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November 13, 2016

How Serving Serves to Supply and Sustain Our Joy

Luke 22:24-27

1 Peter 4:10-11

Acts 20:35

2 Corinthians 8:1-5

There are numerous ways in which Christianity offends the hearts and minds of people who don't know and love Jesus. Its values and perspective on life are of an altogether different nature. For example, the world says to do whatever you must to get as much stuff as you can and keep it all for yourself. The Bible says to be "content" with what you have (1 Tim. 6:6-7), and if you do get more, give it away. The world says to hate and "get even" with those who mistreat you. The Bible says to love them, and to bless those who persecute you (Rom. 12:14). The world advocates free sex. Get as much as you can from as many people as you can. The Bible says "abstain from sexual immorality" because "God has not called us to impurity, but in holiness" (1 Thess. 4:3, 7). As you can imagine, the contrasts could go on seemingly forever.

But today I have one thing and one thing only in mind that I want to present for your consideration. It can be expressed in any number of ways:

Whereas the world says that happiness is found in getting, the Bible says that "it is more blessed to *give* than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Whereas the world says get others to serve you, the Bible says to serve *others* for *your good, their good, and God's glory* (1 Peter 4:10-11).

Whereas the world says get more wealth in order to increase your joy, the Bible says that your experience of joy enables you to give in the midst of your own poverty (2 Cor. 8:1-2).

Whereas the world says that he is greater who sits leisurely and lets others serve him, Jesus says that the "greatest" among you is the "one who serves" (Luke 22:26).

I think it's clear that there is no greater contrast between the perspective of the non-Christian world and the perspective of the Christian church than that which we see when it comes to the subject of serving others and giving to others and helping those in need.

Why does the Bible place so much emphasis on the importance of serving? Is this God's way of *punishing* us for our sins? Is this his way of making certain that we remain *humble*? Is serving something like the *membership fees* that we must pay to stay in the Church? Sadly, many think of their service in the local church as the way in which they *pay back* God for his grace. No! You can't pay back God for his grace. Grace never incurs a debt, as if somehow you and I are now required to recompense God for all the good he has done. The only proper response to grace is to posture yourself to receive more, and in doing so direct all the attention to God as the giver, the benefactor, the generous and abundant donor who overflows in mercy for broken people.

So why, then, does the NT place so much emphasis on serving? The answer reveals once again how utterly contrary the values of the kingdom of God are in relation to the values of the world.

Stop and think about how our society looks on those who serve by attending to the needs of others and perhaps sweeping up the messes they leave behind. They are regarded as poor and unworthy and lacking dignity. We almost always elevate and praise and envy those who are served, those at whose feet people fall and those whose every need is instantly met by someone rushing to his/her aid. But it is not that way in the kingdom of God.

Look closely at what Jesus says in Luke 22:24-27.

A dispute also arose among them [i.e., the disciples], as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:24-27).

In our perverted society, we heap praise upon the one whose coat or suitcase another carries. We honor the one who is driven everywhere by the chauffeur. We place greater value on the man or woman who has an entourage that waits on him/her hand and foot, always quick to jump into service whenever they ring a bell or wave a hand.

That is our world. But it isn't the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God it is precisely the opposite. Jesus points to the world's values in v. 27 when he asks them: "For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table?" The world says, Yes, of course, the greater and more important person is the one who reclines at a table and has others wait hand and foot on him/her. But that isn't the way it is in the kingdom of God or in the church. For Jesus immediately declares: "***But I am among you as the one who serves***" (v. 27b). Or as he says it elsewhere, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

So, today we're going to think together about the meaning of service in the body of Christ. But don't be misled into thinking that I'm encouraging you to serve primarily so that we might fill a gap or meet a need or cover for someone who formerly committed to serve but for whatever reason backed out. Of course, there is an element of truth in that. I would be less than honest if I did not acknowledge that we have a great need and that there are numerous gaps to fill. But trust me when I say that such is, at best, a secondary goal of my appeal.

My appeal for you to passionately and joyfully serve is so that you might experience an even greater measure of God's presence and favor. Jesus spoke of experiencing greater "blessedness" if we choose to give rather than merely receive. ***Simply put, you should never, ever expect to become a more mature Christian, a believer who more and more reflects the presence and beauty of Jesus, until such time as your life is characterized by service.*** Not simply a one-off commitment to help an individual clean out their garage on a Saturday afternoon, but a life-long devotion to service.

