

September 28, 2008

Acts 20:32-35 / Galatians 6:6 / Luke 8:1-3

Luke (#35) - Depending on God's Provision Through People

Sometimes, when we read the Bible, or the New Testament, and consider the life and ministry of Jesus, or how Jesus went about organizing or getting support for Himself and His disciples as He carried out His ministry, we can have the tendency to over-spiritualize things in our minds.

That is, we can tend to think that because Jesus was divine, He dispensed with all the normal, earthly, mundane type of things we would have to deal with — like finding donors who would fund the cost of His ministry, and then having to appoint someone who would oversee those funds as they were dispersed to purchase supplies, and food, and possibly pay for lodging on those nights when the weather was inclement.

Our mental picture of the way Jesus did ministry is often more in keeping with "Bewitched" or "Sabrina the Teenage Witch," where every need is met by a snap of the fingers or wiggle of the nose and things simply appear out of nowhere.

No food for the night? No problem — Jesus just snaps His fingers and "whala!" — a meal appears on the table for Him and His twelve disciples. / Without lodging for the night when it starts to rain? "Whala!" — Jesus snaps His fingers and they are standing in an Inn or a fully erected tent, with pillows and blankets and all.

No need to carry or buy supplies, haul around clothes and blankets, or pay someone to wash them. None of that time consuming, mundane kind stuff that everyone else has to attend to.

It's all magically unnecessary we sometimes think, since Jesus is Lord and can simply call it into being out of nothing to spare Himself and His disciples of the hassle!

Believe me, I've talked to many people who perceive that was the way it was!

A supernatural way of doing ministry, devoid of planning and budgeting and funds raising and having someone in charge of those funds and all other burdensome type of earthly responsibilities that everybody else on earth has to do — even when serving the Lord who promises to supply all our needs.

You see, if that is what you imagined, I need to point out from this passage (and for your own good) that that was not the case! That's more of a Hollywood understanding (or an overly spiritualized understanding) that finds little, if any, support in the Bible at all — though it is a trap many Christians often fall prey to!

What we learn from today's passage (thanks to Luke and his accurate historical retelling of the life and ministry of Jesus) is that Jesus had an extensive donor base to cover the financial expenses of His ministry!

He and His disciples were doing ministry pretty much full time, and therefore could not work to support themselves as they traveled here and there; and needed food and occasional lodging; and the normal replacement of things such as sandals or clothes or other supplies — all of which cost money.

And what we learn from verses 2-3 is that there were many women — well-to-do women like Mary Magdalene, and Joanna the wife of Cuza (who would have made a good income as manager of Herod's household), and Susanna, and many others — who helped support Jesus and His disciples *"out of their own means,"* as the text tells us.

Like many full time evangelists and missionaries and pastors ever since, Jesus Himself had a pool of well-to-do donors (apparently all female) who supported His ministry financially on a regular basis.

And because he had donors who gave regularly to support the ministry, He also needed to have someone to be in charge of the funds that were donated — a "treasurer" or a "keeper of the money bag" as he was called in John 12:6. His name was Judas Iscariot, the disciple who eventually betrayed Him.

In John 12:6, after reading that Judas complains that the ointment Mary poured on Jesus feet and wiped with her hair was "worth a years wages," and could have been "sold and the money given to the poor," we are told:

*"He (Judas) did not say this because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief. As keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it."*

Likewise, John also records for us that when Jesus (at the Last Supper) says to Judas, "What you are about to do, do quickly," the other disciples didn't understand what Jesus meant. And John tells us why:

*"Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor."*

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You see, Jesus didn't simply snap His fingers and create food, or a new set of clothes or pair of sandals out of nowhere! He sent them to a shop to buy them with some of the funds that had been given by these women for that very purpose!

That's what we're told in John 4:8. There we read that Jesus is alone at Jacob's Well when the Samaritan woman comes along. Why is He alone? John tells us: "*His disciples had gone into town to buy food*" — Judas, who was in charge of the funds, carrying the money bag.

You see, when it came to the supply of daily needs Jesus didn't simply snap His fingers (Hollywood style) and make it magically appear out of nowhere. He didn't save His disciples the inconvenience of walking into an unfamiliar town, locating the local vegetable or meat market, picking out the food, bartering for the best price, and waiting in line at the cash register (just kidding of course!).

No. They used some of their donated funds / carried the food back to where they had decided to set up camp / choose someone prepare and cook the food / picked someone else gather kindling firewood and make the fire / and then someone else to clean up after the meal — maybe even washing the plates and utensils they probably carried around with them!

In other words, they didn't live in this spiritual cocoon where they were spared of all the mundane, earthly and normal tasks and responsibilities that such a life or ministry would require. If that's what you perceived, then you have the wrong picture!

Though able to do anything He wanted Jesus chose not to! He chose to live life as everyone else had to live it — with all the time-consuming inconveniences and chores and hassles and delegation of responsibilities and distractions from ministry that thirteen men traveling around the countryside would invariably bring!

If we don't see that, we can easily fall prey to the dangers of over-spiritualizing.

