



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

IMPROVING YOUR SERVE

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ OCTOBER 10, 2021

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

²¹"What is it you want?" he asked.

She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

²²"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

"We can," they answered.

²³Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

²⁴When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵Jesus 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. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Matthew 20:20-28

My “Serve”?

First, to all of you tennis and pickleball players, I offer my apology. I know that, as you saw the title of this message, you had hopes that I would be bringing you pointers from the experts on how to score more aces, avoid double faults, or pin your opponent to the baseline. But I will not be talking about any athletic contest that happens on a rectangular court divided by a net. We’re going to be looking at a much broader, all-encompassing perspective on life.

I will give you the conclusion at the beginning, so everyone has time to wrap their brains around the concept. When Jesus, who was God Himself come to earth, arrived here His purpose was partially to teach us and demonstrate to us what it meant to be fully human. In other words, how can we live a life completely pleasing to God and totally personally fulfilling?

The Jesus Principle

The Savior gave us this new perspective that the world had never heard before: The purpose of each person’s life is not to **get** but to **give**. Our real value and worth is demonstrated not by a self-centered quest for whatever fame, money, pleasure, possessions, and experiences we think will make us happy. Our real legacy is found in serving God and serving others. Those two purposes are why our Creator made you and me. We find our true worth in serving.

This is the counter-intuitive, seemingly-unnatural paradox. Over and over, in many different ways, this principle was at the core of Jesus’ teaching about how to live. And His perspective on life ignited like a bomb in the 1st century Greco-Roman world. A society that was consumed with power and privilege, with class and social order, with the pursuit of money and pleasure, had not heard such a profoundly opposite perspective. Many dismissed it. But those who chose to try it discovered that the “Jesus-way” changed everything.

We now return to our reading from scripture. It comes near the end of the biography of Jesus written by His follower Matthew. Already,

in many different settings, Jesus has talked about the upside-down, counter-intuitive values of His new Kingdom.

The last will be first.

Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.

*Whoever tries to save his life will lose it,
but whoever gives up his life will find it.*

Over and over, He has tried to drill into the brains of His disciples these truths. And yet they were notably slow on the uptake. The truth had apparently not penetrated their thick skulls.

What the World Chases After

And so, we come to Matthew 20. Two of the inner circle (brothers James and John, sons of a fisherman named Zebedee) talked their mother into being their agent to ask for a big promotion for themselves. They wanted to be appointed the Co-COOs or Executive Vice Presidents or Co-Chiefs of Staff when the new Kingdom was launched. Clearly this was their ambition, not just that of their “stage mother,” because the other ten disciples, when they overheard it, were furious with the two brothers. My hunch is that the anger and resentment of the ten was not inspired by their wholehearted embrace of the morality of servanthood, but rather they were angry that James and John had “beaten them to the punch.”

This was a ready-made teaching opportunity for Jesus to, once again, articulate what would be different among His followers. And so, we have these words from Matthew chapter 20, which we’ll read again beginning at verse 25:

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 (*the Old Testament title for the Messiah*,

which Jesus often claimed for Himself) did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.

Matthew 20:25-28

We all know what the world chases after, and what its values are. We live in it every day. Politics is all about power. The entertainment industry is all about fame. Wall Street is all about the acquisition of ever-more money. Sports is all about victories and glory. Everybody seems to be trying to climb the ladder, on the back of others as necessary. It has always been this way. And it has always resulted in the end in emptiness.

Ultimately, we all die and stand before our Maker. The powerful have no power on that day, the beautiful and famous are nobodies, the hall-of-fame superstars are unknowns, the rich are penniless. “What did you do with the life I gave you?” the Creator asks. And the only things that any of us will be able to offer at that moment as being credited to our account are the things we did to serve God and other people. That’s it: the only currency we can take out of this world. Not trophies or Oscar statuettes, not Bitcoin or dollar bills, not titles or press clippings. What kind of servant were you? What kind of servant was I? That’s what matters.

Your Highest Goal: Serving Others

My appeal to you is simply this: Choose this day and every day to value **servng** rather than **being served** as your highest goal. To give is better than to get. It makes us better people, it raises us in the love and esteem of others, it brings us a deeper and lasting fulfillment, and it pleases God.

Focusing on a life of giving is not limited to just financial and material things, although that can certainly be part of it. This is especially true for those of us who, among the minority of people who have ever walked the earth, have been blessed with abundance—far more than we need to survive and provide for our families. When we are

financially blessed as followers of Jesus, it is the most natural impulse to want to give out of our plenty to help others.

This has become very important to my wife and me. We are choosing to give generously (and not just by naming charities in our wills); we love the joy of giving freely while we're still alive and can see the results of our gifts. We love to support this church each week with a tithe in the offering plate, as well as supporting our Compassion children and other Christian and charitable organizations that are doing noble work. And as an added bonus, the federal government even allows us to deduct all those gifts from our income taxes.

