

"To Minister in the Name of the LORD"

You might have noticed that this section of Deuteronomy addresses the three main offices in the Old Testament of prophet, priest, and king. The last passage we studied in Deuteronomy addressed the office of king. Later in this chapter the office of prophet is addressed. Today we consider the office of priest.

There's several different sorts of applications that jump out to me as I read over a passage like this. And so here's how I'd like to tackle this passage for today. First I want to do an initial survey of what's being described in this passage. Then I quickly want to get into three different applications that can be drawn from this passage. The applications that we'll address are this. First, an application to supporting the ministry of the church. Second, an application to the universal priesthood of all believers; we're all priests essentially in the new covenant. Third, an application to our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. Essentially that final application will point us to the gospel in light of this passage. So we should have lots of application in today's sermon.

But let's begin with a summary of this passage. Basically this passage tells us right away that the Levites have no inheritance among their fellow brothers in Israel. That's verses 1-2. Of course, what this is talking about is that they don't have an *earthly* inheritance. The other tribes will all get an allotment of land when they settle into the Promised Land. The tribe of Levi will not. And so this is something that distinguishes the Levites from all their brother Israelites. They have no inheritance among their brothers. Of course, land at that time, represented your livelihood. If you didn't have land of your own, there was a good chance you'd go hungry. Your land is where you'd grow crops and raise livestock. No land could mean for you no food.

But God had a way to solve for this. You see, the passage tells us that the Levites actually did have an inheritance. Verse 2 tells us what that is. The LORD was their inheritance. And so they didn't have an inheritance like their brothers, but they did have an inheritance. Now at first, we could understand that this gets at what their job would be. They'd be dedicated to serving God in the tabernacle. But for the LORD to be their inheritance is more than just the fact that they get to serve and experience God in this capacity. God is saying that he himself is their inheritance. That's a rather deep idea to say that God is your inheritance. You could spend a lot of meditating on what all the entails. But certainly one thing this entails is this: It's God's way of saying that what is God's is theirs. What belongs to God, essentially belongs to them, as God's provision for them. They share in the things of God, because God is their inheritance.

This then explains the next few verses. God basically describes how the people's sacrifices are to benefit the Levites. Remember that the sacrifices and offerings are ultimately offered to God. The people are giving these really first to God. But since the Levites' inheritance is the LORD, then that explains why they get to benefit from these sacrifices and offerings. The offerings are given to God, and the Levites get to share in what's given to God. Why? Because the LORD is their inheritance. What belongs to God is shared with them.

And so notice that the sacrifice described in verse 3 doesn't seem to refer to the tithe. In the tithe, all of the animal would have gone to the Levites. But this appears to refer to one of the several other offerings described in Leviticus

besides the tithe, such as the freewill offering, for example. And so in these other sacrifices, certain parts of the animals were to be given to the priests who perform the sacrifice as their portion. The fat in such offerings was to be burned for the LORD; but then the rest was to be for the person and family giving the offering. This is a helpful reminder that God called the people to support the Levites not only through the regular tithe but also through other offerings as well.

We see more of the provisions for the Levites described in verse 4. Here you've got listed a number of other things that are to be offered to God by the people as well. And these things in turn are to be given to the Levites. Again, their inheritance is the LORD, and so they share in the things offered to God. Notice that it lists the "firstfruits." The first of the grain. The first of the wine. The first of the oil. The first of the fleece from the sheep. Realize the priority here. Before you use these things for any other purpose, you offer the first amounts to God. You don't offer to God whatever is left at the end. You offer to God from the firstfruits. That's another important principle that's here, and God's saying that it's his intended way to provide for the care of the Levites' needs.

Of course, all of this provision for the priests and Levites is a sort of compensation for them. That's what the passage goes on to essentially describe. You see, the rest of the Israelites have land to go and work and produce. The Levites do not. But they still have a job. Look at verse 5. They "stand" before the LORD. They serve in the name of the LORD. This what the priests do. In verse 7 it says the same thing about what all the Levites do. The Levites have a job. They serve God at the holy place of his choosing; the place where the tabernacle was; the place where the sacrifices and offerings are to be brought. There were various functions of service to be done in this capacity, not just dealing with sacrifices and offerings. For example, this included a very important teaching role. Passages like Deuteronomy 33:10 and Leviticus 10:11 make it clear that the Levites were to be teachers as well; teaching people about the laws of the covenant. And so the sense you get as you read this passage is that they are involved in full time ministry; they are the ones performing the ministry of the LORD's work, in a way that the rest of the people did not. And so here God provides a sort of compensation for their service.

