

Offering a Drink to Others

Sermon V by John Ed Mathison

Today's topic deals with a very important biblical principal about becoming open to receiving the treasures of the transformed life. It's coupled with our commitment that primes the pump, a part of which is not only for praying, attending worship, and giving. It's also for serving. Now, in my humble opinion, the churches that are going to be the most effective in this new century are the churches that do the best job of helping laypersons discover their spiritual gifts and then offer a vehicle through which they can deploy those gifts to do ministry.

A long time ago, the body of Christ was separated into clergy and laity. That chasm was bridged by the Protestant Reformation. Unfortunately, I think we have recreated that chasm to some extent because we tend to distinguish too much between clergy and laity. Many churches and Christians have the idea that if something is to be done in the church, the clergy should do it.

That's not as it should be. The biblical take on the ministry of the church is that the church is the ministry of the *laos*, the people of God, the laity. So today's subject is critical because it is designed to help each of us, laypersons and staff, discover where God wants us to serve so we can begin to invest our lives in something that is extremely meaningful to us as individuals, a church body, and a society in general.

I'm going to share three basic points with you. I'll begin by emphasizing the essential nature of service in the Christian life. We'll also

consider where we should serve, and then, how we should serve.

First, serving is an essential dimension of the Christian life. It's not an option; rather, it's what we are called to do. Some people want to attend church simply to be fed the Word of God. Well, if individuals don't use caution, they could develop spiritual obesity because they are always being fed but they are never active. The purpose of worship, the purpose of praying, and the purpose of church is not to simply sit and soak. We are to become stirred to action—to go and to serve.

Serving is such an important dimension of the Christian faith. First, it's part of our Christian faith because God serves us. Jesus came to be a servant: “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” (Matt. 20:28). This past week we've been studying the model of how we imitate Christ as we begin to serve. Jesus serves us, and he expects us to serve others:

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 be the slave of all. (Mark 10:42–44)

The expectation that Jesus has for us as his bride, the body of Christ, is that we are to serve others.

Now here's an interesting sidelight to that: when we serve in the name

of Christ and reach out to others, it gives us credibility as his messengers. If we are to become effective sowers of the message of Christ, one of the best ways to fertilize the soil in which that seed can be planted is to serve. Paul said in First Corinthians, “I have become a servant of everyone so that I can bring them to Christ” (9:19). When we serve others, we open the door of opportunity for the message of Christ to be shared.

Peter pointed out, “Your godly lives will speak to them better than any words. They will be won over by watching your pure, godly behavior” (1 Pet. 3:1–2). You see, the best sermons are seldom those preached from behind the pulpit. The best sermons are the sidewalk sermons preached by God’s people when we leave the sanctuary and go out into the world, where we reach out and touch human lives. What we do oftentimes speaks much more loudly than anything we actually say.

Here’s another aspect of that all-important concept. Serving others is an essential dimension of the Christian life because it brings us together. The New Testament concept of the church is that we are the body of Christ, the community of faith that gathers together and serves together. The physical body of Christ was well coordinated, and all parts of his body functioned in unity with one another. The church, as the body of Christ, is composed of many different types of people with many different gifts, but the whole function of service brings the church together in unified vision.

The love that church members have for one another binds us together and frees us from ourselves and our selfishness. One of the best witnesses a church can give to its community is exhibiting unity in its love and care for

others.

Paul said, “We work together as partners who belong to God” (1 Cor. 3:9), and that “Under his direction, the whole body is fitted together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts to grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love” (Eph. 4:16).

This past week we read about team spirit and the servant’s heart, and about how Jesus went about serving, which brought together a group of individuals who became inseparable in their love, encouragement, and support of one another. Our serving gives us credibility as messengers for Christ, and it also brings us together as a team. And teams can get a lot more accomplished than individuals.

Now, granted that we need to be serving, let me ask a very important question: where should we serve? I promise you that there is a place for every person in the life of the church to use his or her God-given gifts for something very meaningful. Here are just a few suggestions of how to determine where we should serve.

First, we should serve where we can use the gifts and abilities that God has given us. Just as on a football team, the quarterback has different gifts from the guards and the tackles who, in turn, have different gifts from the wide receivers. If the offensive linemen are playing quarterback and wide receiver in a game, you’re not going to win. If you get the quarterback playing at an offensive or defensive line position, you’re not going to be very effective. So it is with us. We will best serve where we can best employ

our specific gifts.

The Miami Dolphins were AFC champions in 1983, and played the Washington Redskins in the Super Bowl. Miami Coach Don Shula was credited with a great deal of the Dolphins' success because he evaluated the talents of his players and built his system around those talents. That was different from other coaches, who usually built a system and tried to make the players' talents fit the system. I like Coach Shula's approach. I believe that the church can win any contest in the world today when we allow God to direct us in employing the gifts he's given us to use in ministry.

Part of the church's task is to help people discover what gifts they possess and then provide an opportunity for those gifts and abilities to be used.

In Romans 12:6–8, Paul said:

God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well. . . . If your gift is that of serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, do a good job of teaching. If your gift is to encourage others, do it! If you have money, share it generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

You see, then, that the Bible teaches very clearly that God has gifted each of us in some way.

It's still exciting to me as a pastor to see people prayerfully discover what their gifts are. If you don't know what your talents are yet, there are resources such as gift inventories that can be used to help you really discover them. That's important because I want to be strategically placed in the body of Christ so that I can be the most effective in serving others.

I want to make just a side comment to this. One of the big issues we hear with volunteering today is "burnout." Yet you'll never hear one person say "I'm burned out on what I'm doing" if the volunteer prays about and finds a place to serve in an area he or she loves. Now, it's different if I'm recruited to do something that is not in my gifting. In those cases, I feel guilty if I don't do it; and so often, therefore, I try to do it, but I don't do a very effective job. That's where burnout occurs. But if I am in the area of my giftedness, I don't burn out—I just get fired up because I'm giving and I'm receiving far more than I'm giving.

