

LIVE AS IF YOU ARE A SERVANT

MATTHEW 20:20-28; EPHESIANS 4:11-13

Years ago, a pastor made an appeal to his congregation to give to a worthy cause. It was the custom in that church to bring your offering up to the front of the church rather than to pass around offering plates as we do here. Many came forward to present their gifts of love. Among them was a young crippled girl who hobbled along at the end of the line. She pulled a ring from her finger, placed it on the communion table where the offering was collected and then made her way back down the aisle to her seat. After the service, an usher was sent to bring her to the pastor's office. He wanted to talk to her. When she came in, the pastor said, "My dear, I saw what you did this morning. It was beautiful. But the response of the people has been so generous that we have more than enough to take care of the need. We know how much you treasure the ring that you gave today, and that's why we just don't feel right about keeping it. We've decided to give it back to you." But the girl shook her head vigorously. "You don't understand," she said. "I didn't give the ring to you. I gave it to God."

Children sometimes understand the Kingdom of God better than adults. Perhaps that's why Jesus said that all of us need to become childlike if we're going to become a part of His Kingdom. As we age and mature, our ability to rationalize and over complicate what it means to follow Jesus seems to grow, too. That young girl understood that every kind of giving is an expression of gratitude to God. When you give your time to the Lord, it's out of gratitude. When you give your talents and abilities to the Lord, it's out of gratitude. When you tithe your income to the Lord, it's out of gratitude.

Today is the final message in a series entitled *How to Have the Best Year Yet*. My belief is that if you and I will grasp to a far greater extent the significance of four basic truths, we'll experience in 2008 the best year of our lives yet. What are they? God is the owner. Jesus is the Lord. You are a steward. And, today, you are a servant. Live as if you are a servant. Granted, the concept of serving God is pretty familiar to most of us here today. Maybe that's just the problem. Sometimes we can get so familiar with a basic truth that we lose sight of its significance. I'd like to hang my thoughts about being a servant on three pegs this morning. Here's the first one.

SERVING'S RESTRAINTS

Why do you and I resist being God's servants? First and foremost, we are selfish and self-centered by nature. It starts at an early age. Have you ever taken a bunch of kids to a playground? Now, I haven't done that for awhile, but when I did I never had the experience of watching those children tumble out of my car, race towards the swings and slides, shouting at the tops of their lungs, "I'm last! I'm last!" Oddly, that's never happened. By nature, you want to be first not last. You want to be more not less. You want to be served not to serve. Look with me at a story in the Bible. Just because those twelve men hung out with Jesus for three years doesn't mean they stopped being all too human in their attitudes and actions. James and John's mother wanted her sons to have positions of great honor and prestige in Jesus' Kingdom. Whenever there's trouble over who is the greatest, there's going to be trouble over who will be least. Most

of us know we'll never be the greatest, the best or the first at anything, but just don't let us be the least, the worst or the last!

Here's another reason we resist serving God. We struggle with the world's definition of greatness. How does the world measure or define greatness? Greatness is the person who controls others. Greatness is the person whose words make others leap into action. Greatness is the intellectually powerful person or the person who sits on high level boards and committees or who has great financial wealth or clout. Can you hear the world's definition of greatness in the words of James and John's mother? She says to Jesus, "...Give your word that these two sons of mine will be awarded the highest places of honor in your kingdom, one at your right hand, one at your left hand." (Matthew 20:21 MSG) Like any parent, she wanted to see her sons make something of themselves. Very natural. She assumed the Kingdom of God operated by the same rules as this world's organizations and institutions.

But Jesus totally reverses this world's understanding of what it means to be great. "...Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave..." (Matthew 20:26-27 MSG) In Jesus' day, everyone had a vivid example of how this world understands greatness: the Roman Empire. Rome stared them in the face every day of their lives. Rome's power was based on an iron fist which it didn't hesitate to use. Jesus says that God's power isn't like that. Rome's authority was dictatorial, controlling and autocratic. Jesus says God's authority isn't like that. Rome existed to be served. Jesus says that being a servant is the mark of God's Kingdom. Greatness, from God's perspective, has nothing to do with how many people you dominate or supervise; it's not how many honors come your way; it's not about your financial or business accomplishments. None of that stuff matters in the least to God. Instead, God is very interested in how many people you serve in His Name. Who are you helping in His Name? That's the measure of greatness in Jesus' Kingdom.

