

One sport I continue to enjoy playing personally is tennis. It's a great game! It's fun to watch the professionals go at it – smashing forehands, powerful two-fisted backhands, gentle lobs at just the right time, and fast hands at the net. But there's no weapon in tennis more impressive and devastating than a booming, accurate and consistent serve. It gives you a big advantage no matter who you're playing. Because a great serve is so difficult to master and yet so important to the game of tennis, professionals practice hours just to improve their serve. If there is any part of my tennis game that needs improvement, it's my serve. I'm lucky to get my first serve into the service court! A typical serve wizzes over the net, misses the service court and sometimes misses the tennis court itself! My second serve floats over the net softly and gently because all I'm trying to do is to keep the ball in play. Many times that second serve is so weak that my opponent can ram it back down my throat. That's when a serve can be more of a liability than an asset!

Improving your serve. We all need to do that because serving is more than hitting a yellow, fuzzy ball over a net. Everybody here serves in some way. Each of us works for, helps and gives assistance – whether it's at a job, at home, in our community, or at church. If you're a follower of Jesus this morning, you know that serving is very important. Jesus described Himself as a servant. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mk 10:45 NLT) So, today, I invite you to think with me about how to improve your serve and my serve in a spiritual sense. My thanks, by the way, to pastor and author, Chuck Swindoll, for that play on words. He wrote an excellent book with that title: *Improving Your Serve*.

We're working our way through Paul's letter to the Philippians Christians this fall. While Jesus is the greatest theme in this letter, joy turns up as an important sub-theme time and time again. Over 15 times, Paul uses that the word “joy” or another word like joy in this brief document. That's kind of ironic because Paul's in prison when he dictated this letter. And the Christians in Philippi weren't in a particularly happy time themselves. They were starting to suffer persecution for following Jesus. They were also having some relational issues and conflicts among themselves. In the passage we consider today, Paul implies that serving the Lord and having God's kind of joy in our lives just go together. You might say that having God's kind of joy is found in and through serving Jesus. Let's read our passage for today and think about it together.

Paul holds up both Timothy and Epaphroditus as marvelous examples of serving Jesus. If you read between the lines of Paul's letter, it's clear that some of the Philippian Christians had become self-centered and were no longer serving Jesus or each other in the way they should have. The Philippians, frankly, needed to improve their serve and so Paul used these two men as object lessons on what it means to be a servant. Now, serving is synonymous with love in the

Bible. You can't love God without serving God. You can't serve God without loving Him. Paul never uses the word "love" in these verses, but that's really what he's talking about ultimately. I believe you need to improve your serve. I believe I need to improve my serve. If our church is going to fulfill our mission and vision now and in the future, it will be because God enables us to become better servants. Two thoughts; here's the first one:

SERVING IS LOVE EXPRESSED.

Who were Timothy and Epaphroditus? Timothy was a young man Paul had met in his missionary travels and who became like a son to him. He came to share such a similar passion for Jesus and for lost people that Timothy became Paul's personal representative to many of the churches that started up in the first century. I'm reminded that serving Jesus well is never a generational or age issue. Young people – teenagers, men and women in their 20s or 30s – can serve Jesus just as profoundly as older people. By the same token, just because you've been a follower of Jesus for decades doesn't guarantee that you're serving Him with the right spirit or attitude.

Epaphroditus was apparently a leader in the Philippian church who had been commissioned by that congregation to bring a gift of money to help meet Paul's needs while he was in prison in Rome. He was probably sent as a kind of permanent assistant to Paul – live right there in jail with him and do whatever he could do to help. But, at some point, Epaphroditus had become seriously ill and had almost died. Fortunately, God restored his health and now Paul was sending him back home to Philippi. Paul lavished praise on Epaphroditus. He called him a brother, a co-worker and a fellow soldier.

Improving your serve always involves caring deeply about other people. All three of these men – Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus – shared the same heart for people. Paul is sometimes pictured as this cold, remote intellectual type, but a careful reading of the New Testament reveals a warm man who had an extraordinary gift for friendship and serving others. All three of these men just flat out loved people. Statistics never got in the way of people. Relationships came before tasks. Planning never replaced caring. Over and over again, the Bible tells us not to become anxious about things. But over and over again, it encourages us to have a healthy concern about and for people. Why? Because people matter to God. People are precious to God. Serving is love expressed and love expressed always looks like caring about people in some way.

I recall hearing about a conversation that occurred at a large Christian festival where people from all sorts of religious backgrounds were present. A Christian man was having a conversation with a Buddhist woman. About halfway through their talk, the Christian man lit up a cigarette and then immediately apologized for doing so. He explained that he wanted to give up smoking because he felt it was a poor witness to non-Christians. The Buddhist woman made an interesting

observation. She said, “We non-Christians – when one of us becomes a Christian – don’t watch to see how well they live up to some self-imposed standard of piety. We watch them to see how they start treating people.”

