

+ Numbers 11:16, 24-29 + Be Zealous, Not Jealous + 18th Sunday after Pentecost + 7 October 2012 +

“Be zealous, not jealous.” I’ll never forget what Moses told me that day out in the wilderness. My name is Joshua. For much of my life going back to my youth, I had served faithfully as Moses’ aide. Over the years, I came to learn how the Lord had blessed Moses with the ability to appreciate the rich and varied gifts God gave to other believers. In very dramatic ways, Moses himself had come to understand that no mortal human being could meet the needs of every other person, and that was a lesson I needed to learn.

Moses had once placed me in command of the armies of Israel because a tribe called the Amalekites had attacked us. We won the victory that day, but it wasn’t because of my leadership. No, the Lord used Moses. You see, as long as Moses’ hands were lifted high the battle was ours, but when his arms and body grew tired and his hands started to sink, the Amalekites began to overpower us. So the Lord provided help. Moses’ brother Aaron and a man named Hur brought a stone for Moses to sit on, and they themselves held up his hands. Through Moses, the Lord gave us the victory, but Moses couldn’t do it alone. He needed the strength of others.

Later we spent over a year at the foot of Mt. Sinai to receive from the Lord his holy Law. Now remember the Lord made Moses the leader of a nation of nearly 2,000,000 people! That was no easy task, because everyone who had a dispute, even a minor lawsuit, would come to him for judgment. As you can imagine, Moses was burning out quickly. Before it was too late, his father-in-law Jethro gave him some good advice. **“The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone... Select capable men from all the people...have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you... That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you.”** (Exodus 18:18b, 21-22) Moses listened to his father-in-law and appointed God-fearing judges to help him lead the people. Even with their help, though, Moses still had a heavy workload.

The wickedness of the people made it even more difficult. At the foot of Mt. Sinai, the people had trembled in fear when the Lord came to reveal his holy Law to them. His servant, Moses, climbed the mountain to receive this Law for the people. He spent forty days and forty nights on the mountain as the Lord laid out this great and holy Law. The people waiting at the base of the mountain, however, grew restless. They had been exposed to the false gods and filthy false religion of the Egyptians. They had not left that godlessness behind, but convinced Moses’ brother, Aaron, to make a golden calf for them to worship and revel around in disgusting ways.

At the time, I was standing guard near the mountain unaware when the sounds of shouting came from the camp. It sounded like war and I got worried. When I saw Moses coming down the mountain, I ran up to him and said, **“There is the sound of war in the camp.”** (Exodus 32:17) Moses knew what it really was, however. The Lord had told him of that blasphemous festival to a false god. Moses’ anger burned for the honor of the Lord. He threw down the two stone tablets in his hands, shattering them. Three thousand Israelites were put to death for their sin. Moses had the golden calf ground into powder and then had the powder dumped into the water, which the people were forced to drink. In spite of their wickedness, however, Moses still pleaded for the Lord’s forgiveness on behalf of his faithless people, and as he so often did, the Lord forgave them.

Sadly, this became a pattern among the Israelites especially after we left Sinai. We were out in the middle of a very dry, very barren wilderness with little food and water. Even so, the Lord in his mercy provided more than we needed. He caused water to come from rocks. Six mornings a week he provided a white, flaky, sweet substance we called “manna”. Some evenings he provided quail enough for everyone in the camp, but in spite of the Lord’s goodness, the people still complained and complained against the Lord. Even when the Lord answered their prayers, they complained that their slavery in Egypt was better than freedom in the wilderness.

Their complaints continued against the Lord. Finally it seemed like every family was complaining about the food the Lord provided from heaven. Moses was quickly growing discouraged and overwhelmed. He fell on his knees at the Tent of Meeting and cried out to the Lord, **“Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? ...I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin.”** (Numbers 11:11a, 14-15)

Moses had finally reached the point when he realized that he couldn’t do it all. He could not meet everyone’s need. He could not lead this nation on his own. The burden had become far too great, but the Lord in his grace had an answer. **“Bring me seventy of Israel’s elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will**

come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.

