

Mark 10:42-45 (NRSV)

⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

2 Corinthians 9:10–15 (NIV)

¹⁰Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

¹²This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Are we really and truly ready to live and to give in the service of others?

Like countless others, my wife, Patti, and I have enjoyed getting to know the characters on the BBC series, *Downton Abbey*. The series tells the story of all those who live on the grand estate – the landed gentry who live upstairs in the house and the household servants who live downstairs. Set in the early twentieth century, the series dramatizes the passing of an age. Those who live downstairs might have chosen a different life for themselves if they could, but they take pride in the fact that they are “in service.” In the series, it often seems that the downstairs staff are more concerned than the upstairs aristocrats with maintaining the “proper and appropriate” distinctions between servant and those being served.

Though the show is very well done and often fascinating, the whole servant/master thing is pretty hard for me to understand. I guess I’m typically American in this. I appreciate a good waiter, but let me carry my own bags please. Perhaps this is just as well, since God calls us to serve, not to be served. Of course, it does take two. As hard as it was for him to do so, Peter had to allow Jesus to wash his feet. We are called to cheerful receivers as well as cheerful givers. Sometimes it is harder to accept grace than it is to extend it.

The Servant People of God

In the Old Testament, God saves the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt so that they might serve him. (Exodus 8:1, 9:1, 10:3).¹ Job is a servant of God (1:8, 42:8). Israel is the servant of God, whom God has saved (Isaiah 41:8, 48:20). This image of God’s servant people is further developed in the New Testament and, like so much of Jesus’ teachings and actions, is taken to levels that can almost make our heads spin.

Jesus’ proclamation of the Good News is a proclamation that he is Lord and the Jews of his day would have heard this to be the claim of a master who is to be served. But . . . when Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover, the

¹ In your translation, these verses will read “worship,” not “serve.” The Hebrew word, *abad*, means to serve, minister, and worship. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, the Greek word *latreou* is

disciples fell to arguing about who would sit at Jesus' side. Jesus tells them that they don't really know what they are asking for, that whoever wishes to be first among them must be the slave of them all, and that, perhaps most remarkable, that he had come "not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (see Matthew 20:20-38, Mark 10:32-45, and Luke 22:24-27)

Just in case his disciples didn't get it (as they usually didn't), Jesus drove home the importance of servanthood on the night of the last supper. Jesus gathered his disciples together to share the Passover supper, only to find that they were again arguing about which of them was the greatest. They would have been seated on couches set beside a low table, with their bodies toward the table and their feet dangling off the back of the couch. Because the roads and streets were so dusty, it was customary for the host to provide water for the washing of feet. But the actual washing was a very servile task to be done by a servant, slave, or perhaps submissive women or children, never by the men themselves. You can imagine all the disciples lying around waiting to see who would come in to wash their feet. Then Jesus did the unthinkable. He rose, removed his outer robe and began washing the feet of the disciples. Peter can't believe what he is seeing! When he is finished (you can picture the disciples sitting open-mouthed), Jesus tells them that he did this as an example to them; they should do as he has done. He washed their feet and they ought to wash each other's feet. Jesus had lived out his teachings on servanthood right before their eyes, abolishing all notions of any pecking order in the people of God. (see John 13:1-20)

True Service

Jesus calls us to be "servants of all" (Mark 9:35). Paul reminds us that we proclaim Jesus as Lord and are to be servants for Jesus' sake (2 Cor 4:5). But what does this service really look like? Isn't it pretty easy for our service to become self-righteous rather than true service of God? In *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster² helps us to see what self-righteous service looks like so we can better grasp the meaning of true service.

Self-righteous service comes from human effort; true service comes out of our relationship with Jesus. Self-righteous service is concerned with the "big" project or "big" deal; true service doesn't discriminate among the opportunities to serve. Self-righteous service requires external rewards; true service needs only God's approval. Foster suggests that self-righteous service is focused only on the results, while true service "delights" in the service. Self-righteous service is affected by our whims and moods; true service carries on whether we feel like it or not. Self-righteous service can fracture a community as people strive for control and recognition; true service is selfless and heals a community. The New Testament witness reminds us time and again that we are called to be servants of God, servants called to build up the covenant community in which we live and to be a witness to those who live outside the covenant.

