

**Core Seminar**

**Living as a Church**

**Class 11: Service**

*Sacrifice for the Sake of Unity*

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**I. Introduction**

This morning, we turn to the topic of serving the church. By serving, I simply mean spending yourself – your time, your gifts, your resources, your energy – all that you have for the good of the church. Christ’s service to us is the model in this. Mark 10:45: *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”*

Now Jesus calls us to take up His cross and follow Him. Our service to others then should be the result of an overflow of love from our hearts because of the love that God has shown to us in Christ. That’s what unleashes ministry; an overflow of joy as we comprehend the incredible mercy Christ has shown us.

This morning we’ll consider how God has called us to serve each other in the church through our various gifts, and how that service contributes to unity in the body. This unity is an important part of our witness: A community full of people who joyfully serve one another should stick out in our world! We’ll start with a theology of service, and then walk through four ways in which service can contribute to unity. Along the way, I’ll pause and reflect on different ways we can get service wrong and fail to glorify God in it. My hope is that our discussion this morning will spur us on to serve each other more and more for God’s glory and our good.

**II. A Theology of Service**

Let me begin by outlining a theology of service that we see from various passages in scripture—and we’ll start by looking at a passage in 1 Peter. In 1 Peter 4:10, we read:

*" As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace*.” And then in verse 11, we read: *“whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.”*

These two verses in 1 Peter 4 are a kind of summary on the theology of service or ministry within the church, and contain five simple but important points: (1) each Christian has received a gift (this isn’t just something for church leadership and staff while everyone else watches passively); (2) the gift is a result of God’s grace; (3) we are responsible to use that gift; (4) we should use it for the benefit of others and for the glory of God; and (5) we should serve through God’s strength. So, as a Christian, there is some special manifestation of God's grace in you which can build up others in the faith, and bring glory to God.

What’s the purpose for your service? In Ephesians 4:12, Paul says that these gifts are given *“to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.”* What Paul is stressing here is the goal of strengthening the whole body, not just the parts. We are to minister to each other with a view not just of helping each other mature, but with a view to the whole body growing in unity. God gives gifts to all of us, according to his grace, to be exercised in his strength—not primarily as a means of fulfillment for each of us as individuals, but for the maturing of his church, that we might grow in unity. That’ll be our focus today.

And that’s also our first point of how service can be done wrong. The person who feels entitled to serve in precisely the way they feel they’ve been gifted—and who fears that they can’t find fulfillment as a Christian if they’re not serving in *that* way, has misunderstood this passage. The goal of service is the strengthening of the body, not our personal fulfillment. And so that means that we serve where the body needs strengthening. The fact that God gives us gifts to use in service isn’t supposed to limit us in what we do, it equips us to do what needs to be done. We can be wrong about what gift or gifts *we think* God has given us. Far better to roll up our sleeves and get serving, then to sit around and wonder what our gift is. Because the goal of service is unity. We discover our gifts *as* we serve.

**III. How Should We Serve in a Way that Promotes Unity?**

Well, given this goal of unity (and I’m now under heading III), what should our service in the church look like? And what should be our motive for serving in the church? Let me touch on four answers to those questions.

***First, we should serve in God’s strength and with great joy*.**

Our goal shouldn’t be mere good deeds but good deeds done in a spirit that comes from a joyful dependence on God's help – that’s what glorifies God in particular. Going back to 1 Pet. 4:10, we read: “*whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies.*”

So picture two people considering whether to come help clean up the church. One says, "Oh, I suppose I'll go. It’s worth a few brownie points with the leaders. Besides, I'm pretty good at that sort of thing; I’ll be able to impress the folks there." So he comes and he grumbles about the tools and talks on and on about his abilities. He works but his work isn’t done in reliance on God’s power and his attitude lacks a spirit of joy and gratitude. And his desire to impress others is a form of fear of man. He’s not serving to glorify God.