A church in Wisconsin wanted to recruit one of its members, a local school principal, to serve on some church boards. He was a very gifted administrator, and the church saw that he could add a lot to various areas. The man was wise and knew his giftings very well. He declined to serve on any boards, but said he would run the church's Sunday school department as long as the church wanted. He never got burned out—instead, he took his church service seriously and ran for many years what was considered to be the best Sunday school in town.

I think this is one of the critical points about serving. The church has to help people be useful in the area of their giftedness. So the area in which I

should serve is where my gifts and abilities are.

We should serve where we can be ourselves and use our past experience to God's glory. All of us have been through some tough trials, and coming through them has given us a unique message to share and a lesson to teach. We're advised in Galatians: "Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that" (6:4 THE MESSAGE). Second Corinthians says something similar, "He comforts us all in our troubles so that we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us" (1:4). I've noticed that the people who are most effective at serving in the life of the church are those who have been through something very tough, a big trial or trouble. Coming through it has taught them how to serve others who might be walking through the same situation.

Another reason that we should serve is to help where we know of a particular need. One of the most basic things about helping a church to be effective is to let the church find out where the need is, and then let people who are gifted in that area volunteer to meet that need. It seems that too many churches are ministering where there are no longer needs, or they're still doing things that are outdated. Something that might have been important five, ten, or even twenty years ago may no longer be relevant. I'm convinced that many churches waste money, resources, and human energy by doing things that no longer need to be done. In most churches, there is a need to officially bury programs or ministries that are no longer needed. That's something that takes a lot of courage, and it's hard to do. But we need

to focus our resources on using them where there are real needs.

Scripture poses this question:

Suppose you see a brother or sister who needs food or clothing, and you say, “Well, good-bye and God bless you; stay warm and eat well”—but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?
(James 2:15–16)

If you look at the example of the church in the book of Acts, in the second chapter, that powerful passage of Scripture which begins with verse 45, it says that the people pooled their resources, found needs, and then began to fill them.

One open door that I’ve discovered in ministry is through support groups. People all over the community are hurting in different areas, and it’s easy to identify the particular needs to be met. Many churches now have support groups for those who are caring for elderly parents, or have specific diseases, or who need parenting skills, or need grief recovery, or are going through the pain of divorce. Many who attend these support groups are unchurched, but the needs are there and churches are working on filling them.

So where should we serve? Where God has gifted us, where we’ve had past experiences that have helped us become stronger in our faith, and where there are needs.

One last thing: How should we serve? We should serve enthusiastically: “Never be lazy in your work, but serve the Lord enthusiastically” (Rom. 12:11). When people are enthusiastic about what they do in the life of the church, it becomes an invitation for others to come. Those who are the most enthusiastic about sharing their faith are also the most enthusiastic about serving.

Sadly, in the average church, it has been estimated that 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work. That’s a large problem. We should have 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100 percent of the people! Every member is to be a minister, and the church should help every person get involved in finding the place where God wants him or her to serve. The church must change its whole paradigm, its whole manner of thinking, and recognize that service is a ministry of the laity. Laypersons must have the opportunity to serve. When people serve enthusiastically, great things happen.

Here’s a side benefit of everyone having opportunities to serve: When people are enthusiastic about where they serve, they rarely complain or gripe. As my father used to say, people rowing the boat rarely have time to rock the boat. When people are enthusiastically serving, they don’t look for things that are wrong, they look for the things that are right.

We are to serve unselfishly rather than for ourselves. Scripture points out that we have been “called to live in freedom—not freedom to satisfy your sinful nature, but freedom to serve one another in love” (Gal. 5:13).

Another way we should serve is with humility because we are not placed above others. We serve as Jesus served. The Bible instructs: “All of

you serve each other in humility for ‘God sets himself against the proud, but he shows favor to the humble’” (1 Pet. 5:5). The most beautiful mental picture I have of Jesus is of him kneeling to wash his disciples’ feet. In the church we’re not to look for the top, we’re to look for a towel—a place where we can serve in humility.

Finally, we should serve with the intention of seeking to please God alone. The point of serving in the life of God’s church is not to please people or to draw attention to ourselves. If we want to get our name in the bulletin because of something we’re doing, that’s the wrong motivation. If, however, we’re serving simply to please God, we’ll receive joy that’s greater than we could even begin to imagine.

We are to “serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or whether they praise us . . .” (2 Cor. 6:8). Serving is at the very heart of how we express our Christian faith, opening doors through which we can be messengers of Christ.

The more we lose ourselves in serving God, the more we will discover about ourselves. The more we give, the more we receive. Every member of Christ’s body is a minister. Every member should be given the opportunity to find a niche in which to serve. When we’re losing our lives in serving Christ, then we’re doing what God has called us to do, opening up opportunities that become a platform for witness.

Serving others is offering a drink of the water of life to others. Jesus said, “if anyone gives even a cup of cold water . . . because he is my disciple . . . will certainly not lose his reward [in heaven]” (Matt. 10:42 NIV).

Serving is what the church should be focused on in the twenty-first century.

And before we close, I just want ask each of us to focus on something as well.

Next Sunday, we celebrate Commitment Sunday. I'm really excited about it. It'll mark the culmination of our six-week study, and we're going to celebrate. It's also when we'll have an opportunity to specifically commit to how we'll support our church with our prayers, presence, gifts, and service in the coming year. As you reflect on the final readings of the study this week, please prayerfully search your hearts and note how you've been transformed by God and what you've studied. Ask God where, what, and how he wants you to commit your transformed life in the life of this church. And then commit.

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