Transformed for Heart Giving

Serving, giving, worshiping, connecting – all these express the living out of the good news we proclaim to the world. But none of this really comes naturally or easily. Our hearts resist God's call, striving to remain as they were, desiring to be served and indulged. No . . . we must seek transformation. We must be formed into new persons, shedding the old and donning the new. In Romans 12:1-2, Paul transitions from Romans 1-11 to chapters 12-16. It is as if Paul has spent the first two-thirds of the letter climbing up the mountain and now, he begins down the other side, examining the Christian life in light of the work of Christ. In this, Paul does not concentrate on Jesus' teachings but on the implications of what Jesus has *accomplished*. And what Jesus has accomplished is so profound, so creation-altering that the only proper response is to

² Foster, Richard. 1978. *The Celebration of Discipline*. San Francisco: Harper. If you haven't ever read Foster's book, I highly recommend it. There are good reasons why it has been a best-seller for 35 years.

offer ourselves, our entire beings, as a living sacrifice, for God has demonstrated that he is worthy of nothing less (v. 1). We can never stay as we once were. Our commitment to Christ demands nothing less than the complete and utter renewing of our minds such that our *thoughts, feelings, and actions* are conformed to the ways of God. It is the marriage of what we believe about God with how we live with God, the joining of biblical theology and holy living.

How does this transformation happen? How do we “grow up in every way . . . into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15)? It seems, well, impossible so much of the time. There is so much in me that needs transforming. How can I put to death the old self (the living sacrifice) and put on the new self (the renewing of the mind)? Only by the grace of God. This renewing of the mind is the work of God’s Holy Spirit (see Romans 8:5-9). If it were up to us alone we couldn’t get there. Make a trip to Barnes and Noble and count the self-help books. Many of these are filled with excellent advice. The problem is that we just don’t actually do much of it. No, only by grace can we ever hope to live a holy life.

Serving and Giving from the Heart

Though we are 2000 years removed from the first communities of Christians, our challenges are not really so different. When the apostles were overwhelmed by their duties, they enlisted others, like Stephen, to help out, serving the young Christian church. Paul taught the churches he founded that God gives us all gifts to use in our service to God. Some are helpers, some are teachers, some are preachers, some are leaders, some are given gifts of knowledge, or wisdom, or mercy, or giving. The point is that we are all to serve. The Book of Joshua tells how the Hebrews conquered the Promised Land – or, more correctly, how God conquered it for them. At the end of the book, Joshua brings to God’s people words of covenant renewal. “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness . . . if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve . . . as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (from Joshua 24:14-15).

When we join the Methodist Church we promise to “uphold it with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service.” This is a practical expression of our commitment to be servants of God and to do his work. The question is not whether we will serve, but only how. We might serve by teaching a children’s Sunday School class, or singing in the choir, or answering the church phones on a Sunday morning, or serving as a Stephen’s minister, or doing mission work, or building for Habitat for Humanity . . . there is no end to the opportunities. Make no mistake; God wants more from us than simply an hour or two on Sunday mornings. Donald Whitney says it well, “Disciplined service to God is work, hard and costly labor sometimes, but it will endure for all eternity.”³ We, the people of God, are called to lives of joyful service to God.

In his book *shiny gods*, Rev. Mike Slaughter of Ginghamburg UMC reminds us that joyful service to others is the very best proclamation of the Good News:

As Christians, we need to remember that people will believe Jesus Christ has risen from the dead not because of our words or because of fancy talk. They will believe because of our actions. Let’s go back to 2 Corinthians 9: 11-13:

You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way. Such generosity produces thanksgiving to God through us. Your ministry of this service to God’s people isn’t only fully meeting their needs but it is also multiplying in many expressions of thanksgiving to God. They will give honor to God for your obedience to your confession of Christ’s gospel. They will do this because this service provides evidence of your obedience, and because of your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone.

