



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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## Ministry: Seeking the New Testament Ideal

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Jesus's sentiments could not be more clear. "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world" (John 17.15-16; cf. Rom 12.1-2; 2 Cor 6.14-7.1; 1 Pet 1.13-16; 1 John 2.15-17). As Jesus's disciples, we are called to be different. Even as we recognize this ideal, we acknowledge our struggles to consistently attain it. Thus, we also acknowledge the need for occasional calls to restore our difference.

What we do not always recognize are the ways we can be subtly pulled away from God's standard. The challenge does not always come in the form of a moral compromise or the surrender of a foundational doctrine. Sometimes, it's almost negligible. But, assuming that whatever God calls for us to be and do is designed to either protect us or provide for us, we know that, even in areas where conformity with the world does not seem as blatant, the dangers that are present any time we conform necessitate that we give attention to staying true to the ideal.

One matter that calls for reevaluation arises from the modern use of the terms "minister" and "ministry." There are at least three things that complicate our efforts to remain true to God's ideal in regards this term. First, multiple English words are used to translate *diakonia*, *diaknonos*, and *diakoneō*, the main Greek words involved. While there are good reasons for this variety, its existence contributes to a misapplication of the word in our practice. Second, some have surrendered, or at least relaxed, the biblical understanding of the term in favor of the way our world typically uses it. Third, the word itself involves a meaning and commitment that are out of step with our world's expectations. We will deal with this issue first.

Several years ago, I read an article that told of a junior executive who was told to complete a task. The younger man replied, "I'll see that it's done immediately." His boss reprimanded him with these words: "No, *you'll* do it. *I'm* seeing that it's done!" This exchange illustrates a typical view of success in which power, prestige, and privilege—usually afforded by wealth—are the keys. Those who are really successful are not those who do for others, but those who can see to it that others do for them.

Before we focus on how out of step with Jesus's ideal that is, we should notice how much it resembles the views of his world. Among the Greeks, *diakonia*, voluntarily giving oneself in the service of others, was considered degrading and dishonorable. "In Greek eyes, service is not very dignified. . . . The formula of the sophist: 'How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?' expresses the basic Greek attitude. . . . For the Greek in his wisdom and freedom there can certainly be no question of existing to serve others" (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittel, ed., 2:82-83).

The Jewish attitude was only moderately different. "Though Judaism in the time of Jesus knew and practiced its social responsibilities, e.g., to the poor, this was done mainly by alms, not by service (cf. Lk. 10:30-35). Lowly service, e.g., waiting at table, was beneath the dignity of a free man (cf. Lk. 7:44ff.)" (*The New International Dictionary of the New Testament*, Colin Brown, ed., 3:545).

Against these attitudes Jesus called on his followers to imitate his example (he came to serve, not be served—Mark 10:45). In using the *diakonia* word group, he employed a term that referred to 'menial and mundane activities . . . activities without apparent dignity' (J. Gary Inrig, "Called to Serve: Toward a Philosophy of Ministry," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, October-December 1983: 336).

The fact that Jesus used this word, that its major focus is on service, not a position, and that the New Testament writers used it to refer to all God's people has far reaching implications for challenging us to pursue ministry that is more like Christ's than the world's.

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