So Moses carried out the Lord's command. He selected seventy faithful, God-fearing men who were leaders and officials among the people. These men came together and stood around the Tent of Meeting. Then something amazing happened that I'll never forget! The Lord came down in the form of a fiery cloud and settled over the Tent of Meeting. He spoke with Moses first and then miraculously ***"took of the Spirit that was on him and put the Spirit on the seventy elders."*** It was like the Lord was lighting seventy candles from one single flame. As the Spirit was placed on each one, they suddenly began to prophesy or proclaim God's Word.

As we marveled at what the Lord was doing, suddenly a young boy came running through the crowd to Moses. He told Moses about a disturbance in the camp. Apparently only sixty-eight of the seventy elders had shown up. Two men named Eldad and Medad had stayed in the camp, ***"yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp."*** As you can imagine, this caused quite a disturbance among the people but all I could think of was "How outrageous!" Why had these men not come at Moses' request? Why were they not at the Tent of Meeting to receive the special blessing from the Lord? Why would the Spirit still rest on them as it had on the other sixty-eight? I was so angry. I was so jealous. Why should the Lord give such gifts to such foolish people who disregarded God's servant Moses? I couldn't help, but blurt out, ***"Moses, my lord, stop them!"*** I didn't want them to take away from the honor and authority he deserved!

Moses' response quickly quieted my anger and calmed my jealousy. ***"Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"*** "Be zealous, not jealous!" I was jealous of the gifts God had given them, and my zeal was directed the wrong way. My zeal was for the honor and position of Moses, when it should have been for the honor of the LORD of free and faithful grace and his work. Rather than being filled with zeal for himself, Moses had the humblest attitude of a servant of God—an attitude like the Messiah to come—the Servant-Savior of all. Moses rejoiced in the gifts God gave to his people. He rebuked my misdirected zeal because he desired those gifts be even more abundant to the glory of God and the benefit of God's people.

Even today, that jealousy, that misdirected zeal still plagues God's people. How often have you forgotten to be humble in your service? How often do you catch yourself thinking it's all about you? How often are you zealous for the wrong reason—for your own glory, for your own standing or position in the congregation, for your own reputation in others' eyes? How often are you jealous of the gifts God has given to others that you don't have? How often in your misguided zeal do you want to cry out, ***"Lord, stop them!"***? How often, though, don't you and I deserve the Lord's condemnation and punishment like so many faithless fools before us because of our jealousy?

In my time, we were told One would come with a name like mine. This One would be a greater Prophet, a greater Servant than Moses. That one named Jeshua—the "Saving One", or Jesus as you know him—did come to serve on your behalf. He had all the gifts necessary to carry out a life of perfect service and a death of innocent sacrifice for your sins and mine. Even more than Moses, this Jesus had perfect zeal for the work of the Lord. He carried out that work as the humblest of servants. He was never zealous for his own glory or his own position or his own reputation. He was never jealous of the gifts of others, but he was the servant of all who brought the greatest glory to his heavenly Father and eternal benefit to you and me his children. Jesus' perfect zeal for his Father's glory and your eternal benefit took him through a life of faithful service to the humblest of deaths. There he took all your jealousy, all your envy, all your misdirected zeal and nailed it to a cross so God would remember it no more.

Now you are forgiven, and service to the glory of God is your goal, whether you are a great prophet like Moses, one of the seventy chosen by God to assist, or of those in the assembly with still other gifts from the Lord. With God's help, you realize that not one of us has all of God's gifts and that you need those rich and varied gifts of your fellow believers. That realization keeps you humble as you now focus on every God-given opportunity to serve him and your fellow believers, rather than what recognition or reward you might get out of it. At the same time, like God's servant Moses and like our Servant-Savior Jesus, you can give thanks for the gifts and service of others as you all serve together for the greater glory of the Lord and the benefit of his children. What greater motivation do you have than that your Savior and mine, Jesus the Messiah, perfectly and faithfully served for you?

"Be zealous, not jealous." Because of your Savior's zeal for his Father's glory and his desire to save you, you can now be zealous for his service. May the Lord God be glorified through our humble service together! Amen.