

1 Tim. (various)
SERVICE

Most buildings (like, say, churches) are square or rectangular in nature. As a result, they have four corners – or, if you will, four corner posts (if the building is made of wood) or cornerstones (if made of brick or stone).

The Church of the Lord Jesus Christ has what I like to call four *spiritual cornerstones*:

1. Christ Jesus Himself, “the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple to the Lord.” (Ephesians 2:20, 21) As the Son of God, Jesus is the key to the entire holy enterprise of the redemption of mankind and its restoration to God the Creator.
2. Salvation through faith in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, with His blood as the final, ultimate atonement for our sins, opening the way back to God.
3. The work of the Holy Spirit as the comforter and the teacher, always pointing back to Jesus and His teachings and enabling believers to do what He told us to do.

The fourth cornerstone (and the one that, nowadays, is perhaps the most neglected) is that of service. The relationship of salvation/service has always been one of the most essential in the church, and one of the most misunderstood. Biblically speaking, believers are saved partly to do service to others: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10). This passage immediately follows one that is far more familiar to every believer and quoted almost universally in every church: “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2: 8, 9) If you read even further back into the second chapter of Ephesians, the main reason God offers salvation to us is because He loves us, and longs to be merciful to His creation.

Many who are uncomfortable with the idea that God loves us so much and that we are saved simply by believing on Jesus and accepting our salvation as the free gift of God have taken these verses and interpreted them to place Christianity on the same level as false religions (and what is still a popular notion in the culture), teaching that one must *earn* his or her way into heaven. Such people have tried, almost since the foundation of the Church, to add some kind of service or task to the picture, turning salvation from the gift of God to a formula that we have to manipulate (as if the sacrifice of the Son of Almighty God, the only sinless person who ever lived, God Himself in human form, was *still* insufficient to do the job).

The idea of works to obtain salvation still persists in the popular culture, although not as strongly as it once did (and not *officially* in most denominations); people started moving away from this concept with the Reformation and the idea of salvation by the Grace of God. In fact, in many cases, people went the opposite way – grace *alone* (as Martin Luther is reputed to have written in to Ephesians 2:8), with the next step in this logic being to avoid works like some people avoid... work. Securing a place in heaven is the key step to people who think this way; *fire insurance*, as some have put it. It doesn’t matter what you do after you get the policy, as long as it’s not sin. Was Luther right to

stress salvation by grace? Yes – salvation *is* the gift of God, and not something anyone can earn. But take the entire passage in context; God has things He wants you to do now that you're saved. In parable after parable, Jesus stresses the point that service to or for the King Eternal is a key element of life in the Kingdom.

People who live in places that are still ruled by a king or queen (or who at least remember when the word of such an individual was law) have very little difficulty understanding this concept. Here in America – where we pride ourselves on having booted out a king some 200-odd years ago, yet still treat some political families as if they *were* royalty (and you can fill in whatever name you please, thank you; I'm not stepping into *that* bear trap) – it's a different story. We are still so enamored of the idea of *rugged individualism*, of pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, of succeeding by our own talent, or cleverness, or stamina, or connections or just plain meanness that the idea of serving anybody but ourselves is anathema to us. Cynicism has so permeated the culture that altruism is viewed with suspicion by Americans; it's either a quality of the naïve or stupid, the beat of the “different drummer” heard only by those folks who are out of sync with the rest of society, or a tool of the con artist, a vehicle by which someone wants to get our money or persuade us to do something we ordinarily would not do. And yet, it is that very quality that the Bible says is not only pleasing to God, but what He created us and saves us for.

And so, we are left with the basic question: *What does God want from us?*

Be like Him. Well, maybe we can't be like *Him*, necessarily (remember – He's God and we're not), but He *does* call us to be “conformed to the likeness of His Son.” (Romans 8:29) Love has our primary, indeed our *sole*, motivation, just as it is for Jesus. Time and again in the Gospels, Jesus stresses this not only with words, but His actions. In Mark 6:30-44, his account of the feeding of the 5,000, this incident occurs right after the Apostles return from Jesus' assignment to travel to neighboring villages and teach, heal the sick and drive out demons. Jesus' original plan was to take the Apostles to a quiet place to rest and eat (which He probably could have used Himself), but the crowds wouldn't leave Him or them alone.

