

The Joy of Serving the Lord

Romans 12:11

This series is an invitation to seek more of God so that we grow deeper in our relationship with him and experience the joy and satisfaction that our souls are longing for. The promise in Jeremiah 29:13 is that if we seek him we will find him, if we seek him with all our heart. I hope that you are taking this opportunity to seek him with all your heart.

When it comes down to it, you will find that nothing is more important in your life than seeking the Lord and I encourage you to build the practices and habits we've been talking about into your lives; take time to meditate on God's Word, pray, and worship. There are no shortcuts. I've heard some stories of how God is working in your lives as you devote yourselves to seeking him and I encourage you to share those experiences with others so we can see how God is working in us, around us, and through us to carry out his mission and advance his kingdom here on earth.

Last week we started looking at some of the fruit that God will produce in our lives when we nourish our souls in him. Like a tree that's planted by streams of water, when we abide in Christ, and he abides in us, the Holy Spirit not only nourishes our souls, he also produces fruit. He equips, empowers, and compels us to become more like Jesus and partner with him in what he's doing here on earth.

Last week we talked about the fruit of sharing our faith. The world is covered in darkness, confusion, and deception. People don't know the truth about God, themselves, or the way of salvation that's found in Jesus Christ. Jesus came to teach the truth and everyone who believes and follows him is called and equipped by him to join in doing the same. God wants you to share the light with the people around you and doing so will be part of the fruit of abiding in Christ.

Today we look at more fruit and our focus is going to be on the fruit of living a life of service to the Lord. Serving the Lord is a familiar concept in Christianity, but a foreign concept in how we live our lives today. The world used to be full of emperors, kings, lords, patriarchs, and masters. It was also full of vassals, tributes, servants, and slaves. So the role of a servant,

bondservant, subject, and slave was common. When the Bible was written, people understood what it meant to serve and were compelled by values of loyalty, honor, devotion, submission, sacrifice and service. Therefore they knew what it meant when they were called to serve the Lord.

But not so today. In a world with presidents, governors, mayors, and bosses, the way we relate to them is much different than ancient society. We don't really fear or revere them, we don't really feel compelled to submit to them or devote our lives to serving them like people did in the ancient world.

Servitude, submission, and subjection are now seen as bad things that need to be gotten rid of. Instead, we value autonomy, independence, equality, freedom, personal rights, and individualism. The only lord or master we look to is usually ourselves. So, in the days the Bible was written people understood what it meant when they were called to serve the Lord. But in these days, we don't, and we need to learn.

Serving the Lord is central to what it means to live as a Christian and follow Christ. It's something we need to understand and embrace because that's the direction the Holy Spirit is transforming us and it will be part of the fruit of abiding in Christ. So today, we're going to look at what it means, what's going to compel us to live that way, and how we can make it a habit in our lives.

What does it mean to serve the Lord? A common understanding today might be volunteering at church in some kind of ministry. It might be deciding that you and your family are going to make it a priority to go to church and youth group every week. These are part of serving the Lord, but the biblical concept goes way beyond that. The idea of serving the Lord comes from the ancient idea of a bondservant.

In some of Paul's letters, he introduces himself as a "bondservant." Romans 1:1 says, "*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.*" If you follow the footnote in the ESV Study Bible you see that Paul used the Greek word "*doulos*" which refers to a "bondservant." According to GotQuestions.org: "*In the first-century Roman world, a bondservant was someone bound by an official contract to serve his master for seven years. Under Roman law, the bondservant was considered the owner's property, with no personal rights while serving his time. However,*

when the contract term ended, a bondservant was paid his wages and allowed to go free.”

But in Jewish society there was an additional aspect that’s important to understand. According to an article by Jameson Steward, after the contract term ended, not every bondservant chose to go free: *“Some may have been treated well by a kind master. If they so chose, they could decide to remain forever as a slave in the kind master’s house. He would then be taken to the tabernacle where the priest would lead him to the doorpost and bore a hole in the lobe of his ear with an awl. From that time on he was the slave of his master. He was known as a bondslave. He could have been free, but he chose to remain as the slave of a kind master. Wherever he walked, his ear proclaimed the character of his master.”*

This is the idea Paul had when he called himself a servant of Christ. And that’s the idea behind what it means to serve the Lord in the Bible. Paul saw himself as a bondservant along with everyone else who was chosen and saved by Christ. And if you look at what he teaches in his letters to the churches, you can see that all of us have been called to willingly and gladly offer ourselves in service to our kind master. In Romans 12:11 it says: *“Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.”* In Romans 14:18 it says, *“Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.”* Paul wrote about the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 1:9: *“For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”* In Romans 6 he writes about presenting ourselves as slaves of righteousness and in Verse 22 he says: *“But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.”* In Romans 12:1 he writes: *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”*

It was clear to Paul that everyone who received the gift of salvation and became a follower of Christ was to live the rest of their lives as a servant to him. This was the very thing that Jesus was calling his followers to do in Matthew 16:24: *“Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”*

So serving the Lord is more than just volunteering in an area of ministry at church. It includes laying down our lives entirely to him, for his service. “Whatever you want me to do, in any area of my life, I will do – at home, in marriage, in parenting, at work, in business, at school, in my community, at church...” That’s the attitude he’s looking for.

