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EMPTY PRAYER

The LORD called Samuel: and he answered, Here am I. And he ran unto Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou calledst me. And he said, I called not; lie down again. And he went and lay down. And the LORD called yet again, Samuel. And Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And he answered, I called not, my son; lie down again. Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, neither was the word of the LORD yet revealed unto him. And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And Eli perceived that the LORD had called the child. Therefore Eli said unto Samuel, Go, lie down: and it shall be, if he call thee, that thou shalt say, Speak, LORD; for thy servant heareth. (1 Sam 3:5-9)

In this event, God had to call Samuel three times because he kept responding to the wrong person. But have you ever played a game, perhaps with a sibling or a coworker, where you call their name, but ignore them when they answer; and then repeat the process two or three more times, until they get angry? Perhaps you were on the receiving end of that game, kind of like Samuel was. Then you can imagine how angry God gets when people call out his name (saying, “Oh, God,” or “My God,” or even “God damn”) and then they don’t go any farther in talking to him.

This is a form of empty prayer. To most people it is what is meant by the third commandment, “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.” (Ex 20:7) Although that command probably entailed much more, it does refer to such uses of God’s name as being in vain, or “empty.” This is not, however, the only way to utter an empty prayer.

The Jews, like many “high church” Christians, have a number of set prayers that they use on different occasions. Like saying the rosary, it would be easy to make the saying of these prayers so routine as to be automatic. A person can read out loud, sing a familiar song, or recite/hear a prayer while thinking about many other things. Because it would be so easy, the rabbis warn against such empty prayers. At a minimum, a person

should be aware in his mind that he is talking to God. Even better would be to think about what is being said, which is sometimes hard when praying in Hebrew (or Latin, or even King James English) when you don’t know the language. Best would be to say the prayer as if you had never prayed it before. Such established prayers are not wrong, in themselves, but become empty when repeated without understanding. “But when ye pray, use not vain [empty] repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.” (Matt 6:7) It is not the words God wants to hear so much as the heart.

Another form of empty prayer would be the one said without any expectation of action or answer from God. One example, mentioned earlier, might be the common phrase, “God damn.” Most people either say it about an inanimate object which cannot be condemned, or don’t believe in God or in his ability to condemn. If they understood the horror of God’s condemnation, they might not be so quick to pray it. But other people also pray without expectation of it being fulfilled. “And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.” (Matt 21:22) Jesus did not promise a result if you pray an empty prayer.

Yet another way we pray empty prayers is mentioned by James. “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.” (Jas 4:3) This is a problem with the so-called “prosperity gospel.” We should ask God that we have enough to survive, and maybe some to give to others.

Prayer is a necessary part of the life of a follower of God. Empty prayer is not.

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OF WHAT?

Grammar is rarely a popular subject. One of the requirements for studying another language is often a basic understanding of your own. Some colleges make English grammar, for instance, a prerequisite course for biblical Greek or Hebrew. One of the most confusing aspects of the grammar of most languages is the use of the genitive case. In English it is often indicated by “of xxx,” but in the possessive form may be simply the addition of “s” to a noun (ex: Paul’s). The confusion comes because there are multiple uses of the genitive. When we read, “through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins,” (Acts 13:38) we have to make a distinction whether “of sins” is a genitive of source (forgiveness as a result of sins) or of object (forgiveness that acts upon sin). Context and general theology point toward the latter. Otherwise we could say that we should sin more so that we can get more forgiveness. Paul dealt with some in Rome of that persuasion, saying, “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid.” (Rom 6:1-2)

Because of this possibility of confusion, perhaps it would be proper to begin with an analysis of the genitive

The breastplate of Righteousness is not possessive, being figurative.

case. It may be “boring grammar,” but it will help in our understanding of the Bible, and especially of the Bible in English.

The most common use of the genitive is probably that of possession. Examples would be “Paul’s letters” or “the church of God.” If that were the end of it, life would be simple; but it isn’t. Grammarians even distinguish between inalienable possession (something that can’t change hands, like Peter’s nose), alienable possession (something that can change possessor, like the belt of Agabus), and possession of relationship (Timothy’s wife). There is a genitive of origin (citizens of Rome), and of apposition (further explanation, such as the city of Rome, not to be confused with the citizens of Rome), and a descriptive genitive (a God of love). Another group are the genitives of composition: substance (a belt of leather), elements (a group of elders), and source (the tribes of Israel). Finally, there are also the genitives of participation, either as an agent (the love of God, as his love for us) or an object (the love of God, as our love for Him).