A life of giving is far more than just financial. We can give volunteer time. We can give to our spouse or children when we help them and care for them in their times of need. We can give to our community by being good citizens. We can give when we do our jobs well to serve our clients or customers. Giving enriches marriages and friendships. When we focus not on what another person is supposed to do for us, but on what we can do for them, we receive a blessing back in return.

Noble and Holy

Some people know, when they lift their heads off the pillow each morning, that in the day before them God is going to bring to them people to serve. First responders know that is their purpose: to be there for people in accidents, fires, heart attacks, crimes, and a hundred other potential crises. Emergency Room doctors and nurses know their job on their shifts is to serve those who walk in or are wheeled in by ambulance crews. (How strongly did that awareness come to us in the darkest days of the pandemic that our medical professionals were putting themselves on the line for their patients daily!)

People serve us in many ways—even grocery store clerks and waiters and truck drivers and lawn maintenance crews. We should be grateful to them. When you come to this church or its thrift store, you are greeted by volunteers who genuinely desire to serve you. But every one of us, even if we get up in the morning with nothing

on our schedule, are going to be given opportunities by God that day to serve someone else (and thereby to serve Him). This is true even if our health and mobility is so limited that we can only pray for friends and family with needs, or call someone on the phone, or email them. The opportunities are presented to us daily, if we'll take them.

We might be tempted to rank different types of service as higher or lower, more noble and holy, or less so. But the human way of thinking is not God's way. Martin Luther, the great leader of the church's Reformation 500 years ago, rediscovered and articulated for the world the biblical principle of the dignity of all work.

During the Middle Ages, what I'll call a "creeping clericalism" or two-tier Christianity developed in European society. It came to be assumed that the priests and nuns and other "professional Christians" performed more noble service (and thereby gained more credit with God) for their work in the church than the ordinary common folk. Luther recaptured the biblical value that **everything** we do, no matter how seemingly humble or lowly, is precious in the sight of the Lord. He wrote, "When it comes to pleasing God, there is no difference between preaching the gospel and washing the dishes for your family. A servant's heart, acting out of love and self-sacrifice, makes **every task holy**." Everything we do in service is precious.

A couple months ago a prominent resident of our state died after a very prestigious career as a college football coach. Bobby Bowden was his name. Thousands of people crowded into a sports arena in our state capital to celebrate his life. Fellow coaches and former players along with family members and friends one-by-one offered their tributes to his legacy.

Bobby was a committed and vocal follower of Jesus, who lived out the value of servanthood. He touched people far and wide because he genuinely cared about them. One assistant coach, who had served on the staff of several other big-name coaches, said that Bobby was unique. Every head coach wants passionately to win. Most of them,

he said, are motivated deep down by a lust to build their own reputations and make more money. Bobby's core passion was that he wanted his boys to win for their benefit, not his, to reward them for their hard work and discipline and to bring them joy and satisfaction.

Some of us are, or expect soon to be, in the retirement season of life. The way retirement has developed in modern America is often stained by self-centeredness. "This is your time. You deserve your play time. You've worked hard, so now you can reward yourself." There are indeed blessings in the later decades of life (even as there are challenges). But my observation is that those in their 60s, 70s, 80s, and beyond whose lives are most full, complete, and joyful are those who have incorporated the joy of serving into their routines. When you care only about yourself, life becomes stale; when you care about others, it becomes rich and flavorful.

A Heart of Servanthood

As I close, let me switch from seniors to children, from the "golden" years to the "growing pains" years. A sixth grader named Chad was shy, small for his age, and not very well liked by his peers. He wasn't particularly good at sports, wasn't extroverted like the "popular" kids, and spent a lot of time by himself. But little Chad had developed a tender and compassionate heart. One winter, as Valentine's Day approached, Chad told his mother that he wanted to make a special, personalized valentine for each of the other kids in his class. He spent hours after school each day, with paper and scissors and glue and crayons and watercolors, carefully selecting and making each valentine. He carefully stacked them in a bag on the big morning and headed off to the bus stop.

His mother worried all day. She was concerned that her son would be hurt, that his gifts to others wouldn't be reciprocated, and that all his effort would lead to crushing disappointment. Perhaps he wouldn't even receive a single valentine. When Chad got off the bus that afternoon, his mother looked out the window and saw that he

walked alone, as usual, apart from the other kids; and she anguished to see that he had nothing in his hands. When he walked in the front door, she heard him say, over and over, “Not one. Not a single one. Not one. Not a single one.” Then he turned the corner to the living room and pronounced with pride in his voice, “Not one, Mommy. I didn’t forget a single one!”

That’s a heart of servanthood. It’s not about what we get but what we give. The joy we feel in our hearts, the joy that comes from our Lord saying to us. “Well done, good and faithful servant,” is unlike any other joy we can achieve. ■