But consider a second person who is also hoping to help with the clean-up. He’s been quite ill lately. He thinks to himself, "Oh, how I would love to help clean the church. Maybe I could encourage some of the downhearted. Or maybe I could just pour the coffee." So he prays. And as it turns out, he feels well enough to go to help with the clean-up. He does what he can with a rag and broom and does it well. But above all he exudes a joy and a sense of gratitude that promotes unity and brings glory to God.

Now, these examples are somewhat extreme, but I hope they highlight that what matters to God isn’t merely *that* we use our gifts, but *how we use them* – in cheerful reliance on him. That’s is the attitude that we should have when we give our time or money or energy to the church. In 2 Cor. 9:7, a verse about giving financially, we read: *“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”*

This verse applies to our service too: too often we *don’t* serve cheerfully—but merely out of guilt. We serve out of compulsion; something which this verse speaks against. But the Bible exhorts us to serve, not out of duty, but because it is a fantastic opportunity to participate in the building up of God’s people.

That’s service gone wrong #2: serving out of guilt rather than out of gratitude. Think of what guilt-driven service says about the things of God. It says they’re *not* more valuable than other things in our life—but we’ll do it anyway because we have to. The difference between letting perfume-laden Aunt Helga kiss you when you’re a kid (because you’re supposed to) and joyfully enduring a long journey to visit loved ones when you’re an adult (because the reward is more than worth the cost).

Now this may raise a question in our minds: what if I don’t have this attitude? What if my heart is cold in our service or is partly motivated by guilt or fear of man? Should I abstain from giving my time and resources? Would it be hypocritical if I continued to serve?

The answer is no. We shouldn’t refrain from serving in the church even though our joy may not always be great or our motives perfectly pure. Scripture commands us to give of ourselves. And while we should strive to give out of a joyful and grateful heart, we also have to recognize that we’re sinners and can’t do this perfectly. So, like everything else in the Christian life, we do this imperfectly but, Lord willing, continue to grow in this area as we serve. We should pray that God would help us to serve joyfully in his strength, and that our motives would become more and more pure.

***Second, we should serve in the knowledge that everyone’s service is needed and valuable.***

One obstacle to the body of Christ functioning the way it should is when members feel of useless and unimportant, which can lead to an envy of others or bitterness toward God. Paul directly rejects this idea of uselessness in 1 Cor 12, where he again uses this wonderful image of a body with many members. And if you have your Bibles, you may want to turn there (1 Cor 12), as we’ll be spending some time in that chapter.

Paul explains that the very existence of the body of Christ depends on the diversity of gifts the Spirit has given the church. We undermine that Spirit-given diversity when we compare ourselves with others. So he says in verse 17: *“If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?”* And then he says in verse 19: *“If all were a single member, where would the body be?*”Well, the body wouldn’t exist.

More importantly, in response to the claim of uselessness, Paul points out God’s sovereignty in the matter. In verse 18, he says: *“But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.”* So, God is sovereign in his designing of all the parts of the body and he does it for our best interest.

What does this mean for us? We should serve in the church where we can; we should thank God for the gifts that He has given us; and we shouldn’t feel useless or discontent merely because we are not serving in some particular way or capacity. There are so many ways to serve in this church that are crucial to the health of the church.

Now I’m not only talking now about the use of spiritual gifts, but also our use of the physical gifts that God had given us. Some members are particularly rich in time; others in resources; others in relationships. Those who are rich in time can build up the body particularly through acts of service. So single members who have more time can more easily help other members move, or provide babysitting, or go on a short-term missions trip. Those who are rich in resources, can help particularly in supporting the church financially. Those who are rich in relationships can build up the body by helping others find friends, by mentoring teenagers here, by providing a home away from home for college students. And the abilities or opportunities we have to serve can change in various seasons of life.