Let me suggest another restraint to serving. It's a consumer mentality towards spiritual things. One example of this is when Christians move into a new community and try to figure out what local church to join. Now, I understand that a certain amount of "church shopping" is necessary, inevitable and even healthy. But what happens all too often is that instead of asking God to help them find the best place to serve, many followers of Jesus want to find the best place to be served. "Let's see now. This church has a nice building, a good nursery, good music, good programs for youth and kids, preaching that's bearable, and some friendly people. I believe this church will meet my needs." Or that same person might say, "Hmmm. The preaching is a bit weak, the music is only average and they seem desperate for people to work in the nursery. I don't think this church offers me much." Well, shouldn't churches try and meet people's needs? Yes. But when a decision to join a church or not to join - or when a decision to be actively serving somewhere or just occasionally showing up for a worship service here and there - is based on the satisfaction of your needs instead of God's call to serve, you, my friend, are suffering from the disease of spiritual consumerism. By way of contrast, when you decide - week in and week out, month in and month out, year after year - to give faithfully a healthy portion of your time, your talent and your treasure, then the

question changes. No longer is it, "What needs in my life will this meet?" but "How does this fulfill God's call upon my life to serve Him?"

Stuart Briscoe is a well known Christian leader and author. For many years he pastored a large church in Wisconsin. He shares a conversation he had with a woman which I've put in my "I wish I would have said that" collection. He was in a supermarket one day when a woman came down the aisle towards him. He could barely see her over the top of her groceries in her cart. She screeched to a halt within a few feet of Briscoe, peered over her load, wagged her finger and said, "I left your church. I left your church." Briscoe said, "Well, if it's my church, I think that was a very wise decision. If it's my church, I think I'm going to leave, too." The woman said, "Don't you want to know why I left?" Briscoe replied, "No, not particularly, but I think I'm going to find out." He was right. She said, "You weren't meeting my needs." Briscoe asked, "I don't recollect seeing you before, let alone talking to you, let alone knowing your needs. Did you ever tell anyone specifically what your needs were?" Well, she couldn't recall if she had, so he asked her another question. "Can you tell me, if we have 5,000 people sitting in that church, all with your attitude, how anyone's needs are going to be met? If you reserve the right to have that attitude, then you must give everybody else the freedom to have that attitude. And if everybody has that attitude, who on earth is going to do all the need-meeting?" Standing her ground, the woman demanded, "Then you tell me who will." Relieved, Briscoe said, "I thought you'd never ask. This is what will work: when people stop sitting in the pew saying, 'They're not meeting my needs' and start saying, 'Whose needs can I meet?' Then needs will be met." Serving's restraints. We all have them. We all struggle with them. That's why we need to hear repeatedly:

SERVING'S REASONS

First and perhaps foremost, you want to follow the example of Jesus Himself. If you're a follower of Jesus that means you want to be like Him, right? You did hear what Jesus said about Himself, didn't you? "That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for the many who are held hostage." (Matthew 20:28 MSG) Or look at what else the Bible says about Jesus: "Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human!" (Philippians 2:5-7 MSG). Jesus gave up something of the eternal perfection, beauty and sheer joy of heaven in order to become a human being for your sake. He willingly accepted the limitations of being a human being. He got tired, hungry, lonely, disappointed and rejected by others.

Look again at how Jesus lived. He came to give not to get. He came to serve not to be served. He came to give away not take away. And He was so devoted to being God's servant that He was even willing to give up His life and get nailed to a cross. And why? Because that ultimate act of service freed you from being an eternal slave to sin, death and hell. If you really know Jesus, you want to be like Jesus. And the more you become like Jesus, the more you'll look like a servant. Not because you're forced to.

Not because somebody “guilted” you into it. Not because it’s your religious duty. You’re just so deeply and continually grateful to Jesus for all He is and all that He’s done, that the desire to serve just keeps bubbling up from within you and expressing itself in a thousand different ways.

Second, serving is clearly God’s will and wish for you. If God is truly the owner of your life and Jesus is the Lord of your life, you will want to know and do God’s will. Let’s look together at another Bible passage. There’s several very important truths in those verses. One, every follower of Jesus has been given spiritual gifts by the Holy Spirit. These are talents and abilities given by God. Two, all of us have been given different gifts, but every gift has the same purpose. Three, the purpose of any and every spiritual gift is to serve God by serving others. Four, using your gifts must be real, practical and down to earth. Five, the church’s leaders are supposed to help you serve God not do the serving for you.

