

BUILDING BLOCKS: SERVICE

Sermon written by Martha Jean Fitch

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TEXT: Matthew 20:20-28

What on earth do you do? If I were to ask *you* to describe yourself what would you say? If I were to ask you to choose just one word or single term that best sums up who you are – what would you say? What on earth do you do? (*get answers from the congregation*) Some of you might say, “I’m a teacher” or “I’m a musician” or “I’m a student”. Others of you would think of your family and say, “I’m a mother” or “I’m a daughter”. There are all sorts of possibilities of answers.

The way you answer that question is very significant because it reveals what is most important to your identity. It shows what is the core of who you are and how you view yourself. What is interesting is to see how the New Testament writers described themselves. If you were to ask Paul or Peter or James that question – how do you describe yourself, what do you think they would say? (*get answers from the congregation*)

What is interesting is that they didn’t use the words Christian or disciples – but the word servant. For example:

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle " – Romans 1:1

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" – James 1:1

"Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ" – 2 Peter 1:1

"Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James" – Jude 1:1

What does this tell us? That they all considered their status as servants to be the most significant aspect of their identity as followers of Christ. The disciples committed their life to Jesus Christ, and that made them concerned for all people – they literally became a servant for Him. And as a servant they humble themselves, following the example of Christ and joyfully give the glory to Christ.

Does that surprise you? How do you like that title – "servant"? Does it seem like a good thing? Is it an exciting idea, something that makes you want to get out of bed in the morning? "Time to get up and be a servant!" Our natural reaction to being called a servant – or worse, being *treated* like a servant – isn’t usually a positive one. In one of New York’s finest hotels, there is a training program for employees. At this hotel, they emphasized the outstanding service provided to the guests by every member of the staff – the front desk, the maids, the bellboys. But what was fascinating was the one line they used to begin every training session. They told them, "You are not servants. You are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen." In their minds, to be a "servant" meant having no dignity, no sense of self-worth. A servant was someone to be looked down on, someone not to be respected. And so, even though they were being trained to do the work of servants, they rejected that title.

¹ & ²Brian Bill, “*Becoming a Servant*”, sermoncentral.com

I wonder if this is how James and John felt so long ago when they were walking with Jesus. They had surely received some popularity in being with this great teacher. Everywhere they went, crowds gathered to hear him preach, to see if he could heal their sick. And James and John were pretty special to be two of his hand-picked disciples. Just think how proud their mother was.

We see this pride clearly when the mother of James and John asked Jesus to give her sons special positions in his kingdom. Open up your Bibles to Matthew 20 and let's follow along with the story, beginning in verse 21. There we see the mother of James and John approaching Jesus and saying to him, *"Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."* She was really wanting a special, privileged position for her sons and so she boldly asked. And Jesus responded by saying, *"You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"* James and John and their mother failed to understand what suffering Jesus would face in his kingdom. Nor could they even know that James and John also would suffer greatly for their leadership in the church after Jesus went into heaven.

But notice how the other 10 disciples react. It says in verse 24 that they became indignant with the two brothers. They were upset that James and John wanted to grab the top positions in the kingdom. But what they have forgotten was that they too wanted to be great in the kingdom. Back in Matthew 18:1, they were all asking, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom?" There, Jesus points out a child and says that you have to change and become like a child to be great in the kingdom. And then in our story today, Jesus draws them all together and tells them another characteristic of being great in the kingdom – and that is to be a servant. Look at verse 26. Jesus says, *"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."*

Jesus' mission was to serve others and give his life away. And if we really want to be great in the kingdom....we need to be like Jesus and follow his example through service. It's that final building block we add to our list of things we need to be a strong and healthy church.

And what does that look like?

First, to be a servant we must be humble like Jesus was humble. We must be ready to take on tasks that help others and lift them up....even if that means we are inconvenienced or we have to do something that we would normally think is "beneath us".

There was a noncommissioned officer directing the repairs of a military building during the American Revolution. He kept barking orders to the soldiers under his command, trying to get them to raise a heavy wooden beam.

As the men struggled, without success, to lift the beam into place, a man who was passing by stopped to ask the one in charge why he wasn't helping the men. With all the pomp of an emperor, the soldier responded, "Sir, I am a corporal!"