Now, this is something we will find goes against our natural tendencies and the values we’ve been conditioned with in our world today. We have been taught to live for ourselves and not let anyone hold us back. And that feels right to us. We’ve been conditioned to value individualism, personal freedom, independence and autonomy. These values, paired with the general rejection of God in our culture, turns all of us into our own little masters. We call the shots; we pursue our own dreams; we take hold of our future and live the kind of lives we want to live. And when we become a Christian, we typically only give part of our lives to God – usually our faith and our character. We believe in him try to clean up our act, and we look forward to going to heaven when we die, but then we still live pretty much in service to ourselves.

But that’s not what it means to serve the Lord or be a follower of Christ. That’s not what the Holy Spirit is doing in us and if we live that way we’re going to feel a constant tension and struggle. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that no one can serve two masters; you will love one and hate the other. We have to decide who we’re going to serve – Jesus or ourselves. Jesus requires that we relinquish control to him in every area. He calls us to offer ourselves completely to him. And that’s the direction he’s moving toward in us. We must bow to him and serve him and lay down our lives for him.

I don’t know about you, but I still feel some resistance to that in my will. There are some areas of my life I don’t want to give over to him. And it’s not that I’m doing bad things in those areas, I just want be the one in control. “As long as I’m not doing anything wrong or evil, can’t I just do what I want to do? Do I have to surrender everything to him?” Jesus said: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” He wants control over everything and calls us to offer our lives completely to him.

If this is something you struggle with, I want to help you find the pathway to obedience – and not the kind of obedience where we begrudgingly do it

because we have to, but a joyful and willing obedience where we eagerly and gladly lay down our lives in service to him.

In 2002 Mel Gibson starred in a movie called “We Were Soldiers.” The movie tells the story of the leadership of Hal Moore, a lieutenant colonel who commanded the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, at the Battle of Ia Drang (“ee-uh drang”) in 1965—the first major battle of the Vietnam War. In November 1965, Moore and his battalion were dropped into the Ia Drang Valley. Outnumbered and nearly surrounded, his men fought for their lives on the broken ground of Landing Zone X-Ray. Moore was everywhere at once — adjusting air strikes, reinforcing weak points, calling men by name, and refusing to leave the field until every one of his soldiers was accounted for. Before deploying, he famously vowed to his men: *“I will be the first to set foot on the field, and I will be the last to step off, and I will leave no one behind.”* According to the Ghosts of the Battlefield Facebook page, Hal Moore wasn’t just a commander — he was the kind of leader soldiers would follow into hell because they knew he’d be standing right beside them.

There’s another story of a man who led a smaller group of people into battle several years earlier and it ended up costing most of them their lives. Tradition holds that 4 of them died by crucifixion; 3 were impaled with spears, swords, or arrows; 2 were stoned to death; and 1 was sawn in two. Only one of them died of natural causes, but even he went through great suffering. All of them knew that if they kept following their leader, something like that was going to happen, yet they chose to keep going and lay down their lives. Their names were Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholemew, Thomas, Matthew, another James, Thaddaeus and Simon.

What would make men like that make such great sacrifices and be willing to lay down their lives? Like the soldiers serving under Colonel Moore, it’s because of who their leader was and how he led them.

You and I have that same leader. And everything he did for them, he’s doing for us as well. Jesus could have demanded that we serve him just because of who he is, because he certainly has that right to do so and is altogether worthy. He is the eternal Son of God. He created the universe and everything in it. He created each of us and gave us life. Every ability and resource and opportunity we have is a gift from him. Every move we make and every breath

we breathe is a gift. He has the power to give life and to take it. He has authority over all of creation, visible and invisible, every throne, dominion, ruler, and authority. He is worthy of our allegiance and one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. So he could simply demand us to serve him and we would have every reason to do so just because of who he is.

But that's not the kind of leader he is. The astonishing truth we need to see is that he didn't just call us to serve him because of who he is; he also went before us into battle and has done everything he's calling us to do and much more. Philippians 2:6-8 says: "*though he was in the form of God, (he) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*"

The eternal Son of God emptied himself and became a servant. He even laid down his life and died a humiliating death on the cross. Why would he do that? Hebrews 2:14-18 says: "*Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*"

Jesus took on human flesh and became a servant so that he could absorb the wrath of God in our place. He did what he did to help us – to destroy the power of death and set us free from sin and condemnation. The prophecy of Christ in Isaiah 53:3-6 says: "*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have*

turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

This is the one we've been called to serve – the very one who died for us so that we could live. He went before us as a servant and because of that we have freedom from sin and condemnation and have been given the gift of eternal life. He already did much, much more than what he's calling us to do, and not only that, but he also goes along with us in the battle every day and stands beside us at every moment. He gives us everything we need to do what he's called us to do and never ever leaves us.

Hebrews 12:1-3 says: *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”*

Will you joyfully and eagerly offer your life in service to Jesus? As awesome as he is, and with everything he's done and will do for us, I believe the only way we will fully serve him is if we do the things we talked about earlier in this series. If we are going to serve the Lord and make that a habit in our lives, we have to cultivate our relationship with him. We have to abide in him and in his love by meditating on his Word, communing with him in prayer, and delighting in him in worship so that our souls are filled and overflowing. That is how the fruit of service becomes a joyful habit in our lives. It all works together. You're not going to serve someone you don't know or think about, no matter how awesome he is. You're not going to lay your life down for him unless you love him deeply.

So I urge you again to make the commitment to seeking the Lord and spending time with him every day. Not only will it nourish your soul, but it will light a fire in you to no longer live for yourself, but for the one who died for you.