
On Being a Parishioner: How to Serve My Fellow Believer

Various

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Introduction

Giants are falling. Banks are bleeding. Stability is wavering. First it was Countrywide, then-Bear Stearns. Then it was Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. This past week it was Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, and AIG and the word on the street is that there is more to come. Large Wall Street financial institutions are failing daily. Icons of America's prosperity and ability are being brought to their knees at an unprecedented rate. What seemed to be so reliable, trustworthy, prosperous, an icon of our American success story, is dissolving.

Not only were financial institutions wiped out this week, but Galveston, Texas was completely leveled in parts, bringing back memories of New Orleans. And then we had an opportunity to taste just a portion of what Galveston experienced. Did you see Kettering or Oakwood? Giant trees uprooted, huge limbs snapped, street after street lined with the wreckage of Mother Nature's no discrimination policy. Electricity out for days, gas stations without gas, and the State of Ohio's declaration that we were under a state of emergency. How quickly did your plans for this week change? How quickly was the whole Miami Valley Region put into a vulnerable state? How quickly did a partly sunny fall afternoon become something that would cause so much destruction and difficulty?

Life can change quickly. Turn on a dime. During the month of August, Beth and I were exposed to two suicides in the families of people we love – both 39 year-old men. One of them with six children between the ages of 2 and 16. The other a single man with a troubled life. To top the month off, the wife of one of my co-workers forgot her child in the car one sunny morning. When she returned at the end of her work day, the 11-month old infant had long since died. The frailty of life and the feebleness of human ability, repeatedly demonstrated in the course of our August.

What lasts forever? What is safe? What is guaranteed? What will tomorrow bring? Do I have any idea how fragile this world is? Do I even know what will happen when I walk out of these doors today? Apparently, neither institutions nor individuals control their own, or others', destinies. Solomon tells us that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to heart¹. Emily Dickinson, perhaps in a chiding tone, begins a famous poem, "Because I could not stop for Death, He kindly stopped for me"².

¹ Ecclesiastes 7:2

² Because I Could Not Stop for Death, Emily Dickinson

Major events, especially when they expose the reality of the human condition, tend to get our attention in ways that cause us to reflect on questions like, “What really matters?” “Where am I going?” “Where is my family going?” “What is this life all about anyway?” “Is my life what it should be?” Perhaps one of the greatest changes is that often there is the immediate vanishing of a great many distractions as they are either physically unavailable or they are temporarily or chased out of mind. You now have some mental space, some extra attention, left over to consider some of these deeper questions.

Perhaps the old saying, “Only one life twill soon be passed, only what’s done for Christ will last” flits across the screen of your mind. And you wonder if *anything* you are doing in life is what you are supposed to be doing. Often this wonderment creates a deep-water dive into the recesses of our hearts and souls. And certainly, a hard look at oneself can be of value. But even better than a look inward, is a look outward, around us. First to Christ, then to his Word, and then to our world. What are you supposed to be doing? What is the activity of your life to be about? For the believer, the topic of our sermon this morning supplies one of the most fundamental Bible answers to this question: How to serve my fellow believer. Do you want to be sure you are not missing the boat? Look around. Really, I mean physically look around. Who do you see that you are serving, that you are loving? If it simply a registry of blank stares and unfamiliar faces, you *may be* missing the boat. [Let’s Pray]

If you have not been with us over the past several weeks, it may help you to know that we are a little over half way through a sermon series titled: On Being a Parishioner – or more simply put, How to be a Good Church Member. This is week three of a four week series. In week one we discussed “How to View the Church,” in week two we discussed “How to Listen to a Sermon” and this week we are discussing “How to Serve My Fellow Believer.” This topical series is a departure from our usual pattern of systematic expository preaching through books of the Bible. The main question that this sermon series seeks to ask is not, “What should the church be to me?” but, “What should I be to the church.”

Why to Serve?

When you ask your four year old to help his sister clean up the toys, there is a good chance he will say “why?” When he is eight you will ask him to help his mother by taking out the trash. He will not say “why” out loud, but he will wonder why, and in his wondering, wander into some other activity and never actually get around to taking out the trash. When he is twelve you will ask him to help his family by hosing down the patio for tomorrow’s cook-out. He will look straight at you, roll his eyes, and drag his body to the patio and half-heartedly perform his duty. Again, “why” will not escape his lips but he is now outwardly answering the “why” question – it is simply because you told him to and in this case obedience is easier than punishment. At 16 you will ask him to spend the day at church cutting the brush along the fence line of the north end of the lot. Like the four year old, he will resort to the why question – except for this time it will sound something more like, “Why should I?” And the battle will erupt. At that point, if you have not taught your son or daughter why it is a believer serves, I can assure you that “because I told you to” will hardly be enough.

