

17. No competing ego

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Competition is good. It excites the ones who are in the competition as well as those who watch. We see this in all sports games. The winner gets to have a bragging right until the next competition and the losers will have a good motivation to do better next time.

Like everything else, there is a down side of competition, especially in Christianity. Because the nature of competition centers around the individual or team competitor's capability without anyone else supplying all the knowledge, strength, and strategy, bragging about one's accomplishment in ministries shows nothing more than one's ego which is absolutely wrong.

In Christianity, every good thing we do and have comes from the Lord. So, if we must boast, we must boast about our God and His goodness and kindness that give us life, wisdom, and willingness to do His work.

Competing ego in Christianity is not only a self-made trap, but also it becomes poison for oneself as well as those who are around that person. It has no place in ministry. Easy to say it, but extremely difficult to control.

In our last study, having fellowship with the Gentiles was a new experience for Peter and these Jewish Christians, who all their lives had looked on the Gentiles as pagans, low life, and below their class.

The Lord had to remove their ego from the ministry equation through three things – accepting others, encouraging others, and receiving help from others.

A. ACCEPTING OTHERS

Acts 11:1-18 Soon the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. 2 But when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, some of the Jewish believers criticized him. 3 "You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!" they said. 4 Then Peter told them exactly what had happened. 5 "One day in Joppa," he said, "while I was praying, I went into a trance and saw a vision. Something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners from the sky. And it came right down to me. 6 When I looked inside the sheet, I saw all sorts of small animals, wild animals, reptiles, and birds that we are not allowed to eat. 7 And I heard a voice say, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.' 8 "'Never, Lord,' I replied. 'I have never eaten anything forbidden by our Jewish laws.' 9 "But the voice from heaven came again, 'If God says something is acceptable, don't say it isn't.' 10 "This happened three times before the sheet and all it contained was pulled back up to heaven. 11 Just then three men who had been sent from Caesarea arrived at the house where I was staying. 12 The Holy Spirit told me to go with them and not to worry about their being Gentiles. These six brothers here accompanied me, and we soon arrived at the home of the man who had sent for us. 13 He told us how an angel had appeared to him in his home and had told him, 'Send messengers to Joppa to find Simon Peter. 14 He will tell you how you and all your household will be saved!' 15 "Well, I began telling them the Good News, but just as I was getting started, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as he fell on us at the beginning. 16 Then I thought of the Lord's words when

he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 And since God gave these Gentiles the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to argue?" 18 When the others heard this, all their objections were answered and they began praising God. They said, "God has also given the Gentiles the privilege of turning from sin and receiving eternal life."

No sooner had Peter returned to Jerusalem, he was confronted by these strong legalistic members of the Jerusalem church for his fellowship with the Gentiles. Please keep in mind that these Jewish believers did not yet understand the relationship between Law and grace, Jews and Gentiles, and Israel and the church.

Most Christians today understand these truths, because we have the Books of Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Hebrews in our Bible to show us. There were many converted priests in the church who still would be zealous for the Law, and even the ordinary Jewish believer would have a difficult time making the transition like Peter did originally. It was not only a matter of religion, but also of culture and custom; and cultural habits are very hard to break.

Ego brings forth elitism. Its definition is "consciousness of or pride in belonging to a select or favored group." The concept of the chosen people by God portrayed wrongly in the mind of the Jewish people. They thought that they were chosen because they were special to God. But in reality God chose the nation of Israel to be the people through whom Jesus Christ would be born – the Savior from sin and death. Jesus had to come from some nation of people, and God chose Israel.

This spiritual elitism still is very much alive in Christianity – believers against unbelievers, one Christian denomination against the other, and one church against the other for whatever the reasons they may have, etc.

Anyone with legalistic mindset has a tendency to have elitism. In their mind, everyone should do exactly what they do, otherwise they are not as spiritual as they are. And they also presume that since they don't do the things as they do, God couldn't possibly love them as much as He loves them and favors them. What a twisted mindset that is!

Ego and elitism incubate spiritual competition. What was the one thing Jesus' disciples had in common before the Lord was crucified? Wanting to be the greatest among them so that they could be served. Here is what Jesus told them:

Matthew 20:25-28 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, " You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. 26 Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. 27 And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave -- 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many ."