Clarifying What We Don't Mean by "Serving"

Before we go any further let's be clear about what serving is ***not***, for all too often we approach the subject with serious misconceptions. Or better still, let's be clear on what are ***inappropriate motives*** for serving.

(1) ***Serving is not a way to manage or manipulate God.*** You must never serve in any capacity thinking that by doing so you can cajole God or sway his will to give you things that he otherwise wouldn't have provided.

(2) ***Serving is not a way to atone for sins or to "make up" for mistakes made.*** To serve for such a reason is to diminish the finality and sufficiency of Christ's death on the cross. You don't earn God's favor by serving, but instead simply grow in your capacity to enjoy his favor even more.

(3) ***Serving is not a way to get God to like you again or perhaps to love you for the first time.*** Here is how some people think: You messed up, so you sacrifice and serve, and God sees it and says: "Good job. I appreciate what you've done for my people. In light of that, I'll suppress my anger and disappoint with you and love you again like I did before you screwed up." No!

(4) As one author has said, ***servicing is not a "tedious process of self-justification"*** (Nate Palmer, *Servanthood as Worship*, 9). In short, serving does not save. The only service that saves is the service that Christ rendered for us in giving himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

(5) ***Never think of service in the local church as a way to get church leaders to notice you and promote you.*** Not only do you not serve to manipulate God, you should never pursue it to manipulate people either. Service is never to be viewed as a mere stepping stone to more glorious and highly regarded positions of power or influence.

(6) ***Serving is not seasonal.*** That is to say, it is not dependent on your mood or the time of year or the circumstances that currently prevail in the life of the local church. ***There is never a time when you aren't serving someone: if you're not serving others, then you are serving yourself.*** If you are not meeting their needs, you are meeting your own. That doesn't mean you should never take a brief break from some area of service. We all need rest and recharging. But ***for the Christian, serving is the norm, not the exception.***

(7) ***You must never think of serving others as separate or distinct from your love of God.*** Serving others and worshiping God are one and the same. "For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do" (Hebrews 6:10). Worship is not just singing! In 1 Corinthians 10:31 Paul says that everything we do is an expression of worship. The Apostle Peter declares that we serve so that "God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:10-11).

This passage in Hebrews 6 is quite incredible. The author doesn't simply say that our love for God is seen or known to be real when we serve others. That of course is true. But he goes farther and appears to say that to love God **is** to serve others and in serving others we are literally loving God. That means that, if you are not regularly serving others, your claim to know and love God is a sham. You may think that's a stretch and perhaps even find it offensive that I would question your devotion to God. But I didn't inspire this author to write Hebrews: God did. And "serving the saints" is clearly said to be one of the primary ways in which our love for God is seen and known to be real. ***So, in the absence of service, what reason does anyone have to believe your claim that you love God?***

Why Serve?

Why serve? I'm about to give you several reasons, but let's start with these.

- (1) We should freely and fervently serve because service is the clearest and fastest pathway to maximum joy. It is not merely ***from joy*** but also ***for joy*** that we serve one another. We'll see that truth confirmed in several texts in just a moment.
- (2) We should freely and fervently serve because service is the best and most obvious way in which we express our love not only for God but for others.
- (3) We should freely and fervently serve because service is what Jesus did for us.
- (4) We should freely and fervently serve because in service God is greatly glorified.
- (5) We should freely and fervently serve because in service you experience the transforming power of the Holy Spirit who is committed to using your self-giving as a way of conforming you to the image of Jesus. In other words, ***serving and giving are an essential part of the life of discipleship. Or again, if you want to be like Jesus, you must act like Jesus.***

It is impossible, not improbable or merely unlikely, but utterly impossible to grow up into Christ-likeness if you do not consistently, freely, and fervently serve others. Some of you will be offended by that and you will either be angry with me or find a way in your mind to justify not serving. Right now you probably think that it's all you can do to show up on a Sunday morning here and there. But I'm telling you this because I care deeply and passionately about your spiritual growth. The simple fact is that ***people who do not freely and fervently serve others cannot and will not grow up in Christ.*** Your spiritual maturity is dependent upon it.

1 Peter 4:10-11

We've already looked at Luke 22:24-27, so let's turn our attention to the three other primary passages on serving. The first is 1 Peter 4:10-11.

