

## **A MISSIONAL CHURCH EMPHASIZES PARTICIPATING NOT OBSERVING 1 PETER 4:10-11**

Let me ask you plant lovers out there today: have you ever heard of beech drops? It's an obscure plant. Beech drops are small, flowering plants found on the roots of beech trees. They're parasitic plants because they're completely dependent on the roots of beech trees for life. Apparently, beech drops have lost some of the chemicals necessary for photosynthesis, so they let beech trees supply them with what they need to live. They let beech trees serve them. Unfortunately, I've met followers of Jesus who remind me of beech drops. Once they had the ability to serve the Lord and others, but somewhere along their spiritual journey they just became content to be served by others. Eventually they became parasites on the local church – always and forever being on the receiving end of its spiritual life and energy – rather than being part of the source of its life and energy to others.

Today I'm concluding a series of messages on what it means to be a missional church. That's sort of the new adjective – missional – that you often see to describe a kind of church that is essentially biblical and effective. So, what is a missional church? It's a church that is intentionally and primarily focused outward; nevertheless, it's also vitally interested in taking care of its own. It takes seriously Jesus' command to help make spiritually lost people His devoted followers by going out into its community and culture, baptizing those who identify with Jesus and teaching them to observe everything Jesus taught us to both believe and do.

We've already discussed the fact that a missional church emphasizes spiritual health not numerical growth. It emphasizes outward ministry not just inward maintenance of its own programs. Last Sunday we thought about the fact that a missional church emphasizes serving not sitting. Today, I'd like to kind of pick up where I left off by pointing out that a missional church – a biblical and effective church – is all about participating not just observing. Let's look at a scripture passage together and then I'd like to share some further insights about serving the Lord that I gleaned from my reading and study. It's written by Peter, the less than perfect disciple of Jesus who became such a great servant-leader through the power of the Holy Spirit. It was written to several churches in several Roman provinces that make up the country of Turkey today. I see here at least two great and important truths about participating and serving. First...

### **EVERY CHRISTIAN IS EXPECTED TO SERVE.**

That's an obvious conclusion from what we just read, isn't it? There's no such thing as either unemployment or retirement in the Kingdom of God. We're all called to do something and to participate and work at it all of our lives. One reason some Christians fail to serve the Lord – or only serve Him sporadically instead of constantly – is simply because they lack the proper motivation. I was

interested to find at least six good motives mentioned in the Bible for you and me to serve the Lord and keep at it day after day.

First of all, you need to be motivated by obedience. Here's what the Bible says. "Serve only the LORD your God and fear him alone. Obey his commands, listen to his voice, and cling to him." (Deuteronomy 13:4 NLT) You serve the Lord simply because you want to obey Him. You find delight in having your life conform to His will and ways. John Newton, who wrote the famous hymn "Amazing Grace", made an interesting observation: "If two angels were to receive at the same moment a commission from God, one to go down and rule the earth's grandest empire, the other to go and sweep the streets of its smallest village, it would be a matter of indifference to each which service fell to his lot..... For the joy of angels lies only in obedience to God's will." Can you imagine an angel refusing to serve Almighty God? Then, how is it ever OK for someone who professes to follow Jesus to just sit and watch others do the Lord's work? If you're not actively serving the Lord, you're being disobedient. Not to serve the Lord in some way, shape or form is sinful.

Second, you need to be motivated by gratitude. The Bible says, "But be sure to fear the LORD and faithfully serve him. Think of all the wonderful things he has done for you." (1 Samuel 12:24 NLT) When you pause to consider all the great things God has done for you, is doing for you and will do for you, is it really a burden to serve Him? I hope you thank the Lord every day that Jesus died on the cross and rose again for you. Suppose God put \$10 million in your bank account every morning, but He didn't save you from spending an eternity in hell. Suppose He gave you perfect health for your whole life, but He didn't open the gate of heaven for you when you died. There's nothing God could ever do for you or any gift He could ever give you that's greater than what happened at a place called Golgotha and at an empty tomb. By that act He brought you to Himself. If you can't be God's grateful servant after realizing what's He already done for you and given to you, what will make you grateful?

Third, you need to be motivated by gladness. The Bible says, "Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before His presence with singing." (Psalm 100:2 NKJV) Some Jesus followers serve God grudgingly and grimly – as if it were some kind of martyrdom. Who needs that kind of service? You can serve out of a sense of obligation – "I guess I'll have to do this if I want to go to heaven." Or maybe you're serving the Lord in an area where you're not gifted. "I can't stand teaching, but I have to deny myself and take up my cross." If that's your attitude, you can't serve with gladness. Serving the Lord isn't some kind of a burden; it's a wonderful privilege. It's something that's done with joy and enthusiasm. Think about the ministry or ministries you're involved in at this church. Do you do them gloomily or gladly? Or, consider what you do for the Lord in your neighborhood or out in the community. Do you do it willingly or reluctantly? Is what you do for the Lord something you endure or something you enjoy?