If you’re a mom with young kids, you may feel exhausted and discouraged that you don’t have the time to disciple women or volunteer at church like you used to. I want to encourage you that *that’s OK!* You are now in a season where God has called you to serve him by loving your kids and training them up. I know that we often pray on Sunday nights for members who have neat evangelistic opportunities – they’re sharing the gospel with an atheist they met on the bus or a Buddhist who sits next to them at work. Don’t despair if you feel like you’ve lost those opportunities now that you’re working primarily in the home: the Lord may have given you 2-4 little atheists that you get to evangelize all day long! It’s good to desire to keep serving the church even while your life circumstances have changed. Pray about that and see how God might open a door to serve the body in new ways if you are in any sort of new season of life.

On your handout, then, you see service gone wrong #3: the person who gives up serving because they don’t see their contribution as important. We must never understand service to God as valuable primarily because of the temporal result—but because of what the sacrifice says about God’s value to us. Which did Jesus say was more valuable—the widow’s two copper coins or the thousands given by the wealthy?

But that raises another question. Does this mean that we can’t desire or seek to attain other spiritual gifts? If God is the one who gives us gifts according to his good pleasure, is it then dishonoring to him to ask for gifts we don’t have now?

Scripture indicates that it is good thing to earnestly desire spiritual gifts that we don't yet have. In 1 Cor 14:1, Paul instructs the Corinthians to “earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.” Is it possible to long for spiritual gifts that we don't have without regarding the ones we do have are useless, or by coveting those that others have? I think it is. This is the balance between contentment in the gracious, sovereign provision of God and the longing of holy yearnings and prayer. So, we should be content with the gifts God has given us. But we can also should be eager for more.

***Third, we should use our gifts humbly***.

This is really the flip side of our second point. In 1 Corinthians 12:14-20, Paul encourages those members who might feel like they have nothing to contribute. But then in vv. 21-26, he cautions those who have been given gifts of greater responsibility to exercise those gifts with humility. So in verse 21 we read, *“The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you.”* Those in positions of greater responsibility or visibility in the church must not lord their authority over others or carry out their duties in with an air of superiority. Unity in diversity is impossible without Christ-like humility. And the place that’s needed most is in those who seem to have the most responsibility or prominence in the church. When this doesn’t happen, people can become territorial over a ministry, or bitter and suspicious of anyone who might suggest changes. The results are devastating for the unity of the church.

Our calling is to recognize and honor the service of all members no matter how visible or invisible; no matter how seemingly significant or insignificant that service might appear to be. A great way for us to do this is to acknowledge the service of others, particularly in areas of ministry that are behind the scenes. So send a card of encouragement or thank someone verbally for such work, whether it’s running the sound system, uploading the sermons to the web site, or working as a hall-monitor.

This is exactly where service can go wrong, our 4th one. How you ever complained that others in the church aren’t doing their fair share? Where does that attitude come from? Maybe a poor understanding of the constraints that others are working under. Maybe a proud heart that confuses personal worth with amount of service. Maybe an assumption that others are willfully neglecting service, rather than compassionately giving the benefit of the doubt, that maybe they don’t yet know how much joy comes from serving. In all of this, the solution is humility. Recognize you’re not any better because you serve. We all alike deserve God’s judgment, and yet he has rescued us so that we can now serve him.

***Fourth, We Should Serve to Glorify God and to Benefit Others and Yourself.***

We’ve touched on this point somewhat but I want to address it explicitly. Our service to the church yields several benefits: for ourselves, for others, and most importantly for the glory of God.

When we serve faithfully, God is glorified because we’re simply returning what is His back to Him. Psalm 24:1 says that “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it” – including the strength and time he gives us. That’s why to think about service, you need to think about your whole lifestyle. What we do with *every hour,* not just Sundays during church, says something about our view of God and what He means to us.

Serving also directly benefits others. Making someone a meal provides sustenance. Giving someone a ride to church makes it possible for them to grow under the preaching of the Word. Serving at the bookstall helps countless people benefit from godly resources. This is all obvious stuff, but take a moment and think about it. Do you want to bring other people joy in their Christian life? When you commit to serve in a particular way and then make good on that commitment, even though that commitment constrains your own time and strength, you are working directly for others to grow in joy and in knowledge of Christ.