Everything the Christian man or woman does, if it is to be virtuous and glorifying to God, must be done conscious of the fact that God is the one who supplies the strength for everything. God is the one who empowers every deed. God is the one who stirs our spirits and moves our wills and sustains our good intentions and inflames our affections.

Peter's reference to "serving" here cannot be restricted to only a few spiritual gifts. All service is carried out by the power that God supplies. That means that the prayer which Peter commanded in v. 7 is undertaken in the strength that God supplies. And the love that we feel for others is expressed in the strength that God supplies. And the hospitality we show to one another is awakened and sustained by the strength that God supplies. And the exercise of all spiritual gifts finds its source in the strength that God supplies. And our serving our kids in the nursery is awakened and sustained by the strength that God supplies. And our commitment to show up to serve in bad weather and when our bodies ache from exhaustion is awakened and sustained by the strength that God supplies.

It's critical that we know this so that when someone hears you praying or sees you loving or is the recipient of your hospitality or benefits from the use of your spiritual gift they will instinctively give God the glory rather than you.

Look again at v. 11b – "in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ!" It is entirely possible to appear to "serve" others all the while you are dishonoring God. If your service is not consciously undertaken in "the strength that God supplies" it will end up being for your glory and not his. And if you find serving others always burdensome and weighty and just one more obligation or moral duty that you have to fulfill or others will think badly of you, it is obvious that you are "serving" in the strength that you yourself supply and not in the strength "that God supplies."

Acts 20:35

Let me briefly remind you of the context for this statement. Paul has been speaking to the Elders of the church in Ephesus, encouraging them and warning them and instructing them. And lest you think that any of them were offended by what he said, it may be helpful to remember that as soon as he finished talking we read this:

"And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken that they would not see his face again" (Acts 20:36-38a).

There are a couple of things I want you to see in v. 35. First, notice that he is trying to motivate them to work hard (v. 35a). And the way he goes about doing this is by telling them that they should always keep uppermost in their minds something Jesus said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (v. 35b). Don't overlook that all-important word: "**remember**". Keep it in your thinking. Mull over it as you labor and serve one another.

Second, the thing that he wants them to "remember" is that there is greater blessedness or joy or happiness or spiritual reward in giving than in receiving. In other words, as they go about serving one another and giving to one another and sacrificing for one another they are to "remember" that in doing so they are going to gain greater blessedness than if they choose only to let others serve and give to them.

Some people don't like that. Some people insist that we should **not remember** but in fact "**forget**" any possibility of reward for our serving and giving to others. They say something like this: "To the degree that you give and serve with the expectation of receiving anything in return, you spoil the virtue of your action; you undermine the goodness of your service and your giving if you do it thinking about what you might gain for yourself."

But that isn't what Paul says that Jesus says. Paul says that Jesus says that the one thing that must motivate your serving and giving, the one thing that you must always "remember" is that when you serve and give you will obtain more blessedness or joy or spiritual happiness than if you choose not to serve and give.

This is why I said earlier that we not only serve and give **from** or **out of** the joy that we already have but also **for** or **with a view toward** gaining and experiencing even more joy. If you are hungry for more joy, look for ways to give. If you are sad and depressed and filled with anxiety, look for ways to serve others and God will fill you with a joy that you likely will never find anywhere else.

Paul didn't quote Jesus simply to reinforce his exhortation to give and serve. His purpose here isn't to say, "Look people, you need to be generous in giving and serving because it is Jesus who said so." Of course, Jesus did say so, and that ought to matter to us. But Paul's point in quoting Jesus is to emphasize that **there is pleasure in giving; there is happiness in serving; there is joy in expending oneself for the sake of others**. And Paul quotes the words of Jesus

in this regard because it is extremely difficult for you and me to believe that we will be happier if we give our lives away in generosity and service for others than if we selfishly cling to our time and energy and money.

Simply put: serving serves not only to supply us with joy but also to sustain it in our hearts. When your joy in God overflows in heartfelt service to others, true love is in operation. Love is the expansion and overflow of your joy in God when it is extended and abundantly poured out into the lives of others. And that happens when you serve them, give to them, and sacrifice for them.

I hope you see the irony in Acts 20:35. The irony is that while Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive, he is also saying that in giving you receive more blessing or happiness or joy than you otherwise would if you are only on the receiving end of the generosity of others. So there is a very real sense in which we give or serve others rather than receive from them because precisely in doing so we actually are the *recipients* of more blessedness and joy than if we only stood to receive.

