

Title: Royal Priesthood
Text: 1 Peter 2:9-10
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Several churches in a country town decided to hold an ecumenical service. The leader was a Baptist and proud of his denomination.

"How many Baptists are here?" he asked as everyone sat down in their pew.

All except one little old lady raised their hands.

"And what denomination are you?" asked the leader.

"Well I'm an Anglican," meekly replied the lady.

"Why are you a Anglican?" queried the leader.

"Well," replied the little old lady, "my grandparents were Anglican, my mother was an Anglican, and my late husband was an Anglican."

"Well," retorted the leader, "just supposing all your relatives had been morons, what would that have made you?"

"Oh, I see. A Baptist, I suppose," the lady replied meekly.

Now all you Baptists out there – and there are a few of you – don't get upset! We have a potpourri of denominational backgrounds represented here. Here at Newlife our heritage is Uniting Church, but the truth is that more than our denominational stripe; we are simply one part of the church of Jesus Christ. In Him, we are one, big, happy – sometimes dysfunctional – family. The church is not a place we go, or a denominational label we wear; in the end:

The church is a people gathered and then scattered by Jesus, engaged in his mission for his glory.

A wonderful Anglican evangelist, J John, says this:

When we stop going to church and start being the church, something wonderful happens.
(J. John)

Last week we began our new series called Engage. Over four weeks we are exploring four biblical images for the church, each which challenges the distorted images we often stubbornly cling to. Last week we explore the passage where Peter describes the church as Spiritual House. Here is a summary of what we discovered:

The church is a Spiritual House shaped and formed by Christ the Cornerstone,
that finds its life in Christ the Living Stone,
and which is complete only in Christ the Capstone.

Peter goes on to say that in this Spiritual House members of the church make spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God. Last week I said that:

A spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God is any thought, word or action offered to God in response to, and through the sacrifice of Jesus.

So the church is a Spiritual House in and through which we make spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.

Today we are going to read just two more verses from 1 Peter 2. They happen to be two of my favorite verses in the bible:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

(1 Peter 2:9-10)

One after the other Peter applies four Old Testament descriptions for Israel to the church. The church is:

A Chosen People
A Royal Priesthood
A Holy Nation
God's Special Possession

These are huge claims! Peter is effectively saying that the church of Jesus Christ is both the continuation, and the fulfillment of the mission and mandate given to the ancient Israelites.

Just as Israel was blessed to be a blessing, the church is blessed to be a blessing.

As Israel was called to be a light to the nations, the church is called to shine the light of Christ.

There is so much in these four phrases, but I want to focus on just one claim of Peter; that the church is a Royal Priesthood, and what this actually means practically.

Right now, here in Australia, to be called a 'priest' (or a pastor, or a minister for that matter) is to hold a dubious and uncertain honor. Every year the Readers Digest publishes the survey results of Australia's most trustworthy professions.

Right at the top you have:

Firefighters
Paramedics
Rescue volunteers
Nurses
Doctors

Makes sense. You want to trust those people. But the list continues in descending order, with air traffic controllers, police, farmers, scientists, cleaners, builders, plumbers, mechanics—even accountants – until we get to number 37, which are airport baggage handlers.

Then at coming in at the 38th most trusted profession in Australia, we have clergy. At least we beat lawyers, sex workers and politicians.

When Peter says the church is a royal priesthood, he didn't have in mind our modern categories of professional church workers. He was actually evoking an Old Testament vision that never really became a reality, but now was through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Let me explain.

Soon after, through Moses, God led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, the people found themselves in the Sinai wilderness. There, God addressed them with some remarkable promises. In Exodus 19, God says to Israel:

Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.
(Exodus 19:5-6)

God promises Israel that they are, and always will be his special people – a kingdom of priests, every person.

