

## **Guarding Against Spiritual Obesity**

Mark 10:35-45

November 11, 2007

We are coming to the end of our autumn stewardship emphasis. Next week is Consecration Sunday when we will present our Estimate of Giving cards to God's work through Calvary church. Throughout the last few weeks, we have been talking about stewardship as consisting of so much more than money.

It is all about commitment. Over the last three weeks, we have talked about our commitment to support the church with our prayers, our presence, and our gifts. Today, we move on to the commitment of service.

As we move into the new millennium, I think that the churches which are going to have the biggest impact on the world are those who do their best in helping all of their members be effective in using their spiritual gifts. We haven't always done that around here, but we are going to keep on trying to do a better job of it.

In my opinion, there is too often a large chasm in churches nowadays. I think that there is a huge abyss separating the laity and the clergy. Much too often, the prevailing notion is that if anything is to be done in the church, it should be the clergy who does it. There is, in my opinion, an almost ingrained attitude that church is somehow a spectator sport. People sit on the sidelines and watch the ministry being conducted by the clergy and the other paid staff of the church.

That however, is not an attitude that can be found anywhere in Scripture. You see, according to the Bible, we are all the *laos*, the people of God. All of us have been designed for service. All of us have been given a special gift or special gifts to be used to increase the ministry of the Body of Christ. I think that we each have an obligation to try to discern just exactly it is where God wants us to serve.

We may be called to do different things, in different places, and for different periods of time, but we are all called to do something to increase the health of not only the Body of Christ, but also of those who have not heard or been introduced to the Good News.

As we go through this message today about our service, I am going to speak on three basic points. The old sermon form was three points and a poem. Well today I don't have a poem, but I still have the three points. We are going to talk about 1) the essential nature of service, 2) the place where we should serve, and 3) how we should serve.

One of the things that people often say in churches today is that they need to be fed. They go to their present church because they are being fed each week. Or they have changed churches recently because they weren't being fed at the last church. Or they are thinking about looking for another church where they can be fed.

What they are saying, I think, is that they are looking for a church in which they are taught the Scriptures, educated in the doctrines of the church, led to a fuller understanding and appreciation of Jesus Christ, and enabled to carry on a rich and fulfilling spiritual life. I want to be fed, we hear. Over and over again; I want to be fed.

Now there is nothing at all wrong with the seeking of those things. Those areas are all important in our growth and development as Christians. Those are the things that help us mature in the faith and become more grounded in the ways of the Spirit.

But I hope you will allow me to lift up a word of caution. You see, if all you do is feed, you are bound to develop spiritual obesity. If all you do is feed on the Word of God, you get fat because you are never active.

All in all, I have spent eight years in seminary classrooms. I love to go to school. In fact, the thing I probably do best is go to school. I love to read and learn about the newest research in theology, biblical scholarship, church history, and church growth. I love sitting in a classroom with my peers who challenge me to think in new ways. I have always told Toni that if I were really rich – not just rich, but REALLY rich – I would go to school. I would simply spend my days in a classroom, soaking up all the stuff that the professors have to teach me.

But you see, you can't just continue to feed on that stuff. The purpose of the church is not to sit and soak. The purpose is not just to get fat and happy. The purpose of the church is to put all of that learning and all of that feeding into action. Becoming spiritually obese helps no one.

So first, let's talk for just a minute about the nature of service. The reality is that we are called to serve because Christ came to earth, not to be served, but to be a servant. Remember Jesus said,

You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around... and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant.  
Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave (Mark 10:42-44).

There are a couple of things to keep in mind about our service. First of all, when we serve others, we earn credibility as faithful, loyal, and authentic followers. You see, the best sermons on earth are seldom the ones which are preached from behind a pulpit. It was after all, St. Francis of Assisi, who encouraged people to understand that the best way to show the love of God and to make disciples was to go and preach the gospel and use words if you have to.

We can talk all we want about how good of a Christian we are, but if those words are not backed up with action they are nothing more than clanging bells or clashing cymbals. Talking the talk AND walking the walk is what gives us credibility in the eyes of others who want to know if we really believe what we say we believe.

A second aspect of serving others is that such service brings us together. We are the Body of Christ. Individually we are nothing, but together, we can fully function in ministry. When we serve, we act together as one, with one intent, and with one vision. The Apostle Paul says, “We are God’s fellow workers” (I Cor. 3:9).

So, the nature of service in the name of Christ earns us credibility and brings us together as members of the Body of Christ. The next question is: where should we serve?