You or I, in that situation, would probably be tired, cranky and desperate to get rid of the mob, but Jesus responds with compassion (Mark 6:34), and not only starts teaching the crowd but even provides food for them from five loaves and two fishes – one of His more spectacular miracles, and one of the few mentioned in every Gospel.

In John's account of the Last Supper (John 13:2), before the meal was served, Jesus, the Son of Almighty God, the Word made flesh, not to mention the *host* of the meal, does the one thing probably no one ever expected; plays the role of the newly-acquired servant, and washes the Disciples' feet. You remember Peter's reaction? In all likelihood, Peter was the only one who spoke up – but he was shocked out of his brains like the other eleven. Jesus then teaches them that what He did was an example for the Disciples. Some denominations take this literally and install Foot Washing Services as part of their yearly observances (usually around Good Friday and Easter). But Jesus' intent was to alert His followers that their *attitude* was to be one of service. In Luke 17:10, He spells it out plainly: “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

When our motivation is love – the *agape* love of Jesus – we have the potential to do not only some pretty amazing things, but the most commonplace without even a thought

for it. Where do we *get* this love? Certainly not from our own selves; thanks in large part to the fall we as human beings are far too self-centered, prideful and focused on *What's in it for me?* to do such things. And even if we can still summon up the courage, the drive and the ability to keep our mouths shut in doing such things, inside we're still thinking of how this plays out in terms of "brownie points" in heaven, which just negates any eternal good we might have gotten out of it all. This kind of love can only come from God.

Service, ultimately, springs from love. How often do married people do for their spouses a number of things that – if it were another person – they would never do? If you have one, think about something you do for your spouse that you would normally avoid – yet you do it because you love that person. For example, I'm certain that my wife can find a thousand things she'd rather do on any given day than iron my shirts. And, on the other side of the coin, while washing dishes is a necessary chore, it's not exactly the first thing that comes to my mind in terms of fun things to do. And yet, if my wife is tired, busy or just not feeling good, I'll do what's in the sink so that what's in the sink doesn't pile up to the ceiling.

I'm sure you can think of similar, day-to-day drudgeries that you do for your spouse. Now – imagine doing those very same odious tasks for a neighbor you're not particularly fond of. Or the person at work that frequently gives you grief. Maybe for a homeless person... with an addiction problem. Now imagine doing this *without thought*. Without considering whether or not your efforts will be fruitful or wasted on that person. *Impossible*, you say? You're right – under our own power. Yet, people who have given their lives to Jesus have ministered to (indeed, given their very lives for) those very people and others who would be considered in even *worse* condition. The reason is that as a person yields to Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit changes his or her heart to enable them to do what the Spirit leads them to do.

The Apostle Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:22, "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply from the heart." This means not only our brothers in Christ – fellow believers – but those whom God also wants in His Kingdom... and, since God's desire is for all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, this means *everybody*... not just those who are appreciative of what you're doing. Including the neighbor you're not fond of, the co-worker giving you grief, the homeless addict.

Ask anybody who makes their living in what is called a "service industry," and they'll tell you that sometimes the ones you're trying most to help insist on being mean, miserable, hard and ungrateful. And yet, we are called to respond as Jesus did, overcoming evil with good. We not only must associate with people that (in our own flesh) we might just want to stay clear of, but actively love them. Deal with *their* problems, bear *their* burdens, and spend ourselves on *their* behalf. If we do not, then our preaching is pointless. At the present, we are vilified as "hate-mongers," angry and intolerant, because too many of us preach against sin readily enough, but forget the second part; we must love the "sinner." In terms of sin, we must be hard and unyielding – but in terms of those still snared *in* sin, we must be as compassionate and caring as Jesus.

