

“Improving Your Serve”

Luke 10:38-42

Series: Friends for God Week 5. S - Serve

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It started with a mailbox. It was my day off and, as usual, I was consumed with my home improvement list. In the middle of it, I happened to notice my neighbor across the street struggling with her mailbox. She was trying to install a new one and it wasn't cooperating.

Walking across the street I said, “Hi Linda, is there something wrong with your mailbox?” “I just bought this new one but it doesn't fit on the post,” she explained. Normally her husband Jerry did these projects but he wasn't feeling well so she decided to get the job done. Unfortunately Linda needed some tools, screws and a block of wood to properly attach the mailbox to the post. Knowing I had all three, I ran back inside, grabbed the stuff and, in no time, the job was done.

Now to be honest, up to the moment, I often couldn't remember her name. I know what you are thinking, “How can this guy memorize a whole sermon and forget people's names?” But I do...with increasing frequency for some reason. In the past Linda told me her name but I kept forgetting. The sad thing is: at that point I'd been living across the street from her for twenty years. I was so embarrassed. She'd say, “Hi Doug” and I'd wave and say “Hey...You!” The mailbox changed all that. From then on I became a better neighbor to Linda and Jerry.

One of the best ways to Bless people is to Serve. In fact, many of you tell me **you** get blessed when you serve. In our series **Friends for God** we are learning how to BLESS those around us and help them find their back to God so they can be friends with God. We B-Begin with Prayer, L-Listen and last week Scott preached about E-Eating and sharing a meal. It was a great sermon and many people told me how great it was. I think that's partly because he fed you Danish. This week we look at the first **S-Serve**. Jesus came to serve and He told us to serve as well.

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Matthew 20:28

Jesus especially tells us to serve our neighbors. The second greatest commandment to Him is:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Matthew 22:39; Leviticus 19:18

This leaves such a profound impression on Jesus' followers it shows up several more times in the New Testament. Paul says in Romans,

The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Romans 13:9-10.

Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. Romans 15:2

In Galatians Paul writes,

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself. Galatians 5:14

James agrees,

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. James 2:8

And John reminds us if we don’t love our siblings and neighbors, we can’t say we love God (1 John 4:20-21). When the Bible uses the term ‘neighbor’ it can mean anyone – even our enemies. Yet what if Jesus wants us to begin by loving the people who live nearest in your house, school, workplace and neighborhood – a neighbor like Linda?

This came as a rude awakening to Dave Runyon and Jay Pathak. These two pastors in the Denver suburbs were passionate about helping their community. They gathered other pastors in town to ask their mayor: “If you could wave a magic wand and change anything about our city what would it be?” They expected the mayor to talk about homelessness, poverty, addiction. He mentioned some of these. Yet at the end of the conversation he said, “The smartest thing pastors can do for the city is to start a neighboring movement.” It turns out people who have close bonds with their neighbors live longer. Where people know the names of their neighbors, crime is 60% lower. During natural disasters, neighbors are often first responders. When the mayor finished Dave, Jay and the other pastors were stunned and somewhat embarrassed. The mayor of their city told a group of pastors to do what Jesus says – His second most important commandment. Then the mayor ended with this convicting postscript: “There doesn’t seem to be much difference between Christians and non-Christians when it comes to loving your neighbors.”

Together these pastors decided to lead their people to love their neighbors. Now usually pastors like to set the bar high to challenge their people. “Let’s go out and love our enemies as Jesus says.” That’s true. Yet Dave and Jay recognized this might be graduate level Christianity. To serve someone let’s start with something easy.

First, **Learn Their Names.** How can you really know your neighbor if you don’t even know their name? Instead of waving and saying, “Hey man” it’s better to say, ‘Hey Mike.’ Once you know a person’s name the relationship begins to grow. You move from “Hey Mike” to “Hey Mike, how are you doing?” to “Hey Mike, I have to move this couch can you give me a hand?” to “Hey Mike, how did your Mom’s surgery go?” Knowing someone’s name is the doorway to turning a stranger into an acquaintance and then a friend.

I’d like to give everyone a test today. Picture a tick-tack-toe grid. In the center house or square write your name and address. Now can you write the names of those who live in the eight houses around you? The people across the street, those on either side of you and those who live behind you. I realize this may not be the exact layout of your block or you may live in an apartment building or condo. Regardless, just choose eight houses which are near or around you and write the names of those who reside there. Next, in the middle part of each box write some attribute you know about each family: was born in England, works as a chemist, is retired, loves to go running.

Now in the bottom part of each box write something about their heart, their joys, their concerns such as: just had a new baby, is looking for work, visits an ailing parent, has an upcoming surgery.

As you look at your box you may feel a little discouraged because you don't know very much about the people who live around you. I've lived in my home for 31 years. I can fill out information about three houses across the street and the house on either side of me but I'm still working on the three houses behind me. If your block map is blank don't be bummed. This is very common. Get started learning their names and what's going on in their lives.

Second step to Serve is **Give Your Time**. Good relationships require an investment of time. Yet time is often the very barrier which blocks us from loving our neighbor. "Yes, I'd like to get to know and help my neighbors," we think, "but I just don't have the time." The truth is: we all have the same amount of time. The real question is how do we spend it?