¹ & ²Brian Bill, *"Becoming a Servant"*, sermoncentral.com

"You are, are you?" replied the passerby, "I was not aware of that." Then, taking off his hat and bowing, he said, "I ask your pardon, Corporal." Then the stranger walked over and strained with the soldiers to lift the heavy beam. After the job was finished, he turned and said, "Mr. Corporal, when you have another such job, and have not enough men, send for your Commander in Chief, and I will come and help you a second time." The corporal was shocked. The person speaking to him was General Washington!

God measures greatness by service. The Lord Jesus has set an example, for though He was God and worthy of all honor, He "did not come to be served, but to serve." We are to have the same attitude that Jesus had in coming to this earth to save our souls. A great description of this is found in Philippians 2:5. There it says:

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus who,
Being in the very nature of God did not consider equality with
God something to be grasped,
But made himself nothing
Taking the very nature of a servant...
He humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on the cross.*

If we say we follow Christ, we must also say we want to live as he lived. We need to have his attitude of humility and be ready to reach out and help others – even if that means we are inconvenienced or we get our hands dirty.

Brian Bill, in his sermon *Becoming a Servant*, tells about Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy's, who died back in 2002. Dave once appeared on the cover of their annual report dressed in a knee-length work apron holding a mop and a plastic bucket. Here's how he described that picture: "I got my M.B.A. long before my G.E.D. At Wendy's, M.B.A. does not mean Masters of Business Administration. It means Mop Bucket Attitude." Dave Thomas got his G.E.D back in the 1990's, having dropped out of school when he was 15 years old. But he got his M.B.A. when he was 11 years and was baptized and began his journey of following Jesus. He truly took on the role of a servant, even though he was a multi-million-dollar executive of a fast-growing restaurant chain. He said that Christianity was more than just a doctrine you talked about on Sunday morning. In fact, his advice was: "Live your faith. Don't wear it on your sleeve; roll up both sleeves and do something about it."¹

Do you have an MBA? Is your attitude like that of Jesus? Are you rolling up your sleeves and doing something about your faith?

Jesus, the night before His death, called for a bucket and proceeded to wash the dirty and dusty feet of His disciples. He humbled himself and became a servant. And then, after he was done, he asked them: "Do you understand what I was doing? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord' and you are right because that's what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you." (John 13:12-15)

¹ & ²Brian Bill, "*Becoming a Servant*", sermoncentral.com

We are called to follow the example of Jesus – to serve as He served – to look for ways we can reach out to others. And we as a church are to be a serving church, looking for ways we can be God’s hands and feet in the world – showing His love and care to a broken and hurting world.

And so instead of just “going to church”, we have made a decision as a congregation that we are going to “be the church” – and reach out in ministry and mission to the neighbors. All of us are encouraged to “be the church”, throughout the year – through our service in the Lord’s name. And then, at least two times throughout the year, our church dedicates a day called “Be the Church Day” where we will do different ministry projects to reach out to our neighbors. Today, after worship, we will divide up into groups – to work at cleaning up the neighborhood streets – to reach out to the residents of Knox County Nursing Home – and to make hygiene kits for homeless veterans. It is my prayer and hope and many of you will participate in our activities planned for today – and for those of you listening at home – or unable to here today – I encourage you to find ways you can be a servant – and touch someone’s life with God’s love.

Jesus said we’re blessed when we serve – bending the knee – reaching out to do something to care for our neighbors. One guide I found on how to be a servant for Christ – has 4 action steps we should follow²:

1. Serve whenever you can.
2. Serve wherever you can.
3. Serve whoever is in need.
4. Be willing to do whatever it takes.

Ask yourself, what in the world are you doing this day– as a servant of Jesus Christ?

INVITATION

A man came to the pastor one time and said, "I don't know what's wrong with my life, but that first Christian joy I knew has passed by. I still live a moral life. I go to church. But how can I recover the lost radiance of my faith?" His pastor said, "this is what you should do: go to the store and buy a big basketful of groceries and go to an address of a poor family I will give you. Then when you have given your gift, you sit down with them to find out what they need. Let them know that you are interested in them and that you are their friend. Then lead them in the Lord's Prayer before you leave, and the radiance will come back."

Have you lost the radiance in your faith? Today’s the day you can get that radiance back! You can come forward and re-dedicate your life to Christ and begin living for Him as a servant!

Perhaps today is the day that you make your confession of faith for the first time – and you take on the identity of a servant of the Lord. You’re invited to come forward and make that decision public for Him.

What on earth on you doing for the Lord? Make a decision today to serve the Lord with gladness!

¹ & ²Brian Bill, “*Becoming a Servant*”, sermoncentral.com