So how do you answer the “why” question? Why should you serve your fellow believer? Just as Pastor Chad taught last week in Sunday School, God has his reasons and in his mercy he has shared them with us, though he is certainly not obligated to. Come with me to John 13. We jump into the part of the Christ-story where the pace of the narrative is beginning to quicken. We are at the last supper. In the days preceding, Christ has begun to speak more frequently and plainly of the fact of his nearing death. The disciples may have still been in the fog, but it is quite probable that they knew the fog had a sense of foreboding in it, a certain uneasy tension. In the midst of their anxiousness and uncertainty, Christ takes up the basin and towel and begins to wash their feet³... why this? why now? We have no previous recording of Christ taking up this activity in Scripture. He was about to die a horrible death, to complete the most difficult task in his mission, to bear the sins of his people! Why kneeling, stooping, rinsing, drying... serving? He who was at Creation and spoke the stars into place bows before those he created, those who are his subjects, his servants, his children.

Peter can't understand it. Christ explains:

Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them⁴.

Why serve? First, it is Christ-like. It is following the clear example he has set. Second, it demonstrates the lordship of Christ in your life. Your humble service shows that you understand that you are a servant, a messenger, *not above your master*. On the contrary, to not serve, whether in your heart or in your actual behavior, is to demonstrate that you *don't* understand that you are *not* greater than Christ. Aloofness from serving the body is no virtue. It is a vice, robbing both you and the body of blessing.

But chapter 13 continues, and so must we, for Christ is not done driving his point home. In verse 21, for the third time since the disciples have entered the upper room, Christ refers to his betrayer. This time, however he is deeply troubled and makes the statement crystal clear. Can you imagine how befuddled the disciples must have been by this point? There staring at each other, perhaps with their bread caught in their throats... what is going on? They now clearly know someone will betray Christ, he has made it plain. Events unfold. Peter tells John to ask Jesus who it is. Christ gives Judas the morsel indicating to John that it is Judas, Satan fully enters the scene via Judas, and the beginning of the end is put into motion. Christ knows this full well. Judas receives some odd instruction, gathers his things, and leaves the room. The rest of the disciples note this, but somehow, perhaps in wishful thinking, explain it away.

³ John 13:7

⁴ John 13:12-17

The disciples seem to be slowly piecing *something* together. Their anxiety is growing. Peter says, *“Lord, where are you going?...Why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you⁵.”* Christ senses the growing tension, confusion, and attempts to comfort his men with truth, *“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me⁶.”* Thomas, apparently not satisfied, follows up on Peter’s question, *“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way⁷?”* Phillip, perhaps feeling a bit desperate, clearly uncertain how this whole adventure with Jesus is going to end, says *“Lord show us the Father and it is enough for us⁸.”* You see, the disciples are beginning to get it, the fog is clearing – they are losing the Christ, he is going away. For three years they poured their lives into his life, even as he now will pour his life completely out for them. What is happening!?

In the midst of this intimate and terrible scene, Christ gives a “new” commandment to his closest followers. Come back up in the passage with me to verse 33:

Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples...”

What is happening here? Christ is putting the community in place for the period of time during which he will remain with his Father. This community is the church. What does he leave to his troubled and disquieted people, who will soon be physically unable to access the Christ? He leaves them each other! And what are they to do? They are to love each other! In what manner? In the same manner that Christ had just washed their feet – in humility, in service, demonstrating Christ’s lordship in their lives as they openly prove that they are not their own masters. But the effect of this establishing of the community is not only inward – it is also outward. It is by this love for one another that *“all people will know you are my disciples...”*

Later in the New Testament we are taught that the church is the body of Christ⁹. So, though the incarnate Christ has physically departed this earth, he has left behind physical evidence, in fact, he has left behind his body, for the good and comfort of believers and for the proclamation of his glory to unbelievers. For the second time in this sermon, I tell you to look around. You are in this together. You are who Christ has left all humanity with as physical evidence that he was here! To love and serve your fellow believer is to do nothing less than show Christ to the world in a way that makes God the Father look magnificent and glorious¹⁰!