But this vision was never fully realized, as the promise was predicated with a condition that Israel failed to meet:

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

(Exodus 19:5-6)

Israel repeatedly failed to obey God, turning to idols, and the vision of a whole nation of priests with a special relationship with God, fulfilling a special mission for God was never fully realized. Instead, God set apart Aaron, his family and his descendants to be priests, and they became the mediators – the go-betweens – between a Holy God and an unholy, sinful people. It was only the priests – who could make sacrifices and offerings to God on behalf of the people. Aaron and his family were of the tribe of Levi. So instead of a whole nation of priests, Israel was served by the one part of one of the 12 tribes of Israel who God allowed to be priests.

The good news of the gospel is that the vision of a kingdom of priests that was only ever partially realized through Israel was, and is fully realized through Jesus Christ and his church. In Revelation we read this:

(Jesus) has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests.
(Revelation 1:5-6)

What Israel could not do, what we could not do – obey the law of God – Jesus did fully, completely and perfectly on our behalf. Having done so with his life, in his death he then made the perfect sacrifice – absorbing into himself all of our rebellion, all of our sin, all of our shame and all of our guilt. Through faith in that perfect sacrifice, God sees his perfection as our perfection, we exchange our unrighteousness for his righteousness.

And so the promise of the Old Covenant is fulfilled in the New Covenant as God establishes a kingdom of priests.

The Hebrew word that is translated as priest in Exodus 19:6, and throughout the Old Testament is:

Kohen

Kohen is translated in various ways as worker, friend, minister and so on.

At its roots, kohen means something like ‘princely servant’.

If you are a follower of Jesus, you are a princely servant that combines exalted privilege and a servant’s role. In one of the earliest songs sung in the church, Paul says:

God exalted him (Jesus) to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.
(Philippians 2:9)

Jesus is the risen conquering king of kings and lord of lords, at whose name one day every knee will bow and tongue confess. Jesus is heaven’s royalty and through faith in him we share in his exaltation.

We are princes and princesses of Eternity’s King.

His exaltation is our exaltation!

His inheritance is our inheritance!

His honor is our honor!

His glory is our glory!

There is more royalty in this room than all the palaces on the planet!

But Jesus is also the Servant King. In Matthew’s gospel we read:

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.
(Matthew 20:28)

Jesus came with a servants towel and a saviors Cross.

The writer of Hebrews says this of Jesus:

Unlike the other high priests, (Jesus) does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when **he offered himself**.
(Hebrews 7:27)

So what does it mean for the church to be a Royal Priesthood?

The church is a Royal Priesthood made up of Princely Servants whose life is found in, modeled on and empowered by the Servant King.

Like Jesus and through Jesus, we offer ourselves as living sacrifices. Daily we lay down our lives and daily we take up our Cross as we die to self in order to live for him.

So, what does Royal Priesthood service look like? For my remaining time I want to explore just that.

Service begins with Rest

It seems counterintuitive, but before we serve God wants us to stop; before we work he wants us to rest. Let me explain.

Jess Lipsett started work last week as a Lawyer. Her timing was impeccable, because the third scheduled day of work was the Ekka show holiday in Brisbane. Public holiday in your first week of work – Win!

But there is one couple that has did even better than Jess.

In Genesis we are given an account of the first humans – Adam and Eve. In the Creation account, God forms them on the sixth and final day of Creation. And then this happens the next day:

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.
(Genesis 2:2)

Mark Connor makes the observation that Adam and Eve's first day on the planet was a Sabbath; a day they observed God rest, and presumably, participated in that rest. On the next day their work began, as they named the animals and tended God's garden. But before they worked, before they served – they rested.

There is a rhythm to our working and resting woven by God into creation; we rest before we work. In fact, we work out of our rest.

Before we breathe out...we breathe in.

Of course it all went pear shaped for Adam and Eve and for us when they sinned, and the rhythm of rest and then work was shattered. Because of the curse of sin, work that had been fulfilling was now sweaty toil, painful, tiring and never ending. The rest – the peace – the shalom - that Adam and Eve had enjoyed with God was lost.

History tells the story of man's desperate attempts to rediscover the Rest we lost in the Garden. But it what was lost was never found – not fully.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus makes this beautiful offer:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.
(Matthew 11:28-29)

The rest we lost in the Garden of Eden, Jesus offers us through the Garden of Gethsemane.

