

Selected to Serve

We've been speaking for several weeks now about the God-given purposes for our lives. Or, to put it another way, we've been trying to answer the question: "What in the world are we here for?" So far we've identified three things: We have been wired by God to worship Him, formed for fellowship with Him and with one another and designed for discipleship. In our scripture passage for this morning we discover that we have also been selected by God to serve.

This past Tuesday, I planned a visit to the Social Security office to begin the process of obtaining my retirement money that the government has been collecting from me and investing on my behalf for the past 50 years. For all they've taken and "so wisely" invested, I'm sure I'm going to be rich, right? Well, probably not. Nevertheless, it occurred to me that I might need my original Social Security card to show them to apply for whatever is coming to me, so I went looking for it. I remembered seeing some things like that in the bottom drawer of my dresser in our bedroom, so I began my search there.

I didn't find my Social Security among those treasures—Betty Jane had hidden it elsewhere, but I did find my first two voter registration cards—one Democrat and one Republican. The next one is going to say "Independent." I also found some old pictures that reminded me what I and the rest of my family looked like when we were a lot younger. Tim's high school graduation picture is amazing. In that picture Tim looks like a young man destined to be a fashion model for men's clothing or an actor, a romantic heart throb—a leading man for the big screen!

After those treasures, I found my draft card from the Selective Service. Since it was issued to me during the Vietnam War, it is significant that I still have it. I didn't burn it and run off to Canada. Fortunately, I didn't have to respond to it by going to war either. I was exempted by my status as a college student and then for my status as a pastor.

What we will discover this morning, however, is that there is no exemption from service in the Kingdom of God. As disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are all selected to serve, all meant to minister to others in Jesus' name. But why? Why should we minister to others? After all, there is only so much time, energy and resources available to us. Why

should we take from our time and energy, and from our resources to serve others? It immediately goes against our natural grain, seems counter-intuitive, threatens our security.

In Matthew 20:25-28, Matthew tells us: *"Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that the 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 your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'*"

Pastor Rick Warren, author of the Purpose Driven life, comments on a term often used when speaking about leadership in the church. That term is "Servant Leader." Warren suggests that there is no need for the word "leader." He says, "If you go and serve, you will be a leader."

Do you remember the third purpose of our lives, that we discussed last week? Do you remember that we are called to discipleship, which means we are called to become more and more like Jesus? This answers why we would minister to others. Since Jesus' strategy to bring in the Kingdom of God was serve and to lay down his life for others, it stands to reason that the more our hearts become like His heart, the more we will be motivated to do the same.

In our Scripture lesson from Matthew 25, the one big difference between the people who were condemned and cast into darkness and those who were congratulated and invited to receive the King's blessing, was this: Those who received condemnation had no compassion for those who were suffering; whereas, those who received God's approval, had a heart for the least, the lost, and the lonely around them and among them. **They shared the heart of their Savior.**

The first thing I want us to understand this morning is that our motivation for serving the people around us is Jesus; it is the heart of Jesus, the love of Jesus that impels us to serve. Matthew 9:36 says, *"When he (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* We care for others because our Master cares. The more we become like Him the more we will care like Him. We are selected to serve.

The second point I want us to consider this morning is how, how are

we to serve? The answer here is that we are to serve others in practical ways. Look at Matthew 25:34-36: *"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*"

I believe this is a growing edge for us. Too much of what we did and most churches did in the past revolved around us. We were too concerned about seeking blessing for ourselves rather than blessing the people around us.

Some time ago I heard the true story of a young man in seminary who was serving as a part-time youth minister at a church near his school. He was doing a good job but was being paid very little. One fall he led one of the kids in his youth group to Christ, and wanted to take him to a youth retreat in January. He visited in the young man's home to ask permission from the boy's mother. The mother, who was not a Christian was suspicious of his motives and resistant to the idea. Besides that, money was tight. She said that she did not have enough money to buy presents for her children for Christmas let alone pay for a retreat. The youth minister assured her that he only wanted to help her son grow in his faith, and went on to witness to her about God's love for her and invited her to receive Christ as her Savior, but she remained suspicious of his motives and resistant to his invitation.

But here is where it gets interesting. The youth pastor knew that his parents were going to give him a nice sized cash gift for Christmas, somewhere in the neighborhood of \$500. So, he asked his parents if they would be offended if he should decide to give his present away to someone who needed it more than he did. They told him that that was up to him, and that's what he did. He gave his whole Christmas present to the family to whom he was ministering. The mother was flabbergasted. It wasn't long until she also received Christ as her Savior. Her son was allowed to go to the youth retreat. The youth pastor's Christmas present brought him more joy than any other present he had ever received—all because he gave it away.

Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive. **When we bless others in Jesus' name we will receive the greater blessing.**

Serving like Jesus means ministering from Christ-like hearts, and serving like Jesus means helping others in practical ways. Finally, I want us to consider the question "how often?" How often do we help others? Is this something we only do at Christmas or at the point of some great tragedy like last year's hurricanes in the Caribbean, or like the forest fires and mudslides in California? Is helping others something that we do quarterly or twice a year at our missionary rallies? How often are we to help others?

The people in our Scripture lesson sort of asked about that. They asked "when?" Matthew 25:37-39 say, *"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'"*

The answer to the "when?" question, of course, is "whenever." Eugene Peterson translates it this way in The Message: *"I'm telling you the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me--you did it to me."* You see, here's the deal: The answer to our question "how often?" is "whenever," which means that this business of serving and ministering to others is not occasional but a way of life. It's a part of who we are and what we do as the people of God. It's a big part of what we are here for. **The Christian life consists of loving God and ministering to others.**

Today's scripture from Matthew 25, the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, may be read as a divine warning or even a threat: Be blessed as sheep who serve or face eternal punishment for being selfish self-centered, and self-serving goats.

Or, this parable can be read as a simple description of the way things are. The true followers of Jesus Christ will be recognized by their service to people in need; whereas, counterfeit Christians and counterfeit churches will be recognized by their fixation on serving themselves. Real Christians demonstrate the heart of Christ. Imposters do not.

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Either way, the question comes down to this: Are we God's sheep or the Devil's goats? What do we want the answer to be for us on Judgment Day? Of course the answer to this question is obvious; we

want to be God's sheep. We want God to say, "Come, you who are blessed by me Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." That's what we want.

But, how do we get it? Can we become God's good sheep by doing good deeds? Can we save ourselves by doing good works? Is this gist of this parable? I think not. Otherwise Paul is arguing with Jesus when he is says in Titus 3 that it is *"not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit."* This is also Paul's word to the Ephesians when he says in Ephesians 2:8-9: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast."*

No, we can't save ourselves by deciding to do good works and by exercising our will power to do them. But if we recognize the depravity of our own hearts and acknowledge our selfishness and cry out to God for mercy He will hear our humble cries. God will enable us to receive the invitation of Jesus to come and follow Him. If we respond to that invitation with willing hearts, then the miracle of salvation—of new birth—will be granted us. The heart of Jesus, the heart of servanthood, will be implanted within us. We will not serve others as an attempt to save ourselves; rather, we will serve others because Jesus lives within us and has given us a heart to serve. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are selected to serve.

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Sermon for March 4, 2018
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Matthew 25:31-46

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