

Cross Current



Real help for real life

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Clean Your Shark

It's a shark feeding frenzy, but *on* the shark, not *by* the shark.

In an area known as a *cleaning station*, hammerhead and

white tip sharks signal they're ready. With their heads up, tails down and mouths wide open, the massive fish literally line up and wait to be groomed by the cleaner wrasse, a brightly-coloured species found along coral reefs world wide.

Seemingly out of nowhere, dozens of the smaller creatures appear and begin to pick off parasites and diseased tissue from the mighty sharks, sometimes swimming right into their mouths to clean between their deadly teeth. In return for keeping the sharks healthy, the wrasse gets a steady diet of nutrients from the parasites and tissue and protection from would-be predators.

This mutually beneficial relationship means the sharks never get aggressive or territorial with their smaller friends, even when some of the wrasse cheat from time to time and take a bit of healthy flesh. Interestingly, studies show that when cleaner fish work in pairs, they tend to get more food than those who go it alone, they cheat less, and the sharks get a better over-all cleaning.

In most cases, the parasites favoured by cleaner fish are small crustaceans similar to ticks found on land. They live between the scales of fish and feed on their skin, often leading to problems ranging from fin rot to infections. Disease is especially fatal to young fish.

To find their prey, the wrasse swim the whole length of the host fish and glean parasites from fins and gills. They vibrate their tails, to remind the bigger fish of their presence so they don't get eaten.

According to recent studies, most fish seek a daily cleaning and the



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wrasse routinely service more than 2,300 customers a day. Without the cleaner fish, parasites would increase by five times, endangering the health of many species. Scientists also say the work of cleaner fish increases the abundance and diversity of reef fish. So without the invaluable service of the lowly wrasse, some of the ocean's most powerful creatures would be severely depleted, devastated by a threat too small for the human eye to detect.

For Christians, that symbiotic relationship is simple reminder of a powerful spiritual principle: we need each other. Though it's common these days to find people who embrace God and reject the church, that's a completely unbiblical idea. Our Father and the admittedly imperfect church he sacrificed his Son for are a package deal. That's because He knew we needed unity in community to foster mutual love, encouragement and accountability. The church is also the place through which the Holy Spirit bestows giftedness. If you have a God-given talent, He expects you to use it in the church, to help others there and benefit from their gifts.

That applies whether you're a shark or a cleaner fish. *"There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all,"* the apostle Paul writes. *"A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other... This makes for harmony, so all members care for each other."* (1 Cor. 12:4,7,25)

In that same passage, Paul stresses that every service offered from a submissive, sacrificial heart is of equal value in God's eyes. That means there may be sharks — those with talents and ministries that are more visible and respected than others, from a human point of view. But just as valuable and necessary are the cleaner fish — those of us who serve in less obvious, less dramatic fashion.

"Don't think you're better than you really are," warns Paul. Or less than you really are, either! *"We belong to each other... Never be lazy but work hard and serve God enthusiastically."* Rom. 12:3,11)

When we serve together without growing aggressive or territorial, we'll be fed, we'll keep each other honest, and our work will be more effective. We'll keep one another safe and healthy, too. It takes humility from the sharks and vulnerability from the cleaners, but it's worth it. In God's eyes, each of us is a big fish.

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