

HONORED SERVANTS

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Christian discipleship is always counterculture, no matter what age or area of the world you find it in. One of the clearest statements that we are to live in a way that is counter to our culture is Jesus' insistence that the one who will be first must be the slave of all (Mark 10:44), that greatness comes in service, that giving your life away is the way to find it. This peculiar way of understanding what it means to be an effective human being is at odds with what seems reasonable to natural thinking.

In this message we're going to focus on the ministry of deacons, to remind ourselves of the critical leadership role they play in this church. "Deacon" is a transliteration of the Greek word *diakonos*, which means servant. It's the same word Jesus used when he said that the one who would be great should be a servant (Mark 10:43). God honors those who give their lives away in service. As we consider the ministry of deacons, let's think about the theme of serving, which is found throughout the Bible.

I want to start by looking at a couple of passages in the gospels that describe what it means to be a servant. Our Lord Jesus was so committed, in his own life and in the lives of his followers, to giving preference to service that he put it at the heart of his message.

FOLLOWING CHRIST'S EXAMPLE BY SERVING

Let's read these words of our Lord found in John 13:12-17:

When [Jesus] had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

The act of washing the disciples' feet was representative of everything else Jesus had done all his life. He gave up his rights, took the lower place, ministered to the needs of others. "I've set you an example," he said. "Now you should do as I have done." And if it is our conviction that we should imitate Christ, we should imitate him in this.

He asked, "Do you understand what I have done?" He explained that real understanding should include not only what they said, but what they did. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you should respect that I am your Sovereign. That is exactly right. But if that is the case, will you do what I do? Is it only your language, or is it your life?"

So the first way of thinking about serving is as a means to imitate Christ, to live as he lived. And Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who make that choice: If you do these things, you will be blessed in the doing. Your life will be full; your heart will be changed; God will shine joy into your experience; and you will find meaning, worth, enthusiasm, and interest that you never found before.

But it's not only the call to imitate Christ that will lead us to serve, it's also the call to obey him. Let's read the passage that we've already referred to a couple of times, Mark 10:42-45:

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of

the Gentiles [unbelievers] lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

"*Not so* with you" is a statement of strong emphasis. Unbelievers gather to themselves perks of office. Leadership among unbelievers is to the advantage of the leaders. Jesus is giving a command: "My followers will not live that way."

What is being added here is the costliness of service. On the one hand, we will be blessed in serving. But on the other, the Son of Man came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. It cost Jesus everything. There is no easy way to give up your rights. There's no assurance that it won't be difficult, at times heartbreaking, to be a servant. It isn't just seasonal bursts of compassion that the Lord has in mind here, in which we give a meal to a homeless person on Thanksgiving, or gather up gifts for needy children at Christmas, or make other minimal responses, serving at our convenience in selective ways. It is genuinely setting aside your rights for another.

And you might not be appreciated. The people that you extend yourself for might take advantage of you. You may never receive a word of thanks. Perhaps no one will notice. Our Lord was rejected in his serving. It's costly. "You will be blessed if you do them," but you will also spend yourself if you do them.

One of Ron Ritchie's not infrequently quoted statements came back to me as I was thinking about this. I understand it and feel the same way myself. He said, "I'm glad to be called a servant. I just don't want to be treated like one." I'm glad for the title, I just don't want the cost. But there's no way to serve without the cost.

HONORING CHRIST BY SERVING

Finally, we can honor Christ in our service. One of the last things he said to his disciples before his ascension was about the day when the kingdom would come. Matthew 25:34-40:

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"

If you have been moved by the gifts of life in Christ to say thank you and have wondered how you could give back something to the One who gave his life for you, this text suggests an answer. Andre Crouch's song *My Tribute* asks, "How can I give thanks for the things You have done for me..." A less weighty song, *The Little Drummer Boy*, asks, "What can I give the King?" Jesus said, "What you do for the least, I receive as an honor to me." When we become a servant to the least, having our Lord's heart for the needy, broken, set-aside, and hurting, those who can't fix things themselves, our Lord receives it. It is a way we can give thanks to him.

These calls to imitate, obey, and honor Christ declare that service is at the heart of the Christian message.