This should seem evident, but it isn’t always clear. First and foremost, the place for our service is the spot where our passion and our gifts meet. You would never expect Peyton Manning, quarterback for the Indianapolis Colts, to play on the offensive line. You would never expect Marvin Harrison, who is a great receiver, to become the punter. You would never expect my son with a bachelor’s degree in Fine Arts to go to work in a nuclear physics lab. You wouldn’t expect me, who got a “D” in high school algebra and no longer able to help my children with their math homework after they reached 5<sup>th</sup> grade, to teach math to middle school students.

Just so, sometimes in the church, we get people to volunteer to do jobs for which they are not really suited. Over the course of my ministry, I have watched church volunteers burn out in front of my eyes. I think I know the reason for this.

Going again to Paul, he says:

God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well...If your gift is that of serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, do a good job of teaching. If your gift is to encourage others, do it! If you have money, share it generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly (Romans 12:6-8).

In order to be your best as you serve, you have to discern through prayer, study, and meditation just what your gifts are. If you serving in something that is not where your passion and gifts meet, you will not be as effective as you want to be. By contrast, if you are not serving where your gifts would lead you, you are squandering that gift in God’s sight.

So we have looked at the nature of our service and the place of our service. There is one last question I hope to answer. “How should we serve?”

First of all, we should serve “enthusiastically.” Romans 12:11 says, “Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord.” The quickest way to get someone to join you in helping serve is for them to see your excitement and your enthusiasm for your work.

It is clear, at least clear to me when I read the New Testament, that every person is a minister. We are putting the finishing touches on our nominating committee report of

leadership for 2008. We have Trustees, Finance Committee, Worship Committee, Education Committee, and a whole host of other volunteer positions.

It occurred to me just the other day that we shouldn't be calling these people Trustees, or members of Finance, or Administrative Council members. We should be calling them what the Bible would call them: Ministers of Administration, Ministers of Finance, Ministers of Worship, Ministers of Staff Supervision, Ministers of Offering Counting, Ministers of Altar Preparation...because that's what they are.

The statistics are true in just about every church I know; 20% of the people do 80% of the work. That's just not acceptable. Every person is a minister. That 20% should rise to 60 or 80 or 100%.

Now let's realize that the church has to do its share in helping members find their particular ministries. Service is a ministry of the laity and we need to do a better job in providing opportunities for them to serve.

The second part of answering the question of how we should serve is this: we serve with humility. I believe that one of the most important images in the entire Bible is the picture of Jesus kneeling before his disciples washing their feet. Most of us would consider that to be a humiliating experience, but Jesus found it to be liberating. He was able to always put others ahead of himself.

Finally, we serve with the intention of always pleasing God. It seems to me that the point of life is not to do what pleases us. If that were true, I would be living in a grass hut on the beach down at Key West, listening to Jimmy Buffett records all day long.

The point of serving is not to draw attention to ourselves, but to please God in everything. If we are always wanting recognition for the things we do, maybe we ought to consider just what our motivation is: self-aggrandizement or self-enhancement? Or is our motivation simply to please God? It matters.

A couple of months ago, I wrote an article in the newsletter in which I passed along a story told by our bishop. He was present at the dedication of a new church building in West Lafayette. During the service, they passed out aprons to every person there. The pastor told those gathered that they were being given aprons and not bibs. Their job in the world was to serve and not to worry about being fed, because it is by serving that one is ultimately fed.

I think we have come a long way during the last five weeks. We have looked at our commitment in terms of our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service. Those are stewardship issues. Those are the ways that we commit ourselves to God's kingdom. Those are the ways that we respond to the myriad of gifts that God has given us. Those are all stewardship issues as we give back to God what God has blessed us with in the first place.

Next week is Consecration Sunday. Let me give you a taste of how it will work. When you come, the ushers will give you an Estimate of Giving card for 2008. During the service, there will be time set aside for you to fill that out and then bring it forward and place it on the altar. It will be a time to dream, a time to celebrate, a time to pray, a time to expect great things, a time to say thanks to God, and a time to commit all of ourselves fully to God's work through Calvary church.

During the coming week, I ask that we all be in serious and faithful prayer. I hope that we can reflect on the ways that we have been blessed by God. I hope that we will be honest with ourselves about our need to give back to God a portion of those blessings. I hope that we will discover that our lives have been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. I hope that we will all come ready to give a full measure of ourselves, as Christ has given himself to us.