

Serve

Traveling Together: Pathways for Discipleship

1 Peter 4:7-11

Pastor Josh Black

January 13, 2019

Last week we began a series on our pathways for discipleship. Our mission is clear. We want to make disciples of Jesus Christ. But if we want to actually make progress toward that destination, we have to have a plan. Our pathways are the main ministries we emphasize at First Free to make disciples. They're not the only ways to make disciples, but if we want to travel together as a church, it's important that we have clarity on what roads we're taking.

In case you weren't here last week, or in case you already forgot, here are the pathways: Gather, Know, Go. We want to gather together on Sunday morning to worship, serve, and learn. We also want to be in small groups with other people where we really know others and are known by them. And we want to go together in evangelism and missions.

So, although there are three big pathways, there are also six smaller pathways: Worship, Service, Learning, Groups, Evangelism, and Missions. These aren't the only ministries at First Free. But we feel we are called to these pathways and we believe these pathways are the best way for us to make disciples together as a church. Last week we covered worship. This morning, we're going to talk about serving.

Enlisted or Drafted?

Sunday, December 7, 1941, is a date that will live in infamy. That's what Franklin Delano Roosevelt said about Pearl Harbor. Japan's air strike hit eighteen of our ships. Two hundred aircraft were destroyed. Twenty-four hundred Americans were killed. And 1,300 wounded. The Japanese scored a crippling victory over our Navy... or so it seemed. But their tactics turned out to be a major blunder.

Overnight, America went from a somewhat unconcerned country trying to stay out of the war to a unified nation intent on winning it. On Monday morning there were long lines at the recruiting offices. Volunteers rushed to join the military. Tens of thousands reported late to work or school only to say that they'd be leaving for boot camp in a few days. People lied about their age and health to be able to join. And the ones who couldn't join the armed forces did all they could to contribute.

Fast forward twenty-five years later. American soldiers were again needed for the battlefield. But this time the war wasn't as popular. Almost no one volunteered for Vietnam. Most who fought had to be drafted into service. And many did all they could to avoid the draft.

Don Whitney says that when it comes to serving in the local church, there are some who seem to follow the WWII model. And there are some who follow the Vietnam model. Some are eager to serve, regardless of their age or the difficulty. They have a heart to serve in a great cause—a much greater cause than serving their country in WWII or Vietnam. They're motivated to serve King Jesus and to advance his kingdom through making disciples. Others appear to do all they can to avoid serving. They don't come looking for ministry. Leaders have to draft them. And when they do serve, they serve reluctantly.¹ Which of these best describes you?

¹ The whole illustration comes directly from Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Church*, 103-104.

I don't know all of the reasons why so many enlisted to serve in WWII and why so many avoided serving in Vietnam. And I don't want to wade into any of that this morning. But I suspect it had something to do with the cause. Americans thought the cause of WWII was worth fighting for.

What we're going to see this morning is that our service in the church is a much greater cause.

1 Peter 4:7-11²

⁷The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. ⁸Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: ¹¹whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

This is the Word of the Lord.

This passage has four main commands. Two of them have to do with reasons to prioritize serving. And two of them give us specific ways of serving. So to divide my sermon I want to consider the priority for serving and the plan for serving.

PRIORITY FOR SERVING (7-8)

Let's start with the priority of serving. There are two reasons given to serve.

The Days Are Short

The first one comes in verse 7. "The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers."

What Peter is basically saying is that the days are short, so we need to prioritize what matters. We're living in the last days. And things seem to be spinning out of control. Sin is rampant; people's lives are falling apart. The church is persecuted and opposed. But we shouldn't lose our head. We need to exercise self-control. We need to be sober-minded. And above all, we need to depend on God in prayer! In other words, in times like this, we need to focus on what matters.

January is the time of year when people are setting goals. Some have made resolutions. How many of you bought a new planner or Day-Timer? Or maybe a new bullet journal? Some of you gave up on all of that a long time ago. Maybe you're skeptical or cynical when it comes to goals and resolutions and planners. I personally think it's good to set goals and use organization systems—to the degree that they help you really prioritize what matters.

Many of the best planners or goal-setting schemes encourage you to begin with the end in mind. To think of where you want to end up so you can sort out what your priorities are.

I think that's what Peter's calling us to do. He's saying the end is near. Eternity's in the balance. Judgment's coming. Sure, life is crazy. And the tyranny of the urgent vies for our attention. That's why we have to be focused, self-controlled, and dependent on God in prayer if we want to make the most of our short days. We have to prioritize what matters.

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®] unless otherwise noted.

Love One Another

And what we learn is that there's nothing that matters more than loving one another. Look at verse 8. "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins."

There's a play on words in verses 7-8 that isn't completely clear in the translation. Verse 7 says, "the end of *all things* is at hand..." Verse 8 literally says, "Above *all things* keep on having earnest love for one another..." So in view of the end of all things, there's not one thing that matters more than loving one another in the church. And not only that. We're called to an *extravagant* love for one another in the church. We need to *keep on* having love for one another. This is an ongoing, persistent, persevering type of a love. Remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:8? "Love never ends." That's the idea here. And not only that. We're called to have an *earnest* love for one another. A serious love. Not a causal love or sentimental affection, but a committed love, a laboring love. Or to get to the point of this sermon, this is a kind of love that gets its hands dirty and serves others in the church. Peter says nothing matters more than this.