DEACONS, LEADERS IN SERVING

And so we have the privilege of calling into leadership in the church some who can help the rest of us serve well, who can give us direction and order. Consider Acts 6:1-7:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Let's pause here and set the context. The distribution of food was already an agreed-upon pattern. These were widows who had no family, and there was no public governmental assistance for them. So the church was committed to taking care of them. However, the familiar human tendency toward prejudice reared its ugly head. There were Jews who had lived in Jerusalem all their lives, who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic as their first language. And there were Jews who had immigrated to Jerusalem from somewhere else, who spoke Greek as their first language; and they were considered second-class citizens. As is frequently the case, the second-class citizens were being treated with disrespect, although it may not have been done with full awareness. Verses 2-7:

So the Twelve [apostles] gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

This proposal pleased the whole group. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Phillip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

The problem was how to make the church community effective in its serving.

Now, this wasn't a question of spontaneous acts of mercy. Remember the story of the good Samaritan. The Samaritan traveler found a man beaten and bloody by the side of the road, robbed and left for dead. And because he was a merciful man, he picked up the sufferer, put him on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and paid for his care. The Samaritan's example calls all Christians to say yes to God-given opportunities to act mercifully.

But the problem in this text in Acts is how the church was to respond to a larger problem as an organization. How could they meet the needs of all the widows effectively? Some widows had abundance and others didn't have enough. The church wanted to respond as servants together, so they needed leaders. And that's the ministry of the deacons in our own church. We need leaders who can help us as a church be effective in meeting the needs of people thoughtfully, in an organized, effective way.

The ministry of deacons can include all sorts of things. This is not just a matter of the squeaky wheel getting the oil, or putting out fires when they flare up. It's thoughtfully taking into account, for example, the economics of the day and age we live in. If there are many who are out of work, a certain kind of response is required. If there are refugees in great numbers in our community, that requires a different sort of response. Some pay attention to the finances of the church, and see that money is collected and deposited and checks are written in an orderly fashion.

Calling on the sick and hospitalized among us is an opportunity we all have, but not everybody should show up on the same day. We can take turns so that there is a pattern that is most helpful to the person who is in the hospital. If we're providing meals for a family in need, they don't need ten meals on one day and none for the next week. They need meals distributed out over time, and somebody can take leadership so that we as a church can most effectively meet that need. There are all sorts of other hands-on things that we can do as a church—calling on the shut-ins, arranging receptions for funerals, helping with housing, etc. We can do them

better if we do them with good leadership.

Another observation we can make from this text in Acts is that when everybody does what they're best at, the church has wider blessing. The apostles didn't say that the work of serving tables was beneath them. They considered it, evidently. They saw the problem, and their instinctive response was to get involved and deal with this difficulty. Then they stepped back and realized that in order to do that, they would have to neglect something else. The church would have more blessing if other saints could step up and fill this role, and they themselves could continue to fill their own assignment. If only a handful of people are trying to do everything, then nothing is done well; and the rest miss out on the opportunity for God to use them. Division of labor is for the good of everyone.

Lastly, let me ask you to consider the qualifications that are mentioned for these seven who were going to solve the problem of distributing food to widows. It first says that they were to be full of the Holy Spirit, which means they were supposed to be mature. A person in whom the Holy Spirit has control, who has learned to walk with God long enough that they respond quickly and easily to the Spirit's promptings, is not concerned about his or her ego anymore. You probably know that there are some people who will volunteer to get involved because they want recognition, or because they want to solve their own problems by meddling with someone else's. But the apostles said that they wanted people who would lead the church into service to be mature enough that they would listen to the Spirit, to be able to answer the call of God, not the call of their own ego.

Secondly, they were to be full of wisdom. Now, it turns out that the problem in the Jerusalem church was not just a problem of logistics-how to get food baskets made up that were nutritious, how to ensure that the food got to the each widow, and so on. The reason the Greek widows weren't being given food is because they were considered second-class citizens. If these deacons were to do an effective job, they were going to have to address that problem.

Further, it says that the Grecian Jews "complained" about the problem. That's an interesting word in Greek. It really means to murmur or to mutter. They didn't complain in the open; they had secret meetings in which jealousy and bitterness flourished. Their complaints were completely unhealthy. These were not honest complaints, they were accusations. That needed solving, too. So if the deacons were going to do a good job, they had to battle prejudice and overcome bad attitudes. That's why these people needed to be wise and godly. They needed to be courageous in order to lead the church and serve those who had needs. And it's our privilege to have deacons who are godly and wise leading us in serving as well.

I can remember perhaps half a dozen sermons that were immediately life-changing. I can remember many more times when somebody ministered to me hands-on at a time of crisis. The ministry of the word and the ministry of service are both important in the life of the church. As with the Jerusalem church in Acts 6, it is a privilege for us to have deacons leading us into a ministry of service.

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