

CHAPTER 19

WHO OWES WHO?

I end this study with a truth that transformed my life. In fact, the day this truth clicked in my brain, the change was every bit as dramatic as was my conversion to Christ, and my coming to realize the truth of Square One - that God is in control and He has my best interest at heart. In some sense I have saved the best for last. And as I write this, there is a prayer in my heart that everyone who reads it will experience a similar change.

The demographics of our nation tell us that in the next 50 years the elderly will become a huge ministry test, not only for society as a whole, but especially for the church. Nearly every one of you who reads this will at some point in your life have one or more elderly loved ones or close friends brought into your life by God for the purpose of desperately needed ministry. It will probably come at a time that seems the most inconvenient or burdensome to you. You had better understand *who owes who*.

Ministry to the elderly can become very tedious, tiring, discouraging and inconvenient, and nearly always involves personal sacrifice. If you understand who owes who, you'll be able to invest your life in other lives out of a heart of unconditional love. And you'll become indebted to those who permit you to serve them because they will become a source of your eternal reward, your treasure in heaven. If you can get hold of this truth, **it will transform your life**.

Let's begin with a text. The apostle Paul writes:

And I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented thus far) in order that I might obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to the Greeks and the barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome [Romans 1:13-15 (NASB)].

I was in a Bible class a few years ago with five other businessmen. We were studying Romans, Chapter 1. When our teacher came to verse 14, he paused and said to the class, “Gentlemen, why was Paul indebted to the Greeks and barbarians?” Nobody answered the question. In my mind I could think of only one possible answer, “God called Paul to preach the gospel, so I assume he was indebted to all men. He owed them the opportunity to hear the gospel.” But in this passage Paul gives us a different reason why he was indebted to them. He said, “I plan to come to Rome in order that I might obtain some fruit among you also.” By fruit, Paul meant eternal reward. He was saying that by coming to Rome and preaching the gospel, he would earn some more eternal reward, just as he had by preaching to other Gentile groups. And you can tell he was excited about this reward, for he said, “I am eager to come and preach to you.”

So why was Paul indebted to the Greeks and Barbarians? Because *they were a source of his eternal reward or profit*. (The word translated “fruit” in verse 13 is translated “profit” in Philippians 4:17.)

The truth we are seeing here is both counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. Let me explain. If I minister to you, the world says you owe me. Scripture teaches the opposite, that if you permit me to minister to you, I owe you, because you will be a source of eternal reward for me. Paul said, “If you Romans permit me to preach the gospel to you, I will owe you. I’ll be indebted to you just as I am to the Greeks and barbarians, because you will be one of the sources of my eternal reward.” This changes the whole dynamic of interpersonal relationships.

Aunt Nila had married a cowboy with some oil wells. She is now sick and the prognosis is poor. Maybe if I help her, and play my cards right, she will feel obligated to me and include me in her will. Can you imagine yourself having thoughts like that? I can and I have. That is typical of the world’s response to the health crisis of an ailing aunt.

God’s plan is that her situation is an opportunity for those who understand it to minister to her with the attitude that **they owe her**. Then her pain and irrational responses are not irritants that drive people away, but a source of even greater eternal profit for the one wise

enough to see it. When God brings an aunt Nila into your life, don't fail to remember *who owes who* in the ministry transaction.

If you meditate on this and begin to apply it to your relationships, it can become one of the most relaxing and freeing truths in the Christian life. It solves the problem of unrealized expectations. Every one of us is human. Every one of us is selfish by nature. It is all too human for us to expect someone we minister to, or do a favor for, to respond with some measure of gratitude. I look back over my own life. I remember times, before I learned this truth, I would do what I thought was a good deed for somebody, or minister to them in some way, and they wouldn't respond like I expected. And I would think, "Well the least they could do is thank me, or show their gratitude in some way." *That is straight from the devil.* The truth is, if a person permits me to minister to them, **I become indebted to them**, not the other way around, because they become a source of my eternal reward. Getting this straight has changed my life. I try never to forget who owes who in the ministry transaction.

A word of balance and caution. Not every contact with another person will develop into a relationship that will lend itself to ministry. You cannot have a relationship with another person who doesn't want you to have it. So we must not try to knock down doors that God has not opened. We must remember Square One. God is the One who is in control. We must relax, be ourselves, and let God bring us into the relationships He wants us to be in for ministry purposes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROFIT MOTIVE

Let us learn from Paul and the New Testament that the profit motive is a legitimate motive for ministry. God created it in us, then asked us to surrender our natural instinct for seeking profit in this life, and instead seek profit in the next life ... eternal reward. It's the same thing He did with our desire for autonomy. He created us with the desire, then asked us to surrender it and submit to His authority. He created in us the profit motive, then asked us to forego seeking profit in this life in exchange for even greater and lasting reward in eternity. Paul's way of saying it was, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." (Colossians 3:2), which I suspect is his commentary on Jesus' command to store for ourselves treasure in heaven, not on earth.

God does not expect us to work for Him for nothing, and Paul understood this. Until this clicked in my mind, I had never noticed the word “profit” in the love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13.

And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it *profits* me nothing [1 Corinthians 13:3].

I had never focused on that last phrase. It clearly implies that if I do not minister in love, it profits me nothing. But it also equally clearly implies that if I do minister in love, I will have profit. And it further seems to me that Paul is interested in earning a profit, just as he was when he wrote to the Romans.

The Greek word for love in 1 Corinthians 13 is *agape*. The essence of *agape* is that you do what is in the best interest of the person loved, no matter how it feels, and no matter how the person responds. You may or may not enjoy the relationship. The person you minister to may be grateful, or he may hate you. There may be great sacrifice required on your part, or little at all. The defining characteristic of *agape* is acting in what you perceive to be the best interest of the person loved. It’s the love God has for us. It is unconditional love. It is the kind of love that earns eternal reward.

But what I am going to suggest to you is that that kind of love is not possible without an understanding of the profit motive. God made us that way.

Unless you understand the profit motive combined with love, you will find it extremely difficult, or impossible, to love that unlovable person in your life.

Unless you understand the profit motive combined with love, you will find it extremely difficult to remain in an unhappy marriage. You’ll find it extremely difficult to obey Jesus’ commandments on marriage and divorce.

Unless you understand the profit motive combined with love, you will find it difficult, if not impossible, to give sacrificially of your financial resources.

Unless you understand the profit motive combined with love, you will find it difficult to minister to the elderly.

As I conclude this, there is a prayer in my heart for all who will read it, **but especially for younger people**. I say to you younger people, don't wait until you are 60 or 70 years old to learn this, like I did. Don't do that. You'll waste too many years of your life. **Get hold of this truth. Now. It will transform your life.**

Never forget who owes who in the ministry transaction.