We see this flushed out even in the last three verses. It describes a Levite who hadn't been serving in the temple, who had been sojourning throughout the rest of Israel, and he decides that he wants to go the tabernacle and begin serving. Verse 7 says he's not to be turned away. Any Levite who wants to serve has that privilege. But verse 8 says that they should get the same equal portion as every other Levite, regardless of what he already brings with him when he starts serving. The translation in verse 8 says "besides what comes from the sale of his inheritance." The word "inheritance" here might be a bit confusing since the rest of the passage says he didn't have an inheritance in the land. But the word is actually different in verse 8. It's literally referring to what his fathers' owned; whatever wealth that happened to come into his family over time. It's a bit of a generic statement.

But the point is that these Levites who move to the tabernacle and begin their service are to get the same amount as all the other Levites. This is regardless of whether or not they come with a bunch of other personal assets, no matter how they acquired those. This is reinforcing the principle that this is God's way to compensate the Levites for their service. It's not just charity to be given to the Levites; you could see that might be a false line of thinking for some people. No, this was God's way to basically pay them for their service in the temple. Their

payment wasn't to be based on their needs, but on their service. They didn't get less, just because they already had a large amount of wealth from the past. Their compensation was to be the same fair amount every other Levite received. Verse 3 talks about this being their due; literally their legal right. This wasn't charity, it was God's way of giving them a just compensation for the service they provided.

Alright. Well, that's a summary of this passage. Let's move on to focus on these three points of application for today. First, this passage has a clear call for us today to support the ministry of the church. We are called to support the church, even financially. Now obviously this applies a lot to the ministers who get their livelihood from the church. Now yes, pastors shouldn't see their service as just a job. They should see it as a ministry. And yet, we do pay our pastors. It's not supposed to be charity when we give them a salary. It is to compensate for their work. It's to support them and provide for them as they focus full time on the work of church ministry.

Now, to be very clear, pastors are not to be considered exclusively as priests. The Catholic Church calls their clergy as priests. But my title is not priest. The reason why is actually going to be discussed in our second point of application in a few minutes. But basically, it's because all Christians are priests under the new covenant. That includes pastors, but also includes every lay Christian. And yet we can't help but realize that there are people, such as pastors, who serve full time in the ministry of the church. The way the offerings supported the priests in the Old Testament becomes the analogy given in the New Testament for how the church ought to support its full time ministers of the Word.

An example of this is seen in Philippians chapter 4. There Paul thanks the Philippian church for their recent financial contribution to support his work. Paul calls that contribution "a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God" (Philippians 4:18). In other words, Paul uses this idea from the Old Testament that the sacrifices supported the priestly ministry, and he applies it to the financial support of pastors. Paul brings home this exact application in Corinthians 9, which we read earlier in the service. He calls it the "right" of those who preach the gospel. This is reminiscent of the language here in verse 3 of the priest's "due." And so this passage talks about supporting the ministry of the church. That includes the pastors and full time workers of the church. But also includes supporting all the different aspects of the church's ministry that require resources to operate.

Now I think it's helpful to notice here in Deuteronomy all the different types of gifts that were given to support the priestly ministry. You have animal sacrifices, various firstfruits, fleece from sheep, etc. We of course live in a different culture. But by extension, realize that there are different ways you can give in today's age and culture as well. Obviously the straight forward one is to make a simple cash donation. But there are other ways you can give as well. You can make what's called "in-kind" giving. That's where you donate various goods or services that are of benefit to the ministry. Like you can donate bread for communion. Sometimes people donate things like cars that are then sold for the proceeds. Others donate of their professional services in different ways that would otherwise be something they'd charge for. You can even get creative and donate in a sense by investing in the OPC Loan Fund. Instead of putting money in say a CD or bond, you might consider contributing to a note with the OPC loan fund. There you get a reasonable return on your investment while at the same time you are helping churches acquire church properties. In a similar way, the PCA denomination has the ability to buy charitable annuities that support worldwide missions. So in other words, you can be creative in today's day and age in finding different ways

to support the ministry of the church. There are a number of ways we can bring our tithes and offerings to the church to support it's work.