Fourth, you need to be motivated by forgiveness not guilt. In Isaiah 6, we read of a vision where the prophet saw God Himself. During the course of this incredible vision, the Lord forgave all of Isaiah's sin and cleansed him. What follows is instructive. "Then I heard the Lord asking, 'Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?' I said, 'Here I am. Send me.'" (Isaiah 6:8 NLT) Isaiah wanted to serve God so badly he could taste it! Why? Because he felt guilty about his own sin? No! It was because God had taken his guilt away. If you try to serve God because you feel guilty about what you've done wrong in life, your serving will feel like a ball and chain around your life. No joy. No love. Just obligation and drudgery. My friend, you don't serve God in order to be forgiven; you serve Him because you're already forgiven.

Fifth, you need to be motivated by humility. Jesus Himself is the greatest example of how to serve God and others with humility. Do you recall the story of how He took a basin of water and a towel, knelt down and washed 24 dirty feet – the feet of his twelve disciples? In that day and age, washing feet was the task of a slave – the guy or gal at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. There's always going to be a part of you and me that says, "If I have to serve, I want to get something out of it. If I can somehow get rewarded – maybe have other people think I'm great or turn it to my advantage somehow – then I guess I'll serve." There are at least two anti-serving attitudes that every Christian still battles against in his or her heart. One is laziness and the other is pride. Serving the Lord might mean preaching a sermon, but more often than not it means watching over or building into the life of our kids back in the nursery or in a Sunday School class. Serving the Lord might mean something as visible as singing a solo, but usually it's more like operating the sound system to amplify that solo. Serving the Lord might mean the upfront role of teaching a Sunday School class, but typically it's as unnoticed as washing dishes after some church social event. Most service is like an iceberg – we see a little bit of it sticking up above the surface, but the Lord sees the larger, hidden part underneath.

Sixth, you need to be motivated by love. The Bible says, "For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love." (Galatians 5:13 NLT) There will be times, my friend, when the only thing that keeps you serving Jesus day in and day out, year after year, is simply because you love Jesus. That's because, quite honestly, serving Jesus isn't always fun, exhilarating or an immediate blessing. A missionary in Africa was asked if he really liked what he was doing. He gave an interesting response. "Do I like the work? No. My wife and I don't like dirt. We really enjoy the finer things of life. We don't like crawling around dirty huts through goat droppings. But is a man to do nothing for Christ he doesn't like? God pity him, if not. Liking or disliking has nothing to do with it. We have orders to 'Go!' and we go. Love constrains us." Here's a second very important truth that emerges out of these verses in 1 Peter 4. Yes, it's quite true, every Christian is expected to serve. But, also, secondly...

## **EVERY CHRISTIAN IS GIFTED TO SERVE.**

These verses point to at least three key facts about spiritual gifts. First of all, if you're a follower of Jesus, you definitely have a spiritual gift. It's very clear there in our scripture for today, "God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another." (1 Peter 4:10 NLT) God can take a natural talent that you have and transform it into a spiritual gift the moment you start to follow Jesus. Or, He can give you a spiritual ability through His Holy Spirit that you've never before exercised. I've never met a Christian that had only one spiritual gift. Most have several abilities God wants to use to build His Kingdom. The Bible makes it clear that there are many kinds of gifts – leadership, encouragement, teaching, discernment, craftsmanship, administration, hospitality, knowledge – just to name a few.

Here's a second key fact this passage teaches. God's purpose in giving you any gift is for you to serve Him and His Kingdom. Some of that serving will be right here in our church. Some of that serving will be out there in the community. Some of that serving will be in your neighborhood, your workplace or your school. I encourage you to think about three blocks of your time each week. Now some people have more time than others depending on what stage of life you're in today, but, regardless, it's helpful to think about your weekly schedule in terms of three blocks of time. The first block is the worship block – it's personal time with the Lord as well as gathering with other believers to praise the Lord. It's what we're doing right now. The second block is the study and fellowship block. It might be a Sunday School class or a small group gathering. It's where you study God's Word with others and also where you learn to love, know and pray for others while you are being loved, known and prayed for yourself. The third block is the serving block. It's whatever you do in the church or outside of the church that is an expression of how God has gifted you to touch the lives of others. You will not grow until and unless you begin serving. It's that simple. And if you pay attention to those three blocks of time – worship, study/fellowship, serving – you'll have a balanced spiritual life.

Here's a third key fact about spiritual gifts. The best way to discover and confirm your spiritual gifts is through actually serving. Spiritual gift questionnaires can be helpful. Seminars that help you figure out where you are best suited to serve the Lord are great. But nothing replaces just stepping out in faith and trying something new. If you think you might be good at teaching, try it! If you like people and you think you'd like to greet people at the door on Sundays, give it a shot! If God's given you deep compassion for people, get involved in a ministry that meets the needs of the poor. A lot of the time, you'll discover that your hunch was correct. You do enjoy this and you're pretty good at it! Sometimes you'll find out, however, that what you thought you'd enjoy, really doesn't fit you so well after all. That's OK. God bless you for trying!