That’s not all, though – our service also brings benefits to us! It helps us appreciate the ultimate act of service that Christ did for us. It teaches us that it is more blessed to give than to receive: a life of service is simply a happier life than a life of selfishness. Service makes us less self-focused, but ironically, as it does so, God has ordained things so that this is actually the way to a life of satisfaction and contentment. When we structure our life so that service is a priority, it forces us to depend more on God for strength.

And that’s service gone wrong #5: the person who serves only slightly because their heart is captured by the world, and they believe the lie that self-indulgence and self-focus bring greater joy. Their mixed priorities keep them from the higher satisfaction of self-sacrifice.

And #6: the person who serves to the point that is deemed acceptable by those around them rather than wagering everything on God’s strength.

**IV. Persevering in Doing Good**

Finally, let me close by providing two points of application for us regarding serving in the church.

***Persevere in Service through Christ’s power***

First, persevere in your service through Christ’s power. Paul told his readers in 2 Thessalonians 3:13: “*As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good*.” Why? Because this happens often. People tire in their service. When year follows year, and weariness sets in, there can be a temptation to pull back or even stop altogether. Or maybe you’ve lost sight of the larger goal of serving God; having been so caught up in the details and busyness of the ministry, you have neglected your relationship with God. Perhaps you’re now relying on your own strength.

Well, if this is the case, remember that our strength to serve comes from Christ in us. He has given us his Spirit. To bear fruit, we must abide in Christ, the vine. Just as food provides the fuel that’s necessary for our physical well-being, spending time in God’s word and prayer provides the spiritual nourishment that motivates us to serve. When we remind ourselves again and again of God’s character, His goodness, His forbearance, what He’s done for us in Christ, we are reenergized to serve him. If we neglect our love for Jesus, then it’s no surprise if our service becomes just another chore, even a burden. So, ignite your hearts and minds to service with the truth of God’s grandeur and grace.

This is our last instance of service gone wrong: exhausting ourselves in service in our own strength rather than being refreshed in our relationship with God. My encouragement is to structure your life so that you serve in a **sustainably sacrificial** way. That might sound a contradiction, because sacrifice shouldn’t feel easy. But what I mean is, as we sacrifice in costly ways, seek to position yourself so that you can continue in a posture of utter reliance on Christ that doesn’t lead to burnout but that leads to a contented, ongoing lifestyle of giving yourself up for God’s glory while resting in Him.

***Service Opportunities at CHBC.***

Finally, as you think about persevering in that way, I want to take a minute to talk about service opportunities at CHBC. A great way to find out about such opportunities is in the members’ section of the web site, there is a whole page where all the deacons have listed ways you can volunteer with their ministries. Obviously another way is to watch for opportunities that are announced at the Sunday evening service or in the weekly e-mail newsletter. Here’s a list of some examples:

Giving rides to seniors; discipling college students; hospitality; writing cards of encouragement; ushering; sound ministry; helping at youth group; setting up for weddings; childcare; and many, many others that come along all the time.

And I should point out that some of the most powerful ministry at CHBC isn’t connected with a formal ministry but is informal and relational: Having people over for dinner; or talking with someone who doesn’t know many folks after Sunday morning service to make them feel welcomed. Forming relationships with those who struggle to form relationships is a great ministry and one that we could probably do better at CHBC. My suggestion is to start with the ministry of forming encouraging, deep relationships – which takes time – and then, if you still have time, also get involved in other practical ministries.

**V. Conclusion**

For almost two thousand years, God’s people have faithfully served in the church. They’ve been driven by a love of God and a desire to glorify him. Praise God for how well this has been exemplified at CHBC! In our own midst, we have moving examples of members’ faithful service over decades. Jim Cox has been here since the ‘90s and faithfully ushers and collects the offering. Maxine Zopf of course is well known for her ministry of prayer. The Reedys have been organizing regular potlucks for fellowship for years and they do it cheerfully without much recognition. We are a people who are driven to serve because the Lord Jesus Christ has served us supremely.