May I suggest that trying to find a place – a context - to serve the Lord is pretty easy. The entire New Testament suggests that the local church is the primary place to use your spiritual gifts. Not the only place, to be sure, but the primary place. Right here at Karl Road Baptist Church, you can bear witness to the fact that God is your owner, that Jesus is your Lord, that you’re a steward and that you’re a servant. God’s already provided a place for you to serve Him here, so get busy, find out what it is and then start doing it. The serving will look different, to be sure. Some will teach. Some will work with kids or students. Some will play instruments. Others will sing. Some will open their homes to others. Others will count money or make sure the bills get paid. Some will know how and when to offer encouragement. Others will run sound and video equipment. Some will cook. Others will build. Some will visit shut-ins. Others will give way beyond the tithe. Some will lead. Others will follow. But ALL will serve! And when you give real time, real talent and real treasure, you’re saying, “Thank You, God, for everything! You are my owner. Jesus is my Lord. I am Your steward. I am Your servant. Thank You, God, that I don’t have to be perfect to serve You... or smart... or extraordinary. I just need to be willing, available and teachable. You’ll use me!”

I’ve read about a 400 member church in Thailand where every member tithes. All of them are miserably poor by the world’s standards. But each one gives a tenth of his or her meager income every week. They pay their pastor and have also sent two missionary families to another community that’s been cut off from the outside world. They have an intense interest in all forms of Christian service especially any kind of ministry for down and outers. Their gifts for that kind of work are large. Oh, by the way, this church of all tithers is also a church of all lepers. Every person in that church has leprosy. But God uses each one of them. If you want to be used, God will use you. Now, here’s a final thought about serving.

SERVING’S REWARDS

Some folk try to be more spiritual than God! Have you ever heard a well-meaning Christian say that you should serve God with no thought of reward in this life or the

next? Now, that sounds wonderful, sacrificial and holy, but it's simply not biblical. The Bible makes it clear that there are rewards for serving God and that you should take that into account when you serve Him. True, the rewards are rarely if ever financial or material in nature. Because God knows that money and things can never truly satisfy you as a person, He doesn't consider them a reward. God's rewards involve things like joy, like meaning – that sense that you're doing something of ultimate significance and value -, like true peace and contentment, like the satisfaction of knowing that you've made a qualitative difference in someone else's life. You can experience those kinds of rewards in this life. But the mother lode of serving's rewards are going to be claimed on the other side of this life: eternal life, eternal joy, eternal peace, eternal adventure, eternal interaction with God. I have very little idea what those rewards will be like. But I do know this. I want every last one of them!

Here's another reward. When you're truly being God's servant, God will be honored and people will be drawn to Jesus. Christian author and leader, Joe Aldrich, is a "just walk across the room" kind of person. He knows if God can use him to reach someone else for Christ, a whole bunch of other people will come to faith as well. One neighbor, Phil, traveled a lot. So somehow, Joe ended up being Mr. Fix-It for Phil's family when Phil was out of town. He had to fix their garbage disposal twice. The last repair was horrendous. But then Joe just started laughing lying there on his back, all wet, with water and food all over everything. He said, "God, you've got an incredible sense of humor, because I've been praying for opportunities to serve and you're sure giving them to me. I wish sometimes you'd keep your big fist out of that garbage disposal unit." Joe knew good and well why it was clogged up. Servants have no rights. But God uses servants and their service to draw other people to Jesus.

Doesn't serving mean sacrifice? Yes, but remember that you can't out give God. When you serve Him, He will make your life the richer for it. When you give yourself away to Him and for Him, you will receive some wonderful returns. The really good things in life never come to you as the result of self-centeredness, selfishness or stinginess. When you give, you gain. Here's what Jesus said, "... 'Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.'" (Luke 6:38 MSG)

A wealthy Christian man gave a gift of \$100,000 to build a college in Africa in the early 1920s. That's a large sum of money even today, but it was far more significant in 1920s dollars. By the 1940s that college had grown significantly and was meeting the educational and spiritual needs of many young Africans. When a special anniversary of the college's founding came around, the administration decided it was time to extend a formal thank you to this man who had given so generously in the past. It took months to track him down. As it turned out, he had lost all his wealth in the 1929 stock market crash and was living in a little house on the south side of Chicago. When the college's representatives wanted to visit him to explain this plan to honor him, he refused them – twice! Finally, at their insistence, he was flown to Africa for this great celebration of the college's anniversary. As he looked over the campus filled with hundreds of students with smiles on their faces and tomorrow in their eyes, he whispered something to the

college president. He said, "The only thing I have kept is what I gave away." That's how it works in the Kingdom of God. The only thing you keep is what you give away. That's both the challenge and the joy of being a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.