The point about the firstfruits here has an obvious application to this, that we should set this support as a priority. We should set the support of the ministry of the church as a first priority in how we use our money and resources. By the way, this is a bit of a difficult thing to teach on as a pastor. I can't help but feel a bit self-serving as I make this first application point. And yet, as a minister I need to teach you what God's Word teaches, as the Word raises the points.

But let me add one specific thing here about supporting the ministry of the church. If you're keeping a close tab on our church's finances, you'll see that frankly we have some serious financial concerns right now. We are spending more money each month than what we are taking in. But the point is, we really need to pray that God will send more people to support the ministry of this church here in Novato. I didn't think I could preach a sermon on this topic, and not mention that we have a real serious need before us as this point. Please pray that God would grow us. But then also pray that God would show us how to reach out to this community; and then let's each be faithful to do that. To actually reach out to this community; inviting people to church; telling them the gospel; praying for them, and evangelizing to them. I am confident God has a purpose for us to be here, and I'm thankful for all the ways he continues to support us.

Let's move on to our second point of application now. This passage has an application to the universal priesthood of all believers. 1 Peter 2:9 says that Christians are a royal priesthood. It is correct to tell people as a Christian that you are a priest. Each of us in the Lord; we are all priests. This passage makes it clear that the Levites weren't like their brothers. They didn't have the same inheritance. But it wasn't like that was a bad thing. It wasn't like the Levites should long to be like the rest of the Israelites. Actually, it was the other way around. God would have the rest of the Israelites long to be like the Levites. Exodus 19:5 actually gave that hope to Israel. It talked about the nation ultimately becoming one day a kingdom of priests. That's what the New Testament church is. We are each priests in God's kingdom.

Well, what does it mean to be a priest? Well, it means a lot of things, including our free access to God in prayer, for example. But using the language in this passage, it means we stand before the Lord and serve in his name. Every Christian has the privilege to serve God. And all our service is done in the name of Christ. In other words, we all participate in the ministry of the church, even as lay believers. It's not just the pastors or elders who do the ministry of the church. Every Christian is a priest and so every one of us has the high calling of such service. But there are a number of ways that we can serve God. And so this is a call to all Christians, to participate in serving God. And remember that verse 6 says that no Levite should be turned away that wants to serve. This is the same for Christians as well. No one should be turned away who wants to serve in the church. Now this doesn't mean that everyone is suited to every job in the church. The New Testament makes it clear that there are different parts of the body, with different gifts from the Spirit. Not everyone, for example, is called to be an ordained minister of the Word. Neither does everyone have gifts of administration, for example. But there should be a place for every Christian to serve in the ministry of the church.

If we are all priests, then ultimately we each have the same sort of inheritance described here for the Levites. Their inheritance is the LORD. As Christians, part of our universal priesthood means that we too have the LORD as our

inheritance. What does that mean for us? Well, it means we have access to God and the things of God. It means we can draw near to God and come into his very presence. It means that God has given us of himself - isn't that what the pouring out of the Holy Spirit represents? Yes. God gives us a deposit of our inheritance by sending his own Spirit to live inside us. It's a foretaste of living forever together with God in heaven. As Christians who are priests, the LORD is our inheritance as well.

And so for the LORD to be our inheritance means that God is giving us of himself; including of all the things that belong to him. This includes heavenly treasure as we hear about in the Bible. But it isn't only heavenly treasure that he gives to us. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills. It's no burden to God to share with us either spiritual or physical treasures. So when God provides for our physical needs, even say through the diaconal ministry of the church, that's part of how God shares even now with what is his. Saints give to the church and the church gives to those in its midst who have need. We get to participate in that giving, but also at times participate in the receiving of such diaconal aid. That's why God calls us to work hard so that we might have something to share with others, Ephesians 4:28.