With that as a background we can look at some passages to get a better understanding of what is meant. Understanding that the context determines which genitive is intended, as in the last examples above, an analysis of certain scriptures may help us know the intent of the writer.

Ephesians 6

One passage in Ephesians is sometimes misunderstood because of a fundamental mistrust of grammar. It is the passage about the whole armor of God.

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Eph 6:13-17)

It is easy enough to determine that the “armour of God” (and the earlier phrase “wiles of the devil”) refers to the source. The armor comes from God. The devil is the source of wiles, although you could also say that it is a genitive of inalienable possession; the devil possesses wiles that are an essential part of his nature. Some of the other phrases are equally easily understood.

The breastplate of righteousness is generally accepted as descriptive. The breastplate does not possess righteousness because it is a figurative item. It does not have its source in righteousness, nor is it a participant in righteousness. It may be appositive (explanatory), so that it could be rendered, “put on the breastplate (righteousness).” Whether descriptive or explanatory, it is understood that the breastplate is righteousness itself. The same could be said of the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation. It could also be said of the preparation of the gospel, but that phrase adds another complication. It is the preparation which is the gospel, but that gospel is source of peace.

The problem of interpretation comes with the last of the genitives, “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.” There is a ministry called Sharpening the Sword that helps people learn the Bible. Unfortunately, their name violates their purpose. People talk of carrying their sword, referring to carrying the Bible. In the context of Ephesians 6, however, those phrases may be either inaccurate or, at least, inexact. Paul is using a rhetorical device here in which he uses the same type of phrase over and over for emphasis. “Breastplate of righteousness;”

“shield of faith;” “helmet of salvation;” “sword of the Spirit.” It would make sense, then to understand that the sword and the Spirit are equal, but many people make the sword and the Word equal. In the context, the sword is the Spirit. Grammatically (in Greek and English) the Spirit is the Word of God. In the Greek, the word “which” is of the same gender as the Spirit, but not that of the sword. In English, the word “which” would refer to its immediate antecedent, which is the Spirit. So it should be rendered, “the sword of the Spirit, which Spirit is the Word of God.” Indirectly, then, the sword may be the Word, but the Word is not necessarily the sword.

What difference does it make whether the sword or the Spirit is the word? In this context, probably very little; but in the broader context it effects our understanding of the action and person of the Holy Spirit (assuming this is the Spirit being talked about). Is the Spirit’s sword the word, or is the Spirit the word? Can the Holy Spirit act independently of the word of God, or does the Spirit act through the word? Does God save people by giving them the Holy Spirit miraculously, or is Paul correct in saying, “how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:14) Ultimately it affects the doctrines of salvation, immersion, and grace.

The Gift of the Spirit

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. (Acts 2:38)

What is the gift of the Spirit? Is it the same as the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12-14? How you interpret the genitive in Acts 2:38 directly effects your theology regarding the charismatic.

Basically the question boils down to this: is the gift that results from immersion the Holy Spirit itself, or is it the miraculous powers that have as their source the Holy Spirit? For about 200 years now this has been the essential distinction between “mainstream” Christianity and Pentecostalism. How can we know which is Peter’s meaning on Pentecost?

The scriptures can give us an idea of how to interpret this. If it can be shown that everyone who was immersed (baptized) immediately received the miraculous gifts, then the charismatics are correct. If it can be shown that some people did not receive the miraculous gifts, then it must mean that the Holy Spirit is the gift, independent of the miraculous gifts.

In Acts 8 we read of a group of people in Samaria who were immersed. They all marveled at Philip’s ability to perform miracles. It wasn’t until the apostles came from Jerusalem and laid hands on them, though, that they were able to perform the miracles themselves. It appears that the miraculous gifts had to be conferred in a special way (no longer available to us) rather than being automatic

upon immersion.

Going further in the book of Acts (chapter 19), we find that Apollos immersed twelve people. It wasn’t until Paul laid hands on them that they received the miraculous powers.

