

Serving God by Serving Others

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Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 20:25-28, Hebrews 6:101 Peter 4:10-11

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February 27, 2005

Last week we saw that God's third purpose for you is for you to become like Jesus. The fourth purpose flows directly from that, because if you become like Jesus you're going to serve like Jesus. That's your fourth purpose in life: serving God by serving others. The biblical word for that is ministry, but ministry makes you think of preachers and priests, while the Greek word for ministry is the word for service. Ministry doesn't mean anything but helping people. All Christians are ministers, because all Christians are called to help people. Remember the memory verse from week 1? (Ephesians 2:10 NIV) "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Becoming like Jesus means serving like Jesus. I don't care how sweet you are, how well behaved you are, you're not like Jesus if you're not helping people. Back during the World Series, people kept saying that Johnny Damon of the Red Sox looked like Jesus, because he had long hair and a beard. But if you put Johnny Damon in a police lineup along with Jim Caviezel, Jerry Garcia, and Mother Teresa, you wouldn't have any trouble picking out the real Jesus. It would be the one kneeling down beside AIDS patients and holding the hand of the dying. That's what it means to be like Jesus — to serve others as he did.

Last Sunday I told you how Philippians 3:10 became a life verse for me ("All I want is to know Christ"). But even before that, Philippians 2:5-11 became life verses for me. That passage begins with the memory verse for last week — in the NIV, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." It's really a passage about becoming a servant. The previous verse says "Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand." When Paul talks about Jesus' attitude, he is talking about the attitude of service, what Dave Thomas of Wendy's used to call his MBA, a "mop bucket attitude." Paul sees the great parabola of Christ's journey into this world as a journey from privilege and power to the role of the servant, all the way down to death on the cross, and then, because of his obedience as a servant, being raised to the very highest place. Those verses were burned into my heart in seminary as the shape of the Christian life. I could wish for no better word on my tombstone than "servant." Many years ago, Becca cross-stitched those verses for me, in the RSV: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Becoming like Jesus means serving like Jesus. Once Jesus was talking to his students about the true nature of leadership. He said, "You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must become your slave. For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-28 NLT). If you want to be like Jesus you have to become a slave to others. The point of life is not to be served. It is to serve others.

Jesus acted out that lesson on the night before he went to the cross. John tells us that during his last meal with his students, Jesus got up from the table, took off his robe, stood there in his undergarments and wrapped a towel around his waist. Then he took a basin of water and did something only a slave would do. He washed the dusty feet of his students and dried them off with the towel around his waist. The students were dumbfounded: "What the heck are you doing? It's not your job to wash our feet!" But Jesus said, "I have done this to give you an example, a paradigm for your life. If I your teacher and Lord have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet." If I became a servant and did the most menial thing to help others, I expect the same thing from you. Becoming like Jesus means serving like Jesus.

The other basic truth is that serving others means serving God. It's not like the Christian life is about serving God instead of people. The Christian's life is not limited to the vertical dimension. It's not about lifting your hands up but never stretching your hand out to pick someone up. It's not about becoming a Bible scholar but never doing what it says, which is to help the poor and hurting. That was the issue Jesus faced with the Pharisees. They were all about Bible study and prayer and worship, but they neglected the sick, the needy, and the sinner in their zeal for purity. I like what Rick Warren says about Christians today: "The *last* thing many believers need today is to go to another Bible study. They already know far more than they are putting into practice. What they need are *servicing* experiences in which they can exercise their spiritual muscles" (*PDL*, p. 231).

Hebrews 6:10 (NLT) says that God will not forget "how you have shown your love to him by caring for other Christians." How do you show your love for God? By singing and praying? Sure, but that's not all. You show your love for God by caring for other Christians. 1

Peter 4:10, the memory verse for this week, says in the TNIV, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received” — for what? To make as much money as you can? No — “to serve others.” Whatever spiritual gifts you have, whatever natural abilities you have, whatever experiences you have, use them to help other people. Sometimes we evangelical Christians have talked about service to humanity as if it were a secondary purpose, just a means to evangelism and less important than prayer or Bible study. We have even been suspicious of service agencies because we think they are substituting helping people for the gospel. But helping people is part and parcel of the gospel. We can’t tell people about Jesus and not show them how Jesus cared for people. The gospel says that we have been loved and forgiven *in order to do good works*. We have been saved to serve.

When we serve other people we *are* serving God. Jesus told a story about the last judgment to make this very clear. It’s the last part of Matthew 25. You probably know the story, but it’s still enough to spook most of us. Some of us will be invited into the kingdom. Jesus will say to us, “I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.” Then we will say, “When did we do any of that? We never saw you.” But Jesus will say, “When you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!”

Then it gets scary. To others of us Jesus will say, “Go to hell! I was hungry, and you didn’t feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn’t give me anything to drink. I was a stranger, and you didn’t invite me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me no clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.” Then we will ask him, “Lord, when did we ever see you like that? When we saw you, you were high and lifted up and surrounded with glory.” And Jesus will tell us, “When you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.” And those of us who refused will be taken away to eternal punishment. Here’s the deal: if you do not serve people in need, you have not become like Jesus, and you are no follower of his. Those who don’t help people are not Christians, whether they sat in church or not, and their true nature will be revealed in the end.

This fourth purpose of service is not an afterthought. It’s at the heart of our way of being in the world. Albert Schweitzer said, “The only really happy people are the ones who have learned to serve” (*PDL*, p. 270). Schweitzer was a world-famous organist and Bach scholar, and then a New Testament scholar and author, when he was convicted by Matthew 25. He left his old life behind to go to medical school at mid-life, then went to an unknown village in Africa and started a medical clinic for the least of these, and there he died.

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest who taught at Yale University when he wrote, “In order to be of service to others we have to die to them; that is, we have to give up measuring our meaning and value by the yardstick of others...thus we become free to be compassionate” (*PDL*, p. 269). In his later years, Nouwen felt called to leave the ivory tower to serve the least of these. He moved to a residential facility for the severely mentally and physically disabled, where he became a caregiver for one young man named Adam, whom he dressed and washed and fed. He realized that serving others is serving God. Becoming like Jesus means serving others.

You have been called to Latonia Baptist Church. You have not been called here to sit and worship, but to serve others. In a few minutes you will be asked to move to the Fellowship Hall to a Ministry Fair which offers you all kinds of opportunities to serve others through this church. Next week we’ll have a Missions Fair which will feature agencies and programs outside the church, but this week we are focused on what you can do to help right here at LBC.

Some of you may feel that you don’t have the strength at your age to help others. It may be true that you are at the point in life where your main job is to have the grace to *receive* help from others, but you can always help others with kind words and prayers and wisdom gained from long life and suffering. Some of you may feel that you are not gifted enough to help anybody. First, you underestimate yourself. God has given each of us at least one spiritual gift, and you have hundreds of other abilities. But second, there are lots of jobs around the church that don’t require giftedness. Like any family, we need family members to do chores that just need to be done. Someone has to change diapers and vacuum and clean up the yard and wipe down the kitchen counter. Don’t say that’s not your gift. It’s your chore. And it is serving God.

When we serve others we are serving God, but in the final analysis we don’t serve God with our own strength. God gives us the strength to do what he calls us to do. Listen to 1 Peter 4:11 (TNIV), “If you serve, you should do so with the strength that God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.” Amen.