Application

I don't want to get too far ahead of Peter's argument. He's getting ready to deal with some really practical ways we love one another by serving in verses 9-11. But I want to stop here for a moment and ask: how do verses 7-8 help us to think about serving?

One of the reasons people are reluctant to serve in the church is because they're too busy. Busyness seems to be the excuse we have for everything. But how does our "too busy" rationale match up with Peter's rationale? I think Peter would ask us "What are you busy with?" Are you just busy, or are you busy with the right things? What determines your priorities?

Are your priorities determined by the world or by God? When you think about your day and your week and your year, are you thinking with an eternal perspective? When you make commitments, do you have the end of all things in mind?

I'm convinced that we all have time for what's important to us. What's important for you? Is tangible, committed love for others in the body of Christ important for you? Peter says there's nothing more important. Is that reflected in your schedule? Does that priority help you know what to say yes to *and* what to say no to?

My main prayer for you this morning is that you will prioritize serving one another in the body of Christ. But if you prioritize serving one another, then you need a plan for how to serve them. And that's what I want to turn our attention to now.

PLAN FOR SERVING (9-11)

In verses 9-11 Peter gives us two ways to serve one another. One is through hospitality and the other through using our spiritual gifts. I'll briefly touch on hospitality and spend more time on spiritual gifts.

Hospitality

The first way we serve one another is through showing hospitality. Look at verse 9. "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling."

The hospitality that's being spoken of here is welcoming strangers into your home. This was a tangible way for the early church to serve others, especially those travelling.

We talked about biblical hospitality back in July. Biblical hospitality is not simply having your friends or family over to your house and putting out a nice spread for them. It's not just fellowship. Biblical hospitality is unique. It creates space for people who are strangers to become friends. For people you don't know to become people you do know. It creates a context for relationships. This is important in evangelism and it's important with other believers as well.

Jordan Green will talk more about hospitality in a couple weeks when he talks about community groups. But I think hospitality is important for serving as well.

One of the challenges of being in a somewhat large church like First Free, is it's hard to make friends. But I've found that one of the best ways to get to know others in the church is through serving. When you serve together with others, that serving role creates a space to get to get to know one another. It creates a space for a stranger to become a friend. And that's the goal of hospitality. And not only can you establish relationships with those you serve alongside of, you can also establish relationships with those you serve.

I know my friend Wes sees his service in Cubbies and his service as a Sunday morning adult class leader as an opportunity to extend hospitality to those in his den and their parents as well as those in his class. I know my wife does the same at nursery check-in and in her 5th grade Sunday School class.

I'm no expert in sociology, but I've been at First Free for twenty-one years now and I don't think I know a single person in this church who is really well-connected that hasn't put in significant time serving.

So we're commanded to serve one another. And we're commanded to serve by showing hospitality to one another so strangers can become friends. So you get two birds with one stone. While you serve, you get to make friends. That's a good deal!

Stewarding Gifts

The other way we serve is through using our spiritual gifts. I want to spend a little more time on this. Look at verse 10. "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." Here's the point—steward your spiritual gifts to build up one another.

One of the reasons people are reluctant to serve is they don't think they have anything to offer. Or maybe they think somebody else will do it. But this verse teaches us a very important lesson about serving—*each one* has received a gift. Everyone who has received the grace of the gospel has received at least one spiritual gift to build up the body of Christ.

Every one of us must personally place our trust in Jesus Christ to be saved. But even though our faith is personal, it's not private. We were saved into a family. First Peter 2:5 says that we're being built into a spiritual house. Christ is building his church. But he delights to use each one of us in that building project. We're all body builders. Ministry's not just for the professionals. Every member of the body is a minister.

This is a privilege. But it's not just a privilege. It's also a responsibility. You see, because our spiritual gifts are just that—a gift, or a grace gift from God—then we have a responsibility to steward those gifts. We can't bury them in the ground. We can't lock them up in the storage closet. They need to be used and even developed.

In WWII America needed soldiers to fight against tyranny. It was a compelling cause. But what could be more compelling than the Great Commission? People are lost in sin and dying without

Christ. We're called to go and make disciples of Jesus Christ. The harvest is plentiful, but it needs laborers. Those who have been redeemed are now being transformed into the very image of Jesus Christ himself by the Holy Spirit. And God has called us, every one of us, to engage in this project of making disciples.

We shouldn't dodge the draft. We shouldn't even need to be drafted. We should want to enlist. We should want to leave our nets and follow him. And for those who have enlisted, we shouldn't go AWOL. We should persevere in the fight.