⁵ John 13:36 ff.

⁶ John 14:1

⁷ John 14:5

⁸ John 14:8

⁹ Ephesians 4:1-16

¹⁰ Matthew 5:16

So you must make this very important connection. You must live your life in a way that answers the “why” question we began with. When a hand is lifted in service, from a heart compelled by a “washing feet” kind of love, Christ is seen. When you, in love, move my boxes from my home into a moving truck, Christ is seen. When you tear the floor out of a kitchen, Christ is seen. When you give your money to help a family cover their health care costs, Christ is seen. When you enter into a difficult marital situation and in love speak truth, Christ is seen. When you lovingly challenge the brother or sister who is drifting away from the body, Christ is seen. Especially when you sacrifice things of value for Christ’s body, Christ is seen. Do you want to bring him glory? Then sacrificially serve and love your fellow believer.

Later in the New Testament we can see that Peter retained much of what Christ said on that evening, though he was about to commit one of the gravest sins of his life. He writes, in 1 Peter 4:8ff, to Christians who are suffering,

The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers over a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

How to Serve

And this segues us seamlessly to our next point – How to serve my fellow believer. Note that Peter, in the context of “above all, keep loving one another earnestly...,” gives instructions, in part, about how this is to be done. Each believer has a gift or gifts. Peter breaks them into two core categories: Gifts of speaking and gifts of serving. But before we go further here let’s very quickly go back to John. We saw in John 13 that Christ leaves believers with community – a community that is to be characterized by love and humble service in a manner that demonstrates that we are not our own masters and draws attention to *the* Master, Christ. But that is not all Christ left the church with. He also left them with the third person of the holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit. In John 14:16-17, Christ says this:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

One of the key functions of the Spirit, is to distribute gifts to believers.¹¹ Again, as Peter notes, speaking gifts and serving gifts. There are three things we can learn about these gifts that pertain to our topic this morning: For whom they are to be used; In what manner they are to be used; For whose glory they are intended.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 12

For whom are they to be used?

Both Peter and Paul's teaching is clear on this: Gifts are to be used to *"serve one another as, good stewards of God's varied grace"* (1 Peter 4:10) and Paul says, *"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good"* (1 Corinthians 12:7). If you are a believer, you have a gift or gifts. Broadly, they are for speaking or for serving. How can you know what they are? I think often the answer is in the "doing" so to say. If God gave you gifts for the service of the body, then it is likely that the body is going to recognize when you are using them, because they will be served well. So two elements here: a) you must be serving, and b) the body must be watching. Clearcreek should be filled by believers who are coming to increasingly understand their gifts as they serve and as the body comments. If you are not serving the body, it is not likely you will come to understand fully how God has uniquely gifted you for serving the body. If the body is not speaking openly with you, it is again possible that it will be difficult to fully appreciate your giftedness. This is part of body life.

I can speak from personal experience and say, with genuineness, that I have learned more about myself, my gifts and my talents, in the church than I have anywhere else in life. But be warned, the gifts are for the body. When I was in 6th grade I met with the guy who sold instruments for band. I remember he did certain "assessments" with me. He had me close my eyes and then cross my fingers. He would touch a finger with a pen and then ask me to tell him which finger he touched. He asked me to clap a certain rhythm with my hands. I think I was failing miserably because after several of these activities he finally looked at me and said, "Well, you've got long arms, and the band needs some trombones. You can play the trombone." He identified my unique capability, the band's need, and set me to work. I loathed the trombone. I thought it was ridiculous looking. And I only lasted two years.

My hunch is that many of us hide our long arms, so to say. Perhaps you have come to understand, to some extent, your giftedness. But the truth is, you don't want to use it in service of the body. You are lazy, you are selfish, or you are over committed to other things which you think bring you more benefit, or you are shy, or you just didn't know your gift was for the church. Maybe you can't use your giftedness in the church where you think it should be used, so you choose not to participate, and in a huff proclaim your independence and go off to where you think you will be better appreciated. While I believe that the use of your gifts in service of the church *can* be very satisfying, I know of no place in Scripture that promises you will "like," or "get a lot out of" or "increase your self esteem," from using your gifts in the church. In fact, most of the narratives we see in the New Testament seem to indicate just the opposite. All that you can truly be sure of is what Peter tells us – that when you use your gifts in service of the church, God is glorified through Jesus Christ. Hopefully, this is reward enough.