Jesus did not denounce their desire to be the greatest in the kingdom of God, actually He showed them how by washing their feet and serving them. It is very difficult to wash other people's feet while we keep ourselves on top of a pedestal.

B. ENCOURAGING OTHERS

Acts 11:19-26 Meanwhile, the believers who had fled from Jerusalem during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the Good News, but only to Jews. 20

However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. 21 The power of the Lord was upon them, and large numbers of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord. 22 When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw this proof of God's favor, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord. 24 Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And large numbers of people were brought to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to find Saul. 26 When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching great numbers of people. (It was there at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.)

Antioch, the capital of Syria was located 300 miles north of Jerusalem. Don't confuse this city with other Antiochs. There were at least sixteen Antiochs in the ancient world not even including Antioch in Northern California. But this one was the greatest.

A busy port and a center for luxury and culture. And it also was a wicked city, perhaps second only to Corinth with idol worship and immorality. When the persecuted believers arrived in Antioch from Jerusalem, they did not at all feel intimidated by the magnificence of the buildings or the pride of the citizens. The Word of God was on their lips and the hand of God was on their witness, and "a great number" of sinners repented and believed. I am sure that it was a thrilling work of God's wonderful grace.

Christians often underestimate the raw, even explosive power of the Gospel message. *Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.*

The Gospel message, the Good News can reach every type of person. It doesn't matter what their background is. They may be wealthy, poor, educated, or uneducated. It cuts through cultural barriers, racial barriers, economic barriers, and age barriers. Everyone can grasp the Gospel, because God honors and blesses it and somehow drives it into the heart of the listener.

We make a mistake when we think we need to add on to the Gospel or take away from it or apologize for it. No. We need to proclaim His Gospel truth as is in love and stand back and watch God move.

I just love this guy Barnabas – the son of encouragement. Without hesitation he enlisted Saul from Tarsus to teach these Gentiles in Antioch. Why? Because he remembered that God called Saul to be the apostle of the Gentiles.

Why did Paul and Barnabas experience such pleasure in serving together? No competition. No battle of egos. No one threatened by the other's gifts. No hidden agendas. No unresolved conflicts. Their single-minded goal was to magnify Christ. It didn't matter if the crowds multiplied to thousands or shrank to only a few. All that mattered was that Christ be proclaimed and worshiped. Living in the culture of the success of the individual church is only measured by the sheer number of the congregation, how much do we need to remember this?!?!?

C. RECEIVING HELP FROM OTHERS

Acts 11:27-30 During this time, some prophets traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them named Agabus stood up in one of the meetings to predict by the Spirit that a great famine was coming upon the entire Roman world. (This was fulfilled during the reign of Claudius.) 29 So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they could. 30 This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem.

Since the Jerusalem church shared its people, like the original Christians who came to Antioch as well as Barnabas and Saul with the followers of Christ in Antioch, it is the only right thing for those Christians to help out the Jerusalem believers as they were about to face a massive famine.

Galatians 6:6 Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.

Can you imagine how difficult for these Jewish believers to receive financial gifts from the Gentile believers when they used to think less of them? Eating humble pie is really, really good for removing ego and it becomes a great starting point of true fellowship in Christ. It is a beautiful demonstration of love and a wonderful testimony of unity.

I am going to put this thought in a little different note: After you serve others in whatever way the Lord chose to use you to bless others, when those who were blessed show appreciation by thanking you, please don't say, "Ah, it is the Lord. I don't deserve it." Just say, "Thank you, praise the Lord," and leave at that. Because we all know that it is the Lord who chooses to use you to bless others and brings glory to Himself. In other words, we are His tools. Anything more than that becomes a humble brag.

I saw an example of humble brag in internet sometime ago:
"Your inflatable inner-tube is way cooler than my 80-foot yacht. You get to be so much closer to the water and to nature. I envy you, I really do."

D. APPLICATION

Sincerely thinking of others is still the best formula for a happy and useful Christian life, both for individuals and for churches.