In Cremona, Italy, where most experts believe history's best violins were made, Andrea Mosconi has the important task of keeping the precious instruments in shape. For the past 30 years, six days a week, the old musician has gone to the museum in Cremona's city hall where the 300-year-old violins are stored in display cases. Each morning, before the museum opens to the public, Mosconi plays each violin for 6–7 minutes. He starts with basic music scales and then makes his way to Bach, Tchaikovsky, and Bartok. Over the course of an hour, he plays three violins by the Amatis, two by the Guarneris, and four instruments—3 violins and a cello—by Stradivari. Why does Mosconi do this day after day? A violin needs to be played to perform at its best level. Karl Roy, a German violinmaker and one of the field's top experts, says, "The wood gets tired. It's the same as with a human being. If you just sit and rest in your comfortable chair, when you get up after a while, you will feel crazy." In other words, God called you to be a participant not an observer.

Let me share in closing a few key facts about serving the Lord in general. One, it will often be exhausting. Now, I do believe that when you're serving the Lord you will enjoy it, but I also know you will get drained by it. That is as it should be. Serving the Lord is work! Good work, fun work – but work that will take energy out of you. As an example, I thoroughly enjoy serving the Lord on Sunday mornings. I love to preach. I love to interact with God's people and catch up on what's been happening in their lives. I love to meet and greet new guests to our church. I love to pray with people and talk about spiritual concerns they may have. When I get home, I'm whipped. I'm ready for lunch and a little NFL football before a good nap! I know the same is true for our staff as well as for our wonderful volunteers who serve throughout the building on Sundays and at other times. Serving the Lord is exhausting – in a good way!

Where did we ever get the idea that serving the Lord should never tire us out? I can only shake my head when a fellow follower of Jesus tells me that he or she just can't make a long term commitment to a ministry of some kind. I guess he or she prefers kind of an occasional, spontaneous type of serving. Didn't God make a long term commitment to you by sending Jesus to die on the cross in order to provide you with eternal life? Aren't you glad God doesn't serve you occasionally or just when He feels like it? Or, what do you say to someone who's willing to serve in some ministry as long as it's "convenient." I guarantee the devil will make sure it's not convenient. Meaningful service for the Lord will never be either occasional or convenient. Why should it be? Dying for your sins wasn't convenient for Jesus. And God doesn't just watch over you occasionally. There are times when you and I need to push through our feelings, take ourselves by the scruff of the neck, give ourselves a good shake and say, "I will serve the Lord!" God didn't call you to be an observer. He called you to be a participant.

Here's a second key fact about serving the Lord. It will be fulfilling. Oh, not every day. Not every moment. But, ultimately, whatever you do for Jesus will be the most rewarding use of your time and energy this side of heaven. Do you

remember that story about Jesus and the Samaritan woman? He was tired, hungry and thirsty – all because He was serving His Father. While He's resting beside a well, this woman comes to draw some water. They talk and her life is changed forever. After she goes back to her village to tell her neighbors about Jesus, His disciples return from a food-finding mission. They offer Jesus some of the food they've brought. His response is enlightening. "Jesus said, 'The food that keeps me going is that I do the will of the One who sent me, finishing the work he started.'" (John 4:34 MSG) The work of serving God was so satisfying, so fulfilling to Jesus that He called it His food. It nourished Him; it strengthened Him; it satisfied Him.

And, then, a third key fact about serving the Lord. It will be enduring. I can still see that plaque hanging up in my home when I was growing up: "Only one life 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last." Yes, it can be frustrating to serve the Lord at times because he doesn't often allow us to see the eternal impact of our service for Him. We have to keep on serving Him in faith – knowing that our efforts are being used for His glory in ways that we might never be conscious of this side of heaven. God sees and knows all about your service to Him and He will not forget to reward you for it. The Bible says, "For God is not unjust. He will not forget how hard you have worked for him and how you have shown your love to him by caring for other believers, as you still do." (Hebrews 6:10 NLT) Serving the Lord: it's exhausting... it's fulfilling... it's enduring.

Judy Anderson grew up as the daughter of missionaries in Zaire, Africa. When she was a little girl, she went to a day-long rally celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christian missionaries coming to that part of Zaire. It was a full day of speeches and music. Towards the end of it, an old man came before the crowd and insisted that he be allowed to speak. He said he knew that he would die soon and that he alone had some important information. If he didn't speak, that information would go with him to his grave. He explained that when Christian missionaries came a hundred years before, his people thought the missionaries were strange and their message unusual. The tribal leaders decided to test the missionaries by slowly poisoning them to death. Over a period of months and years, missionary children died one by one. Then the old man said, "As we watched how they died, we decided to live as Christians." That story had gone untold for 100 years. Those who died painful and strange deaths never knew why they were dying or what spiritual impact their lives and death would have. Why did they stay? Because they trusted Jesus Christ even with what was tragic and unexplained. Because they knew that there is no greater privilege than to serve King Jesus. Because they knew that only one life 'twill soon be passed, only what's done for Christ will last. Because they knew that they'd been called to be participants not observers in the work of establishing the Kingdom of God. He who has ears let him hear.