One last hunch in this area. I suspect, that there are those of us who have a degree of knowledge of our gifts. I say a degree, because I don't think we'll truly understand our gifts until we use them for what they are made for. But in one manner or another, we've become expert at using what God has given us for earthly ends. So, Mrs. Stay-at-

Home Mom, you have a way with encouraging and helping people. It has been confirmed repeatedly and you yourself have come to see this. But, you use this gift only with your sewing club, your immediate family, or your closest friends. You know that work in the church is messy, and you prefer not to get your hands dirty. Or Mr. Businessman, you have built a career out of being able to understand things well, having insight, and strong communication skills... and you know these things are true about yourself. But, you keep them to yourself, for yourself, in service of yourself. Personal advancement is your church. And perhaps you make your excuses – I don't know enough about the Bible, I'm not a people person, if I didn't work so much, I wouldn't make so much, and where would the church be without my giving! Dear brother and sister, do not withhold your gifts from the church. They are not for you. Praise God for the unique talents, abilities, and gifts you have. Praise God that you have learned to skillfully use them in life. Praise God that many of you do use them here at Clearcreek to the bodies benefit. But beloved, many of you have yet to submit your gifts to service of the body – don't delay! Only when you do this will you begin to benefit from all the Lord has for you in the church. And only then will the church begin to benefit from all you have from the Lord.

Paul really explains this best when he discusses the body in 1 Corinthians 12:12-20. Let's read that together *[Read]*. Every believer is a functioning part of the body, with gifts, intended to aid the body in its function. Many members, one body. No believer has the right to say, "Oh, I'm a pinky, the body can operate pretty well without me, I'll grab a seat on the bench." Nor does the eye, a seemingly important part of the body, have the right to say to the pinky, "We don't need you! So sit on that bench!" On the contrary, the eye must humbly esteem and honor the pinky with great care and intentionality. Elders are those with at least speaking gifts and therefore tend to be those thought of as "indispensable," but Paul, in verses 21-26 stands this thinking on its head. It is the less prominent parts of the body that are indispensable. So Elders, far be it from us to ever forget those who faithfully play their part in the body, but do so quietly, in ways that are not noticed or often appreciated. Rather, we must go out of our way to bestow greater honor upon those who serve in weakness and obscurity. This is what the Scripture requires. And those who serve in weakness or obscurity, you must not stop serving your fellow believers, proclaiming that the body does not need you anyway. You have no right. So in this way, Paul speaks to us all about our service in the body.

In what manner are our gifts to be used?

There is really only one simple message I want to get across here. It flows from Paul's discussion of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12. Getting a running start at the chapter, however, will help inform our response to this question. Throughout this entire letter, Paul is dealing with issues that have wrought disunity in the church. In chapters 1-4 he is dealing with factions in the church who claim they follow various leaders, Paul, Apollos, etc., which are causing disunity. In chapters 5-6, he deals with unaddressed sin among those in the church which are causing disunity. In chapters 8-9 he addresses Christian liberty and its current disuniting effect in the church. And then in chapter 11 he ad-

dresses the Lord's table and the manner in which it was being practiced leading to, you guessed it, disunity. Paul repeatedly and in many different ways puts forth arguments and commands to turn the Corinthians from their disunity to unity: *I appeal to you brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you*¹² ... *You are God's field, God's building [in which God's fellow workers are laboring]*¹³ ... *Why not rather suffer wrong? [than drag your brother into court, and thereby disgrace the body]*¹⁴ ... *But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak*¹⁵ ... *Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor...*¹⁶

By the time we arrive in chapter 12, it is obvious that one the main messages Paul is trying to get across is that the body is to be unified. That overarching theme swallows up the discussion of gifts and their use in the body. Let's read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 [\[Read\]](#). Can you hear it? Kind of hard to avoid, it is not? For a third time this morning, I want you to look around. All of you who are believers, have gifts. These gifts are for each other. We are dependent on one another – yet we each are different, are unique. These differences will give rise to opportunities to focus on the gift or the person and not the one who gave them. You can say it however you want: You are all on the same team, you all work for the same company, you are part of the same family, or we are all on the same side... The point is, our gifts, our services, our activities must be used in service of one another. This service must be done in such a manner as to promote and prize unity. Why? Because, this demonstrates that we all serve the same glorious God – or to put it in the language of verse 3, that *“Jesus is Lord.”*

A brief note – I just said we are dependent on one another. 1 Corinthians 12 clearly teaches this. For some of you, this rubs you wrong. You have worked hard to build a life that beams with independence. Think hard about what this passage calls you to and whether or not your independence is really as great as you think it is. I would argue there is a potential pitfall... the hand says to the foot, the shoulder, the nose, the ear, “I don't need you, but you need me, and I'm happy to be here for you.” That is not quite what this passage is saying...