2 Corinthians 8:1-5

I've saved the best for last. The clearest and most glorious and encouraging passage in the Bible on the dynamics of giving and serving and the spiritual blessings that come with it is found in 2 Corinthians 8.

Let me remind you of the context. The church in the city of Jerusalem was suffering from extreme poverty. Paul had spent considerable time raising funds to help alleviate their struggle. The Christians in Corinth had initially told Paul that they wanted to help, but for some reason they had never followed through with it. Their verbal declaration had not been consummated by actual giving. So Paul writes 2 Corinthians 8-9 to stir them up to fulfill their promise. And he does it by directing their attention to the Christians in Macedonia (i.e., the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, among others). On the surface, this seems like a bad idea, because the Macedonians were just as poverty-stricken as were the Christians in Jerusalem.

The Macedonians loved their Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. But there was only so much they could do for them. They couldn't travel to Jerusalem, as the distance was too far. I'm sure they prayed for them. But here we are told that they overflowed in generosity to the people in Jerusalem. They served them by giving material resources in order to alleviate the suffering of the church in that city.

Several things to note here.

First, the joy of the Macedonians obviously didn't come from their material possessions. They had none. Or they had very little. Paul says explicitly that they were living in *virtual poverty*. So, although they were personally in great need themselves, they didn't let that become an excuse not to serve and to give to the Christians in Jerusalem.

Second, the joy of the Macedonians obviously didn't come from their physical comfort. They had none. Or they had very little. Paul says explicitly that they were *suffering great affliction*. But again, they didn't appeal or point to their affliction and say, "Hey, as much as we'd like to help, you can see that we are in no condition to do so. In fact, it would be nice if some of you could serve us and give to us. We are the needy ones."

Third, the joy of the Macedonians obviously came from *their experience of God's grace*. They had plenty of it. Paul says explicitly that the grace of God had been "given" to them. Of course, God never just "gives" his grace. He gives effusively, abundantly, with overwhelming generosity.

Fourth, the Macedonians responded to their poverty and affliction not with self-pity or greed or bitterness but with *joy*. Paul says explicitly that they gave to the church in Jerusalem *from "their abundance of joy."* They didn't just have a little joy, a small measure of joy, a passing moment of delight. They abounded in joy.

Fifth, although the Macedonians were suffering affliction and had very little in the way of financial wealth, their joy didn't simply trickle out a drop at a time but *"overflowed in a wealth of generosity."* We all too often measure out what we can do and stop way short of what is actually possible. Here we see people who were literally poor giving in such a way that Paul feels justified in describing their gift as "a wealth of generosity."

Sixth, the Macedonians didn't love and serve the church in Jerusalem because we begged them to do so, says Paul. They loved and served and gave because *they begged us for the privilege* of doing so! In other words, *it was not from a sense of moral obligation or duty that they served others but from an experience of God's grace to them in Christ*. What could possibly have happened in their hearts that would prompt them to beg for the opportunity to give? Could it be that they were hungry for more "blessedness" than would have been theirs had they chosen not to give? Could it be that they had heard Paul say to them the same thing he said to the Elders in Ephesus, that it was more blessed to give than to receive?

Seventh, the Macedonians didn't wake up each day hurting and uncomfortable and poor and say: "Oh, I'm so relieved that my physical and financial circumstances and all the pressures of life have gotten me off the hook so that I don't have to serve others. Hopefully, once people hear of our condition they will jump at the opportunity to serve and give to us." No! They refused to let the adversity and pressures and disappointment of life become an excuse not to serve and to give and to love others.

Eighth, the Macedonians joyfully served others because they had been transformed by the multitude of ways in which *Christ had served them*. Paul makes this clear in 2 Corinthians 8:9 when he bases or grounds his appeal in the self-giving of Jesus himself: "

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

Conclusion

In case you have not as yet picked up on the primary goal of my message today, it is this: Strike a blow at self-preoccupation by devoting your attention, time, and energy to serving and giving to others out of the overflow of your own joy in God. For in doing so you will actually be doing yourself a glorious favor. In serving and giving you will gain far more joy, spiritual blessedness, delight, and satisfaction than could ever be gained by greedily and selfishly serving only yourself.