It was a lesson I learned early in my Christian walk — within a few months of my conversion, as a matter of fact. I had one particular man (in the Dominican Republic program with me) who so divided life in spiritual and unspiritual tasks, that he didn't last long in the program.

What do I mean? I mean that he felt that because he had signed on to be a "missionary," and therefore do "spiritual ministry," he shouldn't have to do the mundane everyday type of things, like:

Making out a weekly schedule, or filling out the monthly progress reports on the kids (which were very time-consuming and no one liked doing but had to do anyway)! / Like tallying up the points the kids had earned at the end of each day or keeping track of the house budget with the inevitable hassle of balancing the books (before we had computer programs to do the task for us).

He had the view I spoke of at the beginning — The view that Jesus and the disciples never had to do any of that type of stuff, and therefore neither should he. He perceived that they simply walked around and prayed and taught and healed and preached and did “spiritual stuff” all the time, never bothered or distracted by the mundane realities of life.

Realities that included: Having to secure a donor base, and keep track of purchasing supplies, or keeping His donors abreast of how they were spending donated funds and on what.

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So, are we clear on that? Good! Because I'd like to move on from all that to point out two other things we need to see from these 3 short verses that will help us in our spiritual walk.

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And the **FIRST** is that over-spiritualizing or dividing the tasks of life up into “spiritual” and “non-spiritual” or sacred and non-sacred (or secular) categories is unbiblical, dangerous to our Christian maturity, our sense of responsibility, and our view of reality. What the Christian is to do is NOT to separate out certain tasks or responsibilities of life into the category of spiritual and thus focus solely on them, and separate others into the category of secular or non-spiritual and thus avoid or slack off on them.

That's not the Christian way! What I believe the New Testament teaches, and Jesus advocates by His life and style of ministry, is that we must seek to bring the presence of God to bear on ALL the affairs and duties of life — even the most mundane, earthy and sometimes burdensome tasks of life.

Speaking of something as seemingly “unspiritual” as eating a piece of meat or drinking a glass of wine, or anything else, Paul tells us (in 1 Cor. 10:31): *“So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do (that is regardless of what it is!) do it all for the glory of God.”*

And in that context he goes on to tell them *“Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.”* He did what he did because his goal was to do what Christ did!

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It's a theme Paul speaks of repeatedly, believing he is “following the example of Christ.” In the letter to the Colossians 3:17 he tells all the believers at Colossae: *“And whatever you do,*

*whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus...*" That is, in the way Jesus would do it, for the reason Jesus would do it — for God's glory.

And again in Eph. 3:7, speaking of doing any type of service for others, menial or otherwise, he says: "*Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is a slave or free.*"

When he says, "*whether he is slave or free,*" he's referring to the tasks one HAS to do or MUST do because they are a **SLAVE** — like their daily job and menial tasks, like cleaning the master's horse stalls, or shinning the kitchen floor, or organizing his master's household affairs, or washing his or her master's clothes by hand, etc., etc., etc. / And the tasks that **FREE MEN or WOMEN** do (as opposed to slaves) are tasks that don't necessarily have to be done because they are voluntary in nature, and the person is free to do them or not do them.

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You see, the task of the Christian (according to the Bible) is not to exclude God from the more ordinary, mundane, everyday tasks of life, and include Him when we sense the tasks are spiritual in nature (that's the mindset Luther and the Reformers rightly attacked as being totally unscriptural)! All of life is sacred if it is lived for God and to His glory, even if it's something as menial as changing a diaper or doing chores around the house!

We are to do EVERYTHING, not just SOME THINGS, to the glory of God—even the things we'd prefer not to have to do! And we are to see our responsibility to do them or opportunity to do them as a chance to honor God by the way we do them, and the attitude (or heart condition) we have when we do them.

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One of the reasons many houses built during the Puritan times (way back in the 16 and 1700's) are still standing in New England, while more recent ones are falling apart, is because they believed (as opposed to most people today) that their chief end was to glorify God, and not simply to make a living or make a big profit.

And that was true whether you were the local carpenter, blacksmith, stone mason, soap maker, weaver, farmer, barrel maker, silversmith or housewife.

If your "job" was making baskets or harvesting corn or building furniture you did it to the glory of God. If your daily duties included cleaning the outhouse or whitewashing a fence or doing dishes or darning socks or taking out the trash or helping raise a neighbors barn, you did it all to the glory of God! You did it all "as if you were doing it for Jesus Himself."

And though comparatively few still think in those terms today, it is biblical and the admonition has not changed! We are still to *“do everything as unto the Lord.” “Whether we eat or drink or do anything else, we are (still) to do it all to the glory of God.”*

So, whether it be the more “mundane” tasks of life or the more “spiritual” tasks of life, it doesn’t matter. That’s a false distinction! They are all opportunities to glorify God. It’s not spiritual vs. unspiritual, or sacred vs. secular. Everything in life becomes spiritual or sacred (that is, it becomes sanctified) when it is done “as unto the Lord,” or “for the glory of God.”