For whose glory they are intended.

Lastly under this heading of How to Serve My Fellow Believer, we want to make clear for whose glory we use our gifts. Peter puts it very concisely in the passage we considered earlier: – *in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*¹⁷ So let me be transparent

¹² 1:10

¹³ 3:9

¹⁴ 6:1-8

¹⁵ 8:9

¹⁶ 10:24

¹⁷ 1 Peter 4:8

in order that you might understand how it becomes so easy to take what God has given you and use it for your own glory. I love to preach. I also love it when people love my preaching. And sometimes, word gets back to me that people do benefit from my preaching. How easy is it for my head to go from 12 inches to 12.5 inches? Pretty easy. Then the following week I'm sitting at my desk wondering how I can do a repeat. How can I get people to like my preaching again... Oh what a ghastly and dangerous desire. Now I am preaching for my glory. That kind of thinking comes from hell. Peter is clear – your gifts are given to you that you may serve the body and that in doing so, **bring God glory**. That means all personal glorification is off-limits. Paul essentially says the same thing – you were *given* your gifts! And all of you got them from the same place. It is not your power, it is the Spirit's power. And the Spirit apportions as **he wills**¹⁸ – not as you deserve. In other words, none of it has anything to do with me, or you.

What Does Serving Look Like?

We want to wrap up our morning asking what does this type of body life look like? Well, it looks like Ephesians 4, the church building itself up in love. It looks like Galatians 6, the body confronting and restoring itself, and it also looks like Colossians 3, probably one of my favorite chapters in all of the New Testament. We began today in a rather dark way, considering how quickly life can change and often, not for the better. We considered how we can be pushed to seriously consider what is important in life in the midst of such circumstances. I have argued that service to body, loving your brother and sister is of fundamental importance for the believer. So important that it should orient the way we live and the choices we make. What does the church require of you? The church requires that you love and serve the body. What does this accomplish? Many things, but most importantly, Christ is seen and given glory.

The idea of love comes up so frequently in the Scripture in regards to our behavior toward one another. John 13 certainly clearly commanded us to love one another. 1 Corinthians 13 powerfully contextualizes the whole chapter on gifts we considered earlier, chapter 12. Galatians, in all its discussion of the law and the way we should understand it under the New Covenant, simply, but compellingly reminds us that it is not keeping the law that matters, but rather faith working through love¹⁹. And we could go on and on.

But let's go back to Colossians 3. If we were to take a camera and put a special lens on it that made qualities, versus material images, stand out, and pointed it at what God calls the church to be, the resulting snapshot would look like Colossians 3. [\[Read Colossians 3:12-17\]](#) This flows directly out of who we are in Christ, in other words, it flows from the good news of the gospel.

A final application and we will conclude. Note that many of the activities described here require much more than the physical intervention we usually associate with serving each

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

¹⁹ Galatians 5:6

other – making meals, working on homes, giving money, though all of these are good. But they tend to happen much more than teaching and admonishing one another, than kindness and bearing with one another. Be careful that as a body we reckon with our full duty to one another, not just those that are comfortable. Church life is messy – but the consequences of not embracing the mess are far more severe than remaining jumping in. Love and service to the body requires all of you. Take your cue from the Savior, he set aside all comfort, all position, all safety for love and service of his church. *[Read [Philippians 2:1-8](#)]* No servant is greater than his master, no messenger than the one who sent him...

Beloved, one last time I ask you to look around. Colossians 3 is to be played out among this group of people. Here. Now. Everyday. What matters? This matters. You see, while markets are failing, hurricanes are raging, and people, sadly, are slipping into eternity, the church continues. And the church's mission to show Christ to the world and to each other continues. One of the fundamental ways that this takes place, is through our love and service of one another. May we be ever-conscious of what is temporal and what is eternal – and then live as people who realize that this world is not our home.

Conclusion