

Offering a Drink to Others

Romans 12:3-13

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We're continuing our journey of exploring commitment through prayers, presence, gifts, and now, service. Serving is another key commitment we make, another discipline that disciples practice. Serving others is offering a drink of the water of life to them. Jesus said, "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward" (Matthew 10:42). Every one of us is called to serve and God gives every one of us gifts and opportunities to serve.

Let's look at *why* we serve, *where* we serve, and *how* we serve.

We serve because God calls us to serve. Some people attend church simply to be fed the Word of God. But if we're not careful, we can become spiritually obese because we're always being fed but we're never active. The purpose of worship, the purpose of praying, the purpose of church is not to simply sit and soak. We're to become stirred to action—to go and to serve.

We serve because God serves us. Jesus came to be a servant: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28). This past week we've been studying the model of how we imitate Christ as we begin to serve. Jesus serves us, and he expects us to serve others:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. (Mark 10:42–44)

Serving in the name of Jesus and reaching out to others gives us credibility as his messengers. If we're going to be effective sowers of the message of Christ, one of the best ways to prepare the soil where that seed can be planted is to serve.

On All Saints Sunday, we remember and celebrate people of faith who've gone before us through death to join the great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). We celebrate their lives of service. That's part of their witness to us. As we serve, we follow the example of many who served before us.

Serving others also brings us together. The New Testament concept of the church is that we're the body of Christ, the community of faith that gathers together and serves together. The church, as the body of Christ, is composed of many different types of people with many different gifts, but we're also united in service.

The love that church members have for each other binds us together and frees us from ourselves and our selfishness. One of the best witnesses the church can give our community is showing unity in our love and care for others.

This unity can't be broken by death. When we talk about "the communion of the saints," we're talking about our fellowship with all of God's people from all times and places.

This past week we read about team spirit and the servant's heart, and about how Jesus served. He brought together a group of individuals who became inseparable in their love, encouragement, and support of one another. Our serving gives us credibility as messengers for Christ, and it also brings us together as a team. And teams can do a lot more than individuals.

When a football team makes an amazing play—maybe the quarterback completes a long pass for a touchdown—it's not just the quarterback doing it. The line has to block to give him time to find a receiver and throw. The receiver has to catch the ball and run. And it's not just what they do in that one play. They've been practicing, building strength and developing skills, every day.

We see the need to serve, but *where do we serve?* There's a place for every person in the life of the church to use our God-given gifts for something meaningful.

We serve where we can use the gifts and abilities that God's given us. Again, on a football team, the quarterback has different gifts from the guards and the tackles and they have different gifts from the wide receivers. If the offensive linemen are playing quarterback and wide receiver, you're probably not going to win. If you get the quarterback playing on the line, you're not going to be very effective. We serve best where we can best employ our specific gifts.

Part of the church's task is to help us discover what gifts God's given us and then provide an opportunity for those gifts to be used.

The passage we read from Romans includes one list of spiritual gifts. There are several places in the New Testament that list a variety of gifts God gives to his people to equip us to serve. We have different gifts according to the grace given to us. Grace is at the heart of all God's giving.

These gifts of grace aren't merit badges. Having or not having a certain gift doesn't make us more or less spiritual than someone else. Gifts aren't indicators of our own spirituality and maturity. They're simply ways that God's grace takes on concrete reality in our lives. They're signs of the Holy Spirit's presence and power equipping the church for our mission.

Paul always sets these gifts in the context of love, of the body of Christ, and of service. Immediately following the list here, Paul says, "Love must be genuine. ...love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor."

Paul says that we who are many are one body in Christ and individually we're members of one another. We belong to each other. Our physical body has many members or parts and they don't all have the same function. The body of Christ—the church—has many parts and we each have unique functions.

We don't all have the same gifts because, like the cells, organs and tissues of the body, we don't all have the same function. Each us has the gifts we need to function in the service God has for us. Spiritual gifts aren't toys for our entertainment, they're tools for the work of ministry.

Early in WW II, Winston Churchill sent this message to President Roosevelt: "Give us the tools and we'll finish the job" (Stuart Briscoe,

Romans, The Communicator's Commentary, 222). I think God's message to the church is, "Here are the tools; let's finish the job."