So that's a little bit about how this passage applies to the universal priesthood of all believers. The last application I want to make is about how this relates to our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. Really, all the application we've made so far hinges on this final application. Christ has become our Great High Priest. The book of Hebrews makes the case that he did that in a way that's greater than the Levitical priesthood, quoting Psalm 110. I won't go into the details of that right now, except to say that this means that every Levite and priest in the Old Testament was a servant of the greater priesthood of Jesus. That was true then, and certainly true about our ministry and priesthood now. We serve Christ our Great High Priest. We are in service to him. The ministry of the church is an ambassador of Christ. That's what pastors do for example, in their ministry, they are ambassadors for Christ. The work and service of each believer is done in the name of Christ, our Great High Priest. God has made us all in some sense like the Levites in their priesthood, he's made all the brothers like the Levites as priests; but together he has made us all like our older brother, Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest.

Of course, in the Old Testament priests could only serve because they were first sanctified by animal sacrifices. They had to first be consecrated unto this holy service to the Lord. You can read about that in Leviticus 8. Well, this is true for us as well. The only way we as Christians have become priests is that we were consecrated by a sacrifice. That happened through the blood of Jesus. Jesus' blood sanctifies us for the holy work of the priesthood.

And yet think about this. Christ is revealed in Scripture as both the priest and the sacrifice. He is both the Great High Priest and the one great sacrifice. That's a pretty important difference between himself and all the priests of old. These priests of old benefited from the people bringing a sacrifice. They got to share in the benefits of the sacrifice. But God knows that the people could never really bring a sufficient sacrifice. We could never really give a sacrifice worthy to atone for all our sins. And so God had Jesus as priest give himself as the sacrifice. Instead of us giving a sacrifice that Christ gets to share in as priest, Christ as priest gives himself as the sacrifice and we the people get to share in that. Christ reverses the direction here. He as priest sacrifices himself and shares the benefits of that with us; us who are the very people who should have been giving the sacrifice. But on our own we had no sufficient sacrifice to give. And so God instead has Christ offer himself for our benefit.

Brothers and sisters, this is the gospel. We should have provided the sacrifice to deal with our problem of sin. But what could we bring that could make things right? Instead Christ as priest gave to us of himself. Christ gave the most precious sacrifice of all, the eternal Son of God come in the flesh. That's a sacrifice more precious than bulls and goats, or even any mere man who might want to sacrifice his life. Christ did this to share with us his inheritance: the LORD. Through Christ, through his priestly offering up of himself, we have been cleansed. Our sin has been atoned for. We now share in the sacrifice. We eat of the sacrifice. Isn't that what we do today? We take communion today, realizing that we eat of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ? We who should have gave to the priest, are instead given to instead by the priest. This is the love of Christ for us. It means our salvation. It means that we now have the LORD as our inheritance. It means that we now have been given the status of priests of God. It means we now can serve in the name of the LORD standing in his presence. Pastors and elders lead us in this, but we all together serve Christ in his name.

Saints, keep this in mind as you serve Christ. Keep in mind your true inheritance. Keep in mind your true treasure. If our true treasure is the LORD, how can we hold back in serving him? How can we hold back even of our earthly wealth and talents? May we pray that God would grant us hearts that are eager to serve him with all our money, with all our time, and with all our talents. Pray that we'd see how we can serve him at our jobs where we provide for our family. Pray that we'd see how we can serve him at our homes where we care for our children. Pray that we'd see how we can serve him in our relationship with others as we treat one another in all purity and love. Pray that we'd see how we can serve him even through the church and its gospel work. Pray that we'd serve him by daily attending to the spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible study. Pray that we'd serve him by zealously attending the worship services of the church. Pray that we'd serve him by a passion for partaking in the Sacraments. Pray that we'd serve him by being intentional in our fellowship with one another; looking in all our conversations to be teaching one another about God from his Holy Word. We have been made priests. Each of us are called to be involved in the ministry of Christ. Let's find our delight in standing up and serving in the great name of Jesus. Amen.

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