This is a great sanctification text, with encouragements to be ***“quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry...to get rid of moral filth and evil.”***

And then we come to the jewel, the heart of this section, ***“Do not merely listen to the word [of God], and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”*** In other words, as our sermon theme today puts forth, thank God for those who serve by listening to what they say. Thank God for those who serve by doing what they say. Thank God for those who serve by serving him.

You know, gifts are nice. Thank you cards are encouraging. But what those who serve God want more than anything else is for you to see their examples, listen to their words (God’s Word), and then to actually, simply do what that Word says. No thank you or encouragement can top that.

So, how well have you done thanking God for those who serve?

Recently, another pastor pointed me to this religious news website, Babylon Bee. It’s kind of like *The Onion*, if you’ve ever heard of that...puts out these comical, satirical articles poking fun at things that are happening in the religious world today. Anyways, not too long ago, I came across an article entitled, “10 Simple Ways You Can Encourage Your Pastor,” because, of course, as the article points out, ***“the lofty expectations and burdensome demands upon the pastor of a local church can be overwhelming at times. Here are ten easy things you can do...to let him know that you care.”*** Here’s a few of them:

**Call his sermon a “speech.”** This is a really easy way to encourage your pastor, and it won’t take much effort on your part. Just a quick, “Great speech, brother” can lift a pastor’s spirits in no time.

**Make sure he knows you would be volunteering more if literally everything else weren’t more important to you.** Every time you decline to serve the church in even the smallest way, tell the pastor that literally everything else is more important. Soccer games, the latest Nicholas Sparks movie, laundry day, or even just general apathy—a man of God loves hearing that all these things and more always take precedence over the body of Christ.

**Drop the F-bomb.** A pastor who’s been trying to disciple you and guide you in your life of sanctification for any number of years will surely be delighted to hear you drop the incidental F-bomb. Or, if you’re not ready for this big of a step, any of the more common profanities will do.

**Write him an anonymous critical letter.** There’s nothing more encouraging to a pastor who’s battling personal demons and fending off thoughts of depression and anxiety and failure than a scathing rebuke you won’t even sign your name to.

**Make sure he knows he’s not John Piper....or maybe, there’s some other pastor you’ve know or have heard preach before who was just awesome, dynamic, and you wish your pastor was more like that, and you don’t have a problem telling him.** The article even suggests, “It’s really helpful to your pastor if

you use phrases like, **“You’re no Pastor \_\_\_\_\_, but that was still a pretty good speech”** for double the encouragement.

**Conk out in the front row.** Pastors never feel more like a shepherd than when their flock is resting peacefully, especially when he’s right in the middle of an impassioned plea for attendees to repent and believe the gospel. Make sure to snore loudly to encourage those around you as well.

**Just tell him he’s worthless.** If all else fails, just bluntly telling your pastor he doesn’t mean anything to you and his years of study and faithful service don’t matter in the slightest will surely see his faith in God skyrocket.

You know, a lot of those are said tongue in cheek, some of them you would never fathom doing. But even just this small sample size, there’s some truth to that, isn’t there? But even more than that, it highlights the issue, doesn’t it?

The child who just learned in Sunday School how God wants us to show love to those around us, then during church starts hitting or scratching her brother. The sermon is preached on the dangers of gossip, and immediately after the service, you hustle over to your good friend to catch up on the latest news, the latest rumors. The pastor who encourages sanctification, serving God and his church, and the Council member’s plea for help at the next church work day falls upon deaf ears.

That thanklessness for those who serve God, it shows, doesn’t it, in the lack of reverence for God’s Word and for what the entire gospel ministry is all about, using the gospel, the awesome message of Christ crucified for sinners – you and me – using the gospel to encourage, equip, motivate, enable you to serve God and do what it says. Friends, I include myself there, too.

It’s like the picture James gives in verse 23. When we hear God’s Word and don’t do what it says, it’s like looking at ourselves in the mirror, and then, as soon as we walk away, we forget what we saw. Here in worship, in God’s Word, we see ourselves as believers, children of God...we hear how we live. But then, how quickly do we forget by not doing what God’s Word says? How easily are we deceived by the trap of Satan? How thankful are we for those who serve God? More importantly, how much thanks are we really giving to God when we don’t do what he says?

And for our thanklessness, for the many times we don’t do what God’s Word says, here’s what James tells us, ***“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth.”***

Every good and perfect gift...and that’s not your pastor. You know some of my imperfections. I know many more. No, his greatest and most perfect gift to us from heaven is salvation.

The gift is Jesus, who did not merely listen to the Word; he did what it says. Read through the Gospels sometime and see just how many times Jesus told his followers and others what God’s plan for him was, to go to Jerusalem, to suffer, to die, to rise. Often, he would start out by saying, ***“As it is written...”*** Jesus knew the prophecies. He knew they were talking about him. And he did what they said...from him living the perfect and righteous life in the place of us who couldn’t...to the sacrifice he made of himself at the cross, where his blood purified us from every sin...to his resurrection, where he definitively defeated death, our final enemy. It’s all there, written about him in God’s Word...and Jesus did it all.

Friends, this salvation is a reality because it comes from God the Father, ***“who does not change like shifting shadows.”*** You see, when the sun moves, it produces shadows that are constantly shifting and changing. God the Father, however, never changes. Therefore his good giving and his perfect gift of salvation through Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection...that never changes.

And of course, whenever you get a gift, what do you do? As Mom reminded you, probably a thousand times when you were younger, you say thank you. So, how can we thank God for his perfect gift of salvation? James here tell us. He calls for a sanctified life which always finds its basis and motivation in the precious gospel message of God’s gifts to us.

In other words, we don’t just listen to the Word; we gladly and eagerly do what it says. When we do the Word, our lives are a demonstration of the true saving faith in our hearts, for we’re doing the works that please God, just as Paul reminds us in the book of Ephesians, ***“We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”***

And, going one step further, how can we thank God for those who serve him and who share his Word? Now, I’m sure you can agree, maybe there’s a little uncomfotability talking about this. It’s hard to stand up here and in more or less words tell you that you should be thankful for me and others who serve God here in his church. It’s hard not to come across as conceited and egotistical. And I’m sorry if that’s the impression I’ve given you. That’s not my intent.

But it’s good to think about why your pastor or other servants of the gospel are here....to share the Word, to encourage you to do the Word, to be an example of doing the Word for you.

And here are a few simple ways to appreciate them. Pray for them. Thank them. Encourage them. And finally, listen to them. Join them. Do what they say (or rather, what God’s Word says). Serve God.

Friends, that’s not hard. This is the very exercise of sanctification, our joyful response to God for his gift of salvation, his gift of Jesus, his gift of his Word, his gift of servants for his church.

If you don’t ever remember or celebrate October as clergy appreciation month, my feelings won’t be hurt. Cards are fine. Encouragements are nice. What I would really want (what any servant here would want), are for servants, who simply are glad and eager to do what God’s Word says and to serve him. No thank-you, no word of encouragement could ever top that. And by the grace of God, we can and we will join together to do just that...to thank God. Amen.