From these two examples we can infer that the gift “of the Holy Spirit” uses the genitive of substance. The gift was the Holy Spirit, not the powers that had the Spirit as their source.

The Angel of God

There are many references to angels. There are even two references to the devil and his angels. (Matt 25 and Rev 12) There are six references to “the Angel of God.” Based on the look at possible genitives above, there are several ways that we could view this phrase. It could be an angel from God. It could be an angel that is God. It could be an angel in a relationship to God (as opposed,

Is the gift of the Spirit the same as the gifts of the Spirit?

perhaps, to “the devil and his angels”). While it may not be of essential theological significance, there are some passages that might indicate that “the Angel of God” is God himself.

First of all, the phrase refers to an angel in the singular, not angels in the plural. More specifically, it is “the” angel, implying uniqueness. There are two angels specifically named in the Bible (Gabriel and Michael), and several others that people refer to by names not specifically given in the Bible (Raphael, and possibly Uriel). Because there are at least two of these named angels, they cannot be “the” angel of God. Because Michael is the only one given the title Archangel, the phrase could conceivably be applied to him.

Among the six references to “the Angel of God,” two specifically equate this angel with God. Jacob said, “The angel of God spake unto me in a dream.” (Gen 31:11) Two verses later he quotes the angel as saying, “I am the God of Bethel,” thus making the angel to be God. When Paul was on the ship bound for Rome he tells the sailors, “there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve,” who related that he must go to Rome. One possibility is that he is saying he serves the angel of God (thus making him God), but the context could also imply that the angel came from “God, whom I serve.” Does it make a difference in our understanding of God? Probably not.

Grammar, spelling and punctuation are important (although the Greek had no punctuation). Sometimes it can be the difference between “Let’s eat, Grandma” and “Let’s eat Grandma.” Or the distinctions made above.

HOW DO YOU LIKE YOUR STEAK?

Jesus walks into a restaurant and is seated. A man walks up to him and says, "My name is Ted. I will be your server today. Are you ready to order?" Jesus orders a steak and baked potato. Ted asks, "And how would you like your steak, sir?" Being a good kosher Jew, Jesus naturally replies, "Well done, good and faithful servant." (Matt 25:23)

Many people anticipate hearing that phrase from the parable in Matthew. There are songs and sermons galore about the joys of hearing Jesus say, "Well done." Consider, though, that many who want to hear that phrase are loath to use it themselves.

Educators know the value of the phrase. Many early-childhood computer-learning programs assign tasks to the child. When the tasks (identifying, matching, or ordering items) are completed properly, no matter how many times it takes to accomplish them, feedback is given. Often that feedback is "good job," or "well done."

A person, child or adult, who never hears that they have done something well loses motivation. On the other hand, a word of praise is often as powerful a motivator as money; more powerful perhaps, because money only motivates to minimum performance, while appropriate praise motivates to more than the minimum.

Solomon knew the value of a well-placed "well done." One of his proverbs even compares it to a costly work of art. "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver." (Prov 25:11) Praise not only compliments a person, it complements them, as well.

The wise king also considered a good word to be as effective as a physician in curing some ills. "Heaviness

in the heart of man maketh it stoop: but a good word maketh it glad." (Prov 12:25)

Candy is often used as a reward for children. Chocolate may even be a reward for some of us older people. Solomon said praise is like candy, only healthier. "Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones." (Prov 16:24) (That is not to say that chocolate is unhealthy; if Solomon had known about chocolate he might have compared pleasant words to it.)

We know how to train our pets with praise. Why can't we treat people the same way? Too often we are quick to criticize and slow to praise. We may call it "constructive" criticism, but it is rarely so. Criticism is often destructive.

The opposite of destruction is edification (building up). Paul often had to correct errors in the early church, but even when he did this it was often accompanied by praise. The exception to this is in a discussion of corruption of the Lord's Supper, in which he twice had to say, "I praise you not." (1 Cor 11:17, 22) To tell the Corinthians he did not praise them in a matter was so shocking that it served as motivation, but this only works when praise is the norm.

Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. (Eph 4:29)

If we want a pleasant life and good relationships, we must be people of praise. May it never be that the only time your children hear "well done" is when you are ordering steak.

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