Through gifts of grace, gifts of the Holy Spirit, God equips the church with the tools to do God's will, to fulfill God's purpose, to serve and bless other people.

Among the variety of gifts listed here in Romans 12 is *service*. Service is both the purpose of the gifts and it's a gift in itself. The word here literally means "to wait on tables," but it's translated both as "service" and "ministry." It often refers to helping with practical, physical needs. This gift produces the desire to meet the practical needs of others.

You may think, "Well, serving isn't my gift, so I don't need to do it." But we're all called to serve God through serving other people. Some of us may specialize in a certain kind of service, but all of God's people serve.

If we pray and find a way to serve that we love where we can exercise our gifts and find fulfillment, we won't burn out. If we're recruited to do something that we're not gifted for, we'll feel guilty if we don't do it. So we try to do it, but we're not very effective. That's when we burn out. But if we're serving in ways that exercise the gifts God gives us, we don't burn out, we fire up. Even in serving, we can't outgive God.

One church wanted to recruit one of its members, a local school principal, to serve on some church boards. He was a very gifted administrator, and the church saw that he could add a lot to various areas. The man was wise and knew his gifts well. He declined to serve on any boards, but said he would run the church's Sunday School department as long as the church wanted. He never got burned out—instead, he took his church service seriously and for many years ran what was considered to be the best Sunday school in town.

We serve where we can be ourselves and use our experience to God's glory. All of us have been through some tough trials, and coming through them has given us a unique message to share and a lesson to teach. We're advised in Galatians: "Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that" (6:4 *The Message*). 2 Corinthians 1:4 says something similar: "God comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort

we ourselves receive from God" (1:4). Often, the people who are most effective at serving in the life of the church are people who've been through something tough, a big trial or trouble. Coming through it has taught them how to serve others who might be walking through the same situation.

We serve because we're called and we're following the example of Jesus. We serve where we can use the gifts God gives us and where our personality and experience relate to people's need.

One last thing: *How* do we serve? We should serve *enthusiastically*: "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord" (Rom 12:11). When we're enthusiastic or fervent about what we do in the life of the church, it becomes an invitation for others to join in. We're enthusiastic about sharing faith and about serving.

You've heard the old line that in the average church, twenty percent of the people do eighty percent of the work. That's a big problem. It ought to be that one hundred percent of the people are serving! Every member is to be a minister. The church needs to help every person get involved in finding the place where God wants them to serve. Everybody needs the opportunity to serve. When people serve enthusiastically, great things happen.

We're to serve *unselfishly* rather than for ourselves. Scripture points out that we've been "called to be free. But don't use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another in love" (Gal 5:13).

Another way we should serve is *with humility* because we're not placed above others. We serve as Jesus served. The Bible instructs, "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble'" (1 Pet 5:5). Picture Jesus kneeling to wash his disciples' feet. In the church we're not to look for the top, we're to look for a towel—a place where we can serve in humility.

Finally, we serve *with the intention of seeking to please God alone*. The point of serving in God's church isn't to please people or to draw attention to ourselves. If we want to get recognized because of something we're

doing, that's the wrong motivation. But if we're serving simply to please God, we'll receive joy that's greater than we could even begin to imagine.

The more we lose ourselves in serving God, the more we'll discover about ourselves. The more we give, the more we receive. Every member of Christ's body is a minister. Every member needs the opportunity to find a niche in which to serve. When we're losing ourselves in serving Christ, then we're doing what God's called us to do, opening up opportunities that become a platform for witness, and sharing the living water with thirsty people.

Now, before we close, I want each of us to focus on something. Next week, we celebrate Commitment Sunday. I'm excited about it. It'll mark the culmination of our six-week study, and we're going to celebrate. It's also when we'll have an opportunity to commit specifically to how we'll support the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness in the coming year. As you reflect on the final readings of the study this week, please prayerfully search your hearts and note how you've been transformed by God through this study. Ask God where and how he wants you to commit your transformed life in the life of this church. And then make that commitment.