We actually have more time available to us than any previous generation in history thanks to progress and technology. We don't need to grow our food, haul our water or generate our power. Tasks which used to take hours – cooking, cleaning, commuting, communicating – are much quicker. If you told me twenty-five years ago I would be able to call people from my car, access all the world's knowledge on my phone, send a message to everyone in the congregation with the push of a button, and lead a Bible study with someone in India I would have said you were crazy. All these advances make it possible for us to be more effective and efficient.

So where does all the time go? Actually, the same technology which gives us more time also gives us more ways to waste that time. When I was young there were three or four TV stations and Saturday morning cartoons only went to noon. Now there are thousands of TV stations, millions of streaming movies on demand and whole cartoon networks. Plus there are countless online games and social media sites to soak up every second. Even a small investment of time serving someone can make a big difference. It didn't take long to install Linda's mailbox but she really appreciated the help.

Finally we need to **Serve Without Strings**. Serving can be tricky because it's easy to do the right thing for the wrong reason. When we serve out of guilt (I owe this to you), obligation (I have to do this for you), or manipulation (I hope you appreciate all I do for you) it's service with strings attached. This doesn't build up relationships.

A perfect example is the story of Martha and Mary. This comes right after Jesus teaches us to love our neighbors and Martha intends to do just that by hosting Jesus and his disciples.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" Luke 10:38-40

I want to defend Martha for a minute. She's been misunderstood. Martha opens her home to Jesus and his entire entourage which is probably a lot more than thirteen people. Meals are a big deal in

the Middle East and hospitality is legendary. The task is so great Luke says she is “distracted.” The Greek word means she is stressed, obsessed, distressed with all the preparations. What’s more, the word “preparations” and “work” are the same word: *diakonia* from which we get our word “deacon.” It means “service” as in serving a meal and it also means “ministry.” Martha is going crazy serving and ministering to Jesus while her lazy sister Mary sits on the floor and soaks up Jesus’ teaching. I bet Martha would love to do that but there’s work to be done!

Or would she? I guess I want to defend Martha because I identify with Martha. It’s hard for me to sit and soak like Mary. I feel much more comfortable ministering to Jesus than ministering like Jesus or with Jesus. And here’s the irony: I can invest so much time doing the ministry that I have little time left for people. For Jesus people are the ministry. Jesus always has time for people. In the Gospels Jesus is often interrupted by someone on the way to do something else. Sometimes I get irritated when I’m interrupted from doing my ministry. For Jesus the interruptions are the ministry.

It’s easy to miss a very awkward moment in this story. In English it says, Martha “came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” In Greek it says: Martha came and stood over Jesus. See the picture? Martha stands over Jesus, asks the Lord if He cares and then dictates to Him what He should tell Mary while Mary sits quietly at the Lord’s feet and learns from Him. Jesus gently replies,

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” Luke 10:41-42

When God says your name twice, He wants to get your attention. Jesus says Martha is anxious and stirred up about many things. The word stirred up comes from *turbo*. Martha is agitated about a lot of things. She’s on turbo overdrive. Mary focuses on one thing: listening to Jesus.

Don’t minister to Jesus. Minister with Jesus. One crucial way you can serve others is by sharing the faith and the Bible with children. While Scott preached in here, I had the opportunity to be with Stephanie Hermesmeyer, Director of Kid’s Ministry in Sunday School and School of the Rock. The next generation needs us to serve them, to tell them about God’s Hope, God’s Truth, God’s Love. We are in danger of losing a whole generation for Jesus. We need you to serve even if you don’t have children or youth. There are lots of different ways you can serve and bless the children of this community. Please talk with Stephanie now and find out how you can help.

Another way to serve is with the 5 Rings I gave you. Try to put down 1-3 names in each of the five circles: Family, Friends, Fun, Fellowship, Factory/Firm. This week, invest part of your time in praying for them, listening to them, eating with them, and serving them. Find simple, small ways you can serve these people. You won’t believe the difference it makes.

Remember Linda? Normally, her husband Jerry did all the home improvement projects. After all he was retired and had the time. Yet this time he wasn’t out there because he was sick. In truth, Jerry had cancer. He lived with it and fought it for a long time. As I started to have more conversations with Linda on the sidewalk she felt more comfortable asking me to pray for Jerry.

And then came the moment when Linda asked me to come in her house and join their children who were gathered around Jerry. We prayed for him just before he passed away.

She continued to live in the house. Lisa and I enjoyed talking with her whenever she was outdoors working on her garden. Jerry was a veteran and one day I noticed Linda putting up a very tattered American flag. So the next time I was in Home Depot I picked up a new flag for her. We hosted a Growth Group at our house on Monday nights. One time God said to me, "Why don't you invite Linda?" I did and she said, "Sure. That sounds great." She became friends with the other members of the group. One time, I was doing a home improvement project at my house and we could not host it so Linda graciously opened her home to the Group at the last minute.

Eventually, it just made sense for her to sell her home and move closer to her children and grandchildren. We were truly sad to see her move away. Over time, Linda had become more than a name to us. She was a dear friend and a sister in Christ. I'm sorry that it took more than two decades to get to know her.

A new young couple with a little girl bought the house from Linda. I was determined not to let it take two more decades before I got to know them. So I baked some chocolate chip cookies and Lisa and I walked across the street and gave them the cookies with a welcome to the neighborhood card. It turns out that Andrea and Jeremy already knew us. They were both classmates of our daughter Kristin. God made it easy on us.

Who is your neighbor? If you don't know, maybe it's time to improve your serve.