Before we work, we rest – we rest in the work that only Jesus could do; the work he accomplished on the Cross.

And so before we breathe out we breathe in. Before we can truly give, we first must receive.

Having by faith breathed in God’s mercy, we now breathe out mercy.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had the privilege of working to tend - to steward God’s creation.

In Jesus Christ, our privilege is to join in God’s work of restoring his creation.

As I said last week, Jesus did not save us so we can sit around on our blessed assurance waiting for the day we receive our one way ticket to heaven and a harp.

While we can never be saved by our good works; we are saved for good works. Dallas Willard puts it this way:

Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.
(Dallas Willard)

We don’t just breathe in; we must breathe out. Too many Christians are doing the spiritual equivalent of holding their breath. They breathe in and bask in God’s mercy, love and forgiveness, but they haven’t learned to breathe out what they have breathed in through simple acts of service. Bob Goff, one of the speakers at this year’s GLS, says this:

Service begins with rest.

Service becomes Catalytic

(EXPERIMENT)

A couple of weeks ago I shared with you this diagram. It comes from a survey we use in this church called Reveal. Reveal tracks the discipleship journey, which starts here as we begin to explore the claims of Christianity:

“I believe in God, but I am not sure about Christ. My faith is not a significant part of my life.”

Once we make a decision to follow Jesus, we step into this next phase of Growing in Christ:

“I believe in Jesus and am working on what it means to get to know him.”

As we continue to grow by God’s grace, we continue the journey becoming Close to Christ and then Christ Centered, where:

“My relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship in my life. It guides everything I do.”

Of course the discipleship journey is not as straightforward and linear as this. It is full of fits and starts, time when we leap forward and other times when we feel stuck.

Here’s the interesting thing; after studying data from thousands of churches and hundreds of thousands of Christians, the Reveal researchers have identified the spiritual practices that are most catalytic to spiritual growth. These are the practices by which we breathe in the grace of God, and so grow. Things like prayer and bible reading and so on. One of the most catalytic and helpful practices for spiritual growth they identified is service. People who serve out of God’s rest grow spiritually.

Service is a Catalyst that fuels our spiritual growth. And it doesn’t even have to be our service. Let me explain.

This is a picture of my three University mates I play golf with each year. The guy on the left is Reece. Reece is an insurance executive in Melbourne. Through his service, Reece also acted as a critical spiritual catalyst in my life.

I moved to Adelaide when I was almost 17 and started work in a bank as a teller. I had grown up in a Christian home and had decided to follow Jesus when I was 12 years old. But for all of my teenage years I felt like a failure as a Christian. I said and did all

the right things at youth group on Friday night and church on Sunday, but was a poor representative of Jesus the rest of the time. In short, I was a miserable hypocrite. So when I moved to Adelaide, away from the watchful eyes of my parents, I decided to give it all up – being a Christian was all too hard.

On the Discipleship journey I was stuck somewhere between Exploring and Growing in Christ.

And so like the prodigal son in Jesus' story, I travelled to the far country to rebel.

I stopped going to church.

I started smoking. But it was only Benson and Hedges Extra Mild.

I started drinking. But it was only Rum and Raspberry – basically cordial with a kick.

And I never really got dangerously drunk, just pathetically tipsy.

If the prodigal son in Jesus story travelled to the far country in his rebellion, in my rebellion I had only got to the equivalent of New Zealand.

I was lonely and miserable. I was a failure not just as a Christian; I couldn't even do a good job as a sinner.

Three months after I moved to Adelaide, just after my 17th birthday, Reece called me. Reece attended Coro Valley Uniting Church, which had a connection with my old church in Naracoorte. He had heard I was in Adelaide and wondered if I would like to come to Friday night youth group with him? I was that miserable I said yes. I had no car, so every Friday night for the next three months Reece would drive out from the CBD, pick me up from my bank, drive me to his house where I would have a meal with his family, we would then go to youth group, and afterwards he would drive me home.

A simple act of service. But it had a profound effect. Over those few months Reece served me by driving me to youth group, God did a work in me. I started to understand grace for the first time. Something shifted in me. I was no longer stuck. I was starting to grow again.