We can't do it alone – we need the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish this. And as we learn to abandon ourselves to God and let Him remake us into what He wants, He gives us power to share His love with others who need it. Jesus Himself said that we

were to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all of our needs would be added to us as well. This refers not only to *our* daily needs and even some of the desires of *our* hearts, but of *God's* heart as well. And it gives God honor, glory... and pleasure to see His creation come back to Him.

Is there a need? Can you fill it? *Get the message?* How does one serve? We often have the idea that service means doing without (sort of like taking a vow of poverty and living like monks), or going off to Africa, Katmandu or some far-flung corner of the world. In fact, it's one of the reasons why most folks hesitate to take Jesus at His Word and accept His offer of Salvation: *Aw, dude – I'll have to go off and live in a hut somewhere and eat bugs and not marry some hot babe and...*

Now, God does ask this of people from time to time (but usually more than equips them for the job). And many times, what God asks us to give up are things that will hinder us in our service to Him, or are detrimental to our lives in general. But more often than not, God simply asks us to get busy right *where we are*, with the abilities we already have. Our abilities are either God-given or God-enhanced – sometimes both.

Far too often, we view our service to God as some mystical, big-deal thing, being so set apart that one practically has to undergo some ritual just to step out the door in the morning to go to get the paper. But when we operate out of love, often service is as simple – as *practical* – as finding out about a need, and having the ability to fill it. *What, you need this? I can do that – c'mon with me... You need a ride to the doctor? Hop in! Left your lunch at home? I have plenty, have some of mine. or C'mon with me to this great place I know... my treat...*

You say you have no abilities at all, or at least none God can use? Well, yes you do. People are frequently amazed at how God takes what we see as the most ordinarily, commonplace abilities and transform them for His use in the most extraordinary ways. And, in some cases, God puts extraordinary gifts or talents in us specifically for His use. (Refer to the beginning of the construction of the Tabernacle in the wilderness in the Book of Exodus, with God placing the ability to do craft work for the place of worship in Bezalel and Oholiab (Ch. 35). When people make themselves available to God, and let Him take care of the details, God can take us places and doing things we dared not dream of.

1 Timothy 5, 6

One of the best examples of this viewpoint on service can be found in Paul's first letter to Timothy, chapters five and six. The Apostle is giving his younger "son in the faith," and protégé instructions on day-to-day operations of the church, or how to live out the life of Jesus in the practical, everyday stuff of life. I offer the following passages as examples:

- But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. (1 Tim. 5:4)
- If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1 Tim. 5:8)
- If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need. (1 Tim. 5:16)

- All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. Those who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers. Instead, they are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them. These are the things you are to teach and urge on them. (1 Tim. 6:1, 2)
- Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. (1 Tim. 6:18, 19)

So, while service is not a requirement for salvation, it is a practical way of being rooted and grounded in love, and a training ground for the life to come. It is where we learn to love our brother, whom we have seen, in order to love God, whom we have not seen. It is almost like a “boot camp” of sorts, where we learn to stop acting, thinking and living the world’s way and learn the ways of the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

The late Christian artist Keith Green used to criticize the church of his day for being ready and eager to write a check for whatever was needed, but not ready to expend actual effort for the Kingdom: “This generation of believers that you and I are a part of will be responsible for this generation of souls... It’s so easy to write a check, but God can’t cash out-of-state checks in Heaven – He needs you.”

These days, the situation is far more dire; many Christians aren’t even interested in writing a check, unless they figure they can get a return on their “investment” in the Kingdom. We have tried to retro-fit the world’s ways into the Kingdom for so long now that we live under the false impression that the Kingdom will only come by finding the correct way to package and promote it into existence.

God needs you to be His hands and feet. More importantly, He needs you to have His heart, ready to present it to someone else so that people who need it the most can see God’s love for His creation through you.

You don’t need a degree to love someone; you don’t need a title and a staff and a company car with an expense account to serve. All you need is to be available and be willing – get started!