Make that meal and do those dishes and change that diaper and care for that pet “to the glory of God.” / Take out that trash and clean that garage and mow that lawn and greet that neighbor and make that bed and fix that sink or leaky roof — “to the glory of God.”

I recall my mother, on occasion, telling to me that viewing things that way made the mundane tasks of life less mundane. She’d say how it helped her to remind herself that she was, cleaning that toilet” or “making that bed as if she were doing it for Jesus.” “She picked up the house” or “cooked each meal” and “weeded the gardens out front” as unto the Lord.

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**Do you?** Do you see your job or chores or responsibilities as a drudgery or an opportunity to glorify God? Because just that one little change in perspective will change your whole attitude toward what you do! It will.

When you do your job, or speak of your boss, or witness to your co-worker, or drive in your car, or answer the phone, or spend time alone, or prepare for whatever ministry you do, or love your spouse and children —

Do you do it as if you were doing it for Jesus Himself? / Do you keep in mind that through it you have an opportunity to please God and bring honor to Jesus or glory to Him by the way you do it and the attitude you do it with?

That’s the way we need to look at everything -- not as mundane tasks, but as opportunities to glorify Jesus. And then imagine, friends, how different this world would be if every Christian actually did that!

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Then **LAST**, in keeping with my sermon title, I need to point out that although God is able to do anything — including create money out of nowhere or provide manna from heaven, he chooses

most often to supply our needs, or ministry needs through people whom He touches to give out of the abundance of what He's given them. In the Jewish society of that day, there wasn't much (ministry-wise) that women were allowed to do. Yet the one thing these well-to-do women could do was give to Jesus from their abundance. Actually the verse could be translated: "These women were in a position to minister to them from their own possessions or resources." Their wealth put them in a position to be able to minister to the Lord out of their excess.

The well known English evangelists of the First Great Awakening, George Whitefield and John Wesley both had the same primary donor — Lady Huntington. She gave of her immense inherited wealth to support them, and pay the expenses they incurred while traveling, and preaching — expenses like paying the cost of Whitefield's voyage to America, his food, lodging, the cost of printing of tracts and sermons and other incidentals as well.

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And it's not just a ministry for women. Some men (and especially capable business men) have been given the ministry of serving the Lord simply by giving to Him out of the abundance of their financial resources.

I've mentioned before that the owner of Quaker Oats gave 10% of all his company profits to the support of various Christian ministries. And R. G. Letourneau, who was one of the most respected of all American business men, and of whom it was said, "There is hardly any phase of the vast (construction) industry that has not benefited and advanced through the products of Mr. Letourneau's inventive genius," gave 90% of his income to the Lord's work (and we're talking millions upon millions of dollars). "Why should I live on 90% and only give back to the Lord a mere 10%, when it's all His anyway?" was His reasoning.

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You see, it is true that "***God own the cattle on a thousand hills,***" as the Psalmist says. In fact, everything that exists was created by Him and belongs to Him. But the way that God provides (most commonly) is NOT by having things drop from the sky! Rather, He gifts people with certain abilities and competencies, blesses their efforts, and then calls them to provide for His work out of the abundance He's blessed them with!

He entrusts the "everything" that He owns into the hands of earthly stewards whom He then calls to distribute His funds for the furtherance of His work and the support of various ministries. In fact, it is odd to think about it — but the Jesus "by whom," and "for whom," everything was created; the One who Himself owns the cattle on a thousand hillsides, humbled Himself and by taking on a

flesh and blood human body and being born in likeness as a man, condescended to live off the charity of others.

He has gone on record for all time and eternity, as being One whose earthly needs and ministry needs were met by the generosity of these well-to-do women, "Who ministered to them (that is, both Jesus and His disciples) out of their own resources or possessions."

It's amazing when you think about it: Jesus loves and gives and then condescends to receive back as a gift that which He first placed in their hands!

That's the Christian view of possessions. It all belongs to God! That's one of the differences between Christian and non-Christian. We've come to admit that and they still don't. We're nothing but stewards to whom He's given oversight of His things, to be distributed as He desires! So when He asks us to put aside a portion of His wealth for the support of something He wants done, it's our opportunity to please and honor Him by doing it.

It's true. And what's even more amazing is this: Even though it's all His anyway, He still takes great delight when we take and offer it up to Him.

It's sort of like my twins. They're nine, and right up until last year Nancy and I would give them money out of our own pockets to go out and buy us a Father's or Mother's Day present; a Birthday or Christmas present.

Why? We wanted them to have the joy of giving even though we gave them the money they used to buy us those things!

Did we appreciate the gift any less because we had given them the money to buy them for us? No! It was still brought delight to our hearts to open the gifts that they bought, and see their smiles and sense of anticipation on their faces as we did. It's never failed to touch our hearts deeply, even though we paid for our own presents!!!!

And the same is true for God. EVERYTHING we have comes from Him. There's NOTHING we give to Him that has not first come from His hand!

Yet it still pleases Him when we do! He takes great joy and great delight in receiving our gifts; He receives them gladly, even though He's the One who placed in our hands or hearts both the desire and means to do so.