That’s a great reminder, isn’t it? Non-Christians don’t care if you have all your doctrines straight. They don’t care if you read the Bible, pray every day or tithe your income. Does that make any of those things unimportant? Certainly not! What it does mean is that non-Christians ultimately evaluate the authenticity of your faith and mine by how we treat other people. And Jesus agrees with them! He said, “Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other.” (Jo 13:34-35 MSG) Do you want to improve your serve? Start caring about people more.

Here’s something else that’s abundantly clear from Paul’s comments about his two friends. Motivation and attitude matter. Why you serve Jesus and how you serve Him matters even more than what you do to serve Him. Improving your serve and mine is always about getting and keeping a godly motivation and attitude in our serving. Some years ago, Richard Foster wrote a great book on growing in your relationship with Jesus. In one chapter on serving he points out the difference between what he calls self-righteous serving and true serving. Some examples. Self-righteous service only wants to serve in “big”, important ways that feeds the ego. True service doesn’t distinguish between small and big acts of service. Self-righteous service has to be noticed and acknowledged by others or it stops. True service is most content when it goes unnoticed. Self-righteous service reserves the right to pick and choose who gets served. True service serves anyone. Self-righteous service is greatly affected by your mood. You must *feel* like serving before you serve. True service keeps on serving because there’s a need to be met. Feelings are secondary. Self-righteous serving is always temporary, occasional, hit or miss. True service is a pattern of action that becomes a lifestyle. Do you want to improve your serve? Well, then be prepared for the Holy Spirit to test your motivation and attitude.

May I mention just one specific way of serving Jesus? If our church is to grow both in effectiveness and numbers in the days ahead, it will be because a growing number of us practice the service of sharing Jesus with others. It will be because you take the time and make the effort to develop a relationship with a person who needs Jesus. You have to love people and be able to share the difference Jesus had made in your own life. God will use your consistent prayers for lost people in your circle of influence. God will use you to get into spiritual conversations with them that point to their need for Jesus. God will use your efforts as we minister to non-Christian kids and their families here at our church during the week and on Sundays. You don’t have to be a pastor, a church leader, a Bible scholar or a Christian for 50 years to share Jesus with others, but you do have to work hard at it. We forget that serving Jesus is hard work. And reaching lost people for Jesus is hard work. Not many people just walk into

church looking for God. People have to be won to Christ, one by one. Serving is all about love expressed. But here's a second thought:

SERVING IS LOVE EXTENDED.

True love always costs something – it demands an extension of self. You have to put yourself out there in some way, shape or form. Serving God and other people will always require something substantial from you in terms of your time, your energy and your money. Earlier in this same chapter, Paul points out that Jesus is the greatest example of that fact. He gave up all the glories and perks of Heaven to come into this world and experience the limitations of being human. But He went far beyond that. He took on the role of a humble servant. He – the author of life itself - subjected Himself to death. On the cross, He was executed like a criminal – a bloody, agonizing, hideous death that would make you turn away with the sheer horror of it. Jesus' love wasn't only expressed; it was extended. God's love is more about sacrificial actions than affirming words.

Timothy and Epaphroditus were illustrations of this same truth. There's evidence that Timothy was shy by nature and somewhat passive in temperament. He had some health issues. But none of that ever became an excuse to stop serving Jesus or extending God's love to other people. Epaphroditus was downright reckless in his desire to serve. In fact, in v. 30 (NIV) there, Paul uses a gambling word to describe how Epaphroditus served – "... because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me." He had gambled or risked his own life with a kind of reckless courage in order to serve Jesus by serving Paul. As a result, his own health had been broken. Paul pointed out that by completing his mission in the midst of severe illness, Epaphroditus put his own life in jeopardy. We live in a culture where taking risks is primarily related to gambling in casinos or undertaking questionable business ventures rather than by taking genuinely personal risks related to your love for Jesus or His people. That caused me to ask myself this question: Have I ever risked anything to serve Jesus or His people? Have you? Epaphroditus paid dearly to love God, to love Paul and to serve. He was extended.

Leonard Sweet, a professor and author, had a student who received an appointment by his bishop to a particular congregation. The student didn't like the assignment at all. Sweet overheard him complaining about it to another student. But then the other student said something that stopped Sweet in his tracks. She said, "You know, the world's a better place because Michelangelo didn't say, 'I don't do ceilings.'" Sweet says he had to admit the student's observation was exactly right. If you and I are going to be stay faithful to whatever ministry or service God has called us to do, we had better understand the call to be extended. The world's a better place because Noah didn't say, "I don't do arks and animals." The world's a better place because Moses didn't say, "I don't do Pharaohs or mass migrations." The world's a better place because David didn't say, "I don't do giants." The world's a better place because a young

teenager named Mary didn't say, "I don't do virgin births." The world's a better place because Paul didn't say, "I don't do letters." And, above all, the world's a better place because Jesus didn't say, "I don't do crosses." And this world will be a better place only if you and I don't say, "I don't do... whatever."