Some have the attitude that they've done their time. But the Bible calls us to not grow weary in doing good (Gal. 6:9). That doesn't mean that we have to keep serving in the same roles year after year, but I believe that until the end comes, we each have at least some part to play in serving one another in the body. Even a shut-in in the nursing home can have a ministry of praying for the church. Or I think of the team of men who clean on Tuesday mornings. That's an example of a group of men who have not grown weary in doing good. Many of them are in their seventies or eighties and they still show up Tuesday after Tuesday to clean this worship center and restock the supplies. They are stewarding their gifts. They are playing their part in the effort.

Finding Gifts

Some of you may be discouraged with all of this talk of spiritual gifts. Maybe you don't know what your gifts are. Or maybe you don't feel like you're as effective in ministry as you'd like to be. Well, if that's where you find yourself, Peter has some more help for you.

In verse 11 he says, "Whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God, whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies." Peter's really continuing his theme of stewardship here. He's saying those who speak have a stewardship to say what God says. Those who are in a serving role need to remember that it's a role from God; they need to serve in his strength, not their own.

But in teaching us about stewardship, Peter also helps us see the kinds of gifts Christ has given to the church. Broadly speaking, there are two types of gifts: speaking gifts and serving gifts. If you look at the other passages in the New Testament on spiritual gifts, you'll find that they generally fit into one of these two categories. Prophecy, teaching, and exhortation, generally fit into the speaking gifts. Helps, giving, leadership, and mercy generally fit into the serving gifts. That's not a hard and fast rule, but it is a helpful distinction.

But with that said, there's a sense in which we're all called to speak and we're all called to serve. Everybody is called to speak the truth in love as Ephesians says. We're called to build one another up with the Word. And everybody's called to serve. But not everyone has the gift of teaching. And not everyone has the gift of service.

So, if you want to learn what your gifts are, what should you do? We offer classes on spiritual gifts. Tim Buhler is teaching one during our next block. Student Ministries offers spiritual gifts inventories as well. But I really think the best way to learn what your spiritual gifts are is simply through serving. Just try different things. Contact one of our pastors or directors to learn more about their specific ministry. Read your bulletin for opportunities. Or you can contact Jordan Green. That's his job—to help connect you with other people and serving opportunities so that you can grow. He'd love to visit with you. Regardless, just jump in and start serving.

As you try a variety of different things, you'll gain a sense of your strengths. And over time you'll get affirmation and encouragement from others. That will bring clarity to your gifts. And as you gain that clarity, do what you can to leverage your gifting. Serve within your strengths.

Qualifications

But with that being said, I want to make a couple of qualifications. The church is a family. And sometimes chores need done in a family that aren't in your wheelhouse. I don't know that changing diapers part of my gift. I'm a teacher. But sometimes at my house Neaveha's diaper needs changed. The same is true in the church. Ideally, everybody would be serving within their gifting. But sometimes we just need to dive in where things need to be done. That's my first qualification.

That leads me to my second qualification. I think we're called specifically to build up the *local* church. I'm pretty sure that's the point Peter's making. And I'm confident that's what Paul's talking about when he talks about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians. There are some people who are serving the church at large around the city or around the world, but aren't doing much to serve the local church.

I think it's good to serve in parachurch organizations. I do that myself. But I think the New Testament calls us to especially use our gifts to serve the local church. That doesn't necessarily mean you have to sign up for one of our official ministries at First Free.

We need help in a number of important areas on Sunday morning. It takes about 300 people to pull off a Sunday morning. And even more are needed for ministry throughout the week, like on Tuesday mornings and Wednesday nights. We need people involved in these official ministries. *But* there are all kinds of unofficial ways that you can build up the body of Christ too:

- You can serve by helping families with babysitting.
- You can take meals to people when they're sick.
- You could meet with someone for coffee every couple of weeks to read through a good book or do a Bible study.
- You could give someone a ride to church or to an appointment.
- You can simply look for someone to encourage on Sunday morning.

My point is we're called to serve. It's a worthy cause. And we're called to serve our local church. *But* there's more than one way to do that.

In WWII some people enlisted. They signed up for official service. But many others were back home supporting the war effort in unofficial but equally helpful ways. In the church we need both—official servants in specific roles and unofficial, informal service.

Glory

I hope I've made it plain throughout this sermon that when we serve it's not really about us. We serve for the sake of others. And our service is actually a grace. It's nothing we bring to the table. It's something *from* God we're called to steward. The words we speak aren't our words; it's the Word of God. The service we offer is not in our strength; it's in the strength that God supplies. You get the point.

It's all *from* God and *for* others. Not about us. Therefore, we don't get the glory; God gets the glory. The reason we serve is for the glory of God. After Peter gives his argument for serving, he ends by

saying that the whole point of all of this is “in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

That’s a pretty elevated doxology. Sounds like one of Paul’s doxologies after he’s just unpacked a bunch of heavy theology. And Peter uses it here at the end of an exhortation to serve one another. When we serve one another in the body of Christ, God is glorified!

And one reason for that is because when we serve one another, we reflect something of who God is. Remember what Jesus said to his disciples: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

We can’t give our lives as a ransom. But we can give our lives in sacrificial service to our brothers and sisters. There’s nothing much more important. And this is part of what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ who glorify God.