³ Whitney, Donald. 1991. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs: NavPress. p. 121

God equips us to witness to the world through our generosity. I have a favorite cousin who lives in Chicago. She is five years older than I am. In 1964, when she graduated high school, her dad gave her a 1958 MG, and I thought that was the coolest thing ever. She used to give another cousin and me rides all over the place in that MG. She can be quite skeptical about the church. She always calls me on Christmas Day to touch base, and several years ago she asked what I had been doing to celebrate. I said that the day before had been Christmas Eve, so I had preached seven worship services. Her reply? You didn't get multiple degrees to work holidays and weekends!

Yet my cousin is an incredible person. When she visited us recently, I took her down to our New Path outreach ministries. When we walked into the office, some of our special-needs unpaid workers were packing food boxes. We walked by the desk where calls are taken from people seeking emergency relief. A single dad called in while she and I were standing there. He desperately was seeking \$127 to pay his electrical bill. He had two kids, and his electricity was about to be turned off. The person taking the call ran over to our New Path coordinator to see if we had the \$127. The response was not today; funds are low. My cousin immediately took out her checkbook and wrote a check for \$127. On our way back to the car, she turned to me and said, "You know, Michael, I think I could go to a church like this because this church is doing what churches should be doing."

What churches should be doing. . . . Here, at St. Andrew, we are striving to be such a church. Through Seven Loaves, Joseph's Coat, Project Hope, our Four Corners clinic in Costa Rica, and other ministries we strive to give and to serve for the benefit of those who are in need, as we seek to share the Good News with people of all generations and backgrounds. But it all begins with servant hearts manifested in generosity and mercy.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. We can't really pull apart our serving and giving. Serving must encompass our time, our talents, and our financial resources. We serve from the heart and we give from the heart. Here's a few questions to ask yourself around the question of our tithing:
 - a. The benevolent giving of a church, or giving to ministry which reaches beyond the immediate congregation, can be described as a measure of selflessness of the church. Is my church unselfish? What leads me to my conclusion?
 - b. How is my life richer in the things money cannot buy than it was a year ago?
 - c. What is the most radical insight into money that God has led me to understand?
 - d. From where did my blessings come?
 - e. What is a good balance between *impulse* and *discipline* in matters of giving?
2. Paul speaks of our transformation, the renewing of our minds. You might discuss what this means to you. Are you in the process of being transformed? Have you been transformed? How would we know? What are some concrete, real-world examples of what Paul might have meant by the renewing of our minds? Paul means more than just our brains, but still, what does it mean to think as a Christian? Paul also speaks of discerning the will of God – what is good and acceptable and mature. How might you go about finding the will of God for your own life? Do you think this is about which job or school to choose? Or is it about living within God's moral will for us, which begins with loving God and loving neighbor? How might these two different perspectives of God's will play out in your decision-making?
3. The biblical notions of love for God and neighbor are built on concrete notions of love as sacrifice and action. Love is caring. Love is serving. Thus, the obvious, and oftentimes difficult, question is "How are we serving God and neighbor?" What did we do yesterday? Today? What will we do tomorrow? Where are our priorities? Do we tithe? What are the barriers to our serving God will all our efforts and enthusiasm? How do we overcome these barriers? How do we find the joy in serving and giving?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Joshua 24:14-28 The renewal of the covenant and the people's promise to serve God</p>	<p>Tuesday, Malachi 3:13-18 Israel is reminded that the righteous serve God.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Matthew 20:20-28 Service as greatness</p>	<p>Thursday, John 13:1-20 Jesus washes the feet of the disciples at the last supper.</p>
<p>Friday, Ephesians 4:1-16 Paul appeals for unity and the use of our God-given gifts in the body of Christ.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class - now studying Romans

Meets every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class - now studying 1 Peter

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

This week - beginning a new series:

Everyday Theology: from the checkout line to the funeral home

Scott's New Book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*, is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