Through the simple act of driving me to church, Reece was a Royal Priest, a Princely Servant to me.

Service, whether we offer it, or of we are its beneficiary is a spiritual catalyst.

Reece's simple act of service was a spiritual catalyst, not just for me, but I believe also for him.

Jesus says this:

Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.
(Matthew 10:39)

There is a profound paradox in this statement that is woven all through the Jesus story; to discover life we must give it away. And one of the best ways we give our life away is through simple acts of service, like driving a miserable teenager to church, or serving at Kidzlife, or on the Connect Team, or in the Caravan Park ministry, or on the Worship Team, or through a Mission Trip, or....

Royal Priests lose their life for God in service.

So where are you on this journey? Are you moving up and to the right? Or are you stuck? If you are stuck, one way you can become unstuck is to serve, if you aren't already doing so. The bible says it and research proves it - Service is catalytic to spiritual growth. Rick Warren puts it this way:

As physical exercises raise your metabolism, spiritual exercises like prayer, serving, giving raise your spiritual temperature.
(Rick Warren)

Service Glorifies God

Peter tells us that we are priests with a purpose – to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light. In Romans, Paul says of his vocation, which is also our vocation:

He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God.
(Romans 15:16)

We proclaim the gospel – we declare God’s praises – with both our words and our actions. In fact, any act done in Jesus’ name, in Jesus’ power and for Jesus’ glory is a act of worship – a spiritual sacrifice that is acceptable to him.

Pediatrician David Cerqueira shares a story of how a dying girl showed his church the honor of serving God:

One Sunday my wife had prepared a lesson on being useful. She taught the children that everyone can be useful—that usefulness is serving God, and that doing so is worthy of honor. The kids quietly soaked up my wife's words, and as the lesson ended, there was a short moment of silence. [A little girl named] Sarah spoke up. "Teacher, what can I do? I don't know how do to many useful things."

Not anticipating that kind of response, my wife quickly looked around and spotted an empty flower vase on the windowsill. "Sarah, you can bring in a flower and put it in the vase. That would be a useful thing."

Sarah frowned. "But that's not important."

"It is," replied my wife, "if you are helping someone."

Sure enough, the next Sunday Sarah brought in a dandelion and placed it in the vase. In fact, she continued to do so each week. Without reminders or help, she made sure the vase was filled with a bright yellow flower, Sunday after Sunday. When my wife told our pastor about Sarah's faithfulness, he placed the vase upstairs in the main sanctuary next to the pulpit. That Sunday he gave a sermon on the honor of serving others, using Sarah's vase as an example. The congregation was touched by the message, and the week started on a good note. ...

During that same week I got a call from Sarah's mother. She worried that Sarah seemed to have less energy than usual and that she didn't have an appetite. Offering her some reassurances, I made room in my schedule to see Sarah the following day. After Sarah had a battery of tests and days of examinations, I sat numbly in my office, Sarah's paperwork on my lap. The results were tragic. [She had leukemia.]

On the way home, I stopped to see Sarah's parents so that I could personally give them the sad news. Sarah's genetics and the leukemia that was attacking her small body were a horrible mix. Sitting at their kitchen table, I did my best to explain to Sarah's parents that nothing could be done to save her life. I don't think I have ever had a more difficult conversation than the one that night. ...

Time pressed on. Sarah became confined to bed and to the visits that many people gave her. She lost her smile. She lost most of her weight. And then it came: another telephone call. Sarah's mother asked me to come see her. I dropped everything and ran to the house. There she was, a small bundle that barely moved. After a short examination, I knew that Sarah would soon be leaving this world. I urged her parents to spend as much time as possible with her.

That was a Friday afternoon. On Sunday morning church started as usual. The singing, the sermon—it all seemed meaningless when I thought of Sarah. I felt enveloped in sadness. At the end of the sermon, the pastor suddenly stopped speaking. His eyes wide, he stared at the back of the church with utter amazement. Everyone turned to see what he was looking at. It was Sarah! Her parents had brought her for one last visit. She was bundled in a blanket, a dandelion in one little hand.