If you've ever really loved someone, you know that love will extend you. Serving others in love is costly – costly in time, in energy and in money. If you serve Jesus by serving in this church in some ministry, I want to say something to you. First of all, thank you and may the Lord richly bless you for your service. Second, if it isn't costing you something to do whatever it is that you do, then you need to improve your serve. Serving the Lord in this place ought to take something out of you. It ought to demand something precious out of you. If it doesn't, something's wrong! If you're not being extended, you're not serving. You need to improve your serve.

But let's remember something very important. Real love enjoys beings extended. That's a "joy truth" that runs through this letter. God's joy is found in serving God. So, don't serve Jesus, or this church or other people in His Name out of some sense of duty, or because you're forced to do it, or because you're embarrassed not to do so. Serve with joy, or don't serve at all! Paul describes Timothy here as a man with whom he was like-minded or "like-souled." In other words, Timothy like Paul put soul into his service! You can serve God soulfully or soullessly! The difference is crucial. You can serve here and there, when the mood hits you, when it will benefit you – or, you can choose to be a servant – everywhere, all the time, regardless of your feelings. When that happens, serving – like love itself – becomes a matter of your everyday lifestyle.

There's a wonderful aspect to serving like this that helps us to understand why it's linked up with joy. When you serve Jesus in the ways we've discussed today, it comes back to you. When you love like this, it comes back to you. When you improve your serve, you end having more joy and you are more fulfilled as a person not less. It's part of the spiritual truth of reaping what you sow. Jesus put it like this, "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." (Lk 6:38 MSG) If - in your desire to find and have a wonderful life – you somehow become stingy, selfish, and self-centered, you'll never discover the wonderful life you seek. That's just not how God set up the universe to run! But when you give yourself away to Jesus and to the work of His Kingdom, it's then that you can begin to discover life in all of its intended joy and abundance. When you express and extend love God's way, yes, you will get tired. You'll get depleted. You'll get empty. You'll get drained. But God will see to it that you're given fresh energy, that you're replenished, that you're re-filled, and that you're renewed. Truly, joy is found in serving Him.

Pediatrician David Cerqueira shares a story of how a dying girl showed his church and him the honor and joy of serving God. One Sunday, Dr. David's wife

had prepared a Sunday School lesson on being useful. She taught the children that everyone can be useful—that usefulness is serving God, and that doing so is worthy of honor. A little girl named Sarah spoke up. "Teacher, what can I do? I don't know how to do too many useful things." Not quite anticipating that kind of response, Dr. David's wife quickly looked around and spotted an empty flower vase on the windowsill. "Sarah, you can bring in a flower and put it in the vase. That would be a useful thing." Sarah frowned. "But that's not important." "It is," replied Dr. David's wife, "if you are helping someone." Sure enough, the next Sunday Sarah brought in a dandelion and placed it in the vase. In fact, she continued to do so each week. Without any reminders or help, she made sure the vase was filled with a bright yellow flower, Sunday after Sunday. When Dr. David's wife told the pastor about Sarah's faithfulness, he placed the vase in the main sanctuary next to the pulpit. That Sunday he gave a sermon on the honor of serving others, using Sarah's vase as an example. The congregation was blessed by Sarah's example.

During that same week Dr. David got a call from Sarah's mother. Sarah seemed to have less energy than usual and little appetite. Dr. David made room in his schedule to see Sarah the following day. After Sarah had a battery of tests and days of examinations, Dr. David sat numbly in his office. Sarah's paperwork was on his lap. The results were tragic. Sarah had leukemia. On the way home, Dr. David stopped to see Sarah's parents so that he could personally give them the sad news. It was perhaps the most difficult conversation he'd ever had. Sarah eventually became confined to bed. She lost her smile. She lost most of her weight. And then it came: another telephone call. After a short examination, Dr. David knew that Sarah would soon be leaving this world. He urged her parents to spend as much time as possible with her.

That was a Friday afternoon. On Sunday morning church started as usual. Dr. David was just enveloped in sadness. At the end of the sermon, the pastor suddenly stopped speaking. His eyes wide, he stared at the back of the church with utter amazement. Everyone turned to see what he was looking at. It was Sarah! Her parents had brought her for one last visit. She was bundled in a blanket, a dandelion in one little hand. She didn't sit in the back row. Instead she slowly walked to the front of the church where her vase was still perched by the pulpit. She put her flower in the vase and a piece of paper beside it. Then she returned to her parents. Seeing little Sarah place her flower in the vase for the last time moved everyone. At the end of the service, people gathered around Sarah and her parents, trying to offer as much love and support as possible. Four days later, Sarah died. After the funeral, the pastor found Dr. David and said, "I've got something you ought to see." He pulled out of his pocket the piece of paper that Sarah had left by the vase. Dr. David opened the folded paper to read what Sarah had written in pink crayon: "Dear God, This vase has been the biggest honor of my life. Sarah." Life is an opportunity to serve God by serving people. And, as Sarah put it, that is the biggest honor and joy of all.