

WALKING THE WALK – Serving & Giving

Ephesians 2:1-10

January 30, 2022

We are spending the beginning this year with some discipleship training – learning to walk the walk and follow Christ as He leads us and guides us on our Christian journey. It’s a life-long journey that takes effort, discipline, and training to move towards godliness and holiness as God renews us day-by-day, taking us from glory-to-glory, to become more-and-more Christ-like. As the Apostle Paul writes about this to his young understudy Timothy, ***“For physical training is of some value, but godliness (discipleship training) has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance”*** (1 Timothy 4:8-9). Paul is telling us here that physical training is valuable to keep us strong and healthy, but along with physical training, discipleship training (constantly moving forward towards godliness and holiness) is even more valuable for us because it prepares us and equips us for eternity. These foundational and essential spiritual exercises are not difficult, but simple practices that can easily be incorporated into our daily lives. So, in order to follow Jesus’ invitation to ***“Come, follow me,”*** and grow deeper in this coming year of 2022, we need to incorporate the following essential spiritual exercises and disciplines into our daily lives:

1. Worship and Prayer.
2. The Study of God’s Word.
3. Serving others.
4. Generosity.
5. Sharing our Faith.

We have already looked at two of the spiritual disciplines – worship & prayer, and the study of God’s Word. Today we will be looking at the third and fourth spiritual discipline **SERVING & GIVING**, the importance of us carrying out intentional acts of kindness as we generously serve others above ourselves with our time, talents, and wealth. I am combining these two because they are connected, in that they both involve serving. The words *“serve,” “serving”* and *“servant”* appear over one thousand times in the Bible. The important teaching that we find in today’s verses from **Ephesians 2:1-9** is that because God is rich in compassion and mercy, He reached down and rescued us while we were spiritually dead, living as rebellious children subject to God’s wrath, and saved us by His wonderful grace. Paul makes the very important point that God is the one to be thanked and praised

because on one can save themselves. We are not saved according to our works, for there's nothing we can do to save ourselves, salvation is a love gift from our Heavenly Father that brought us to Christ, so no one would be able to boast.

And then, in **verse 10**, Paul tells us this, ***“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*** In thankfulness for what God has done for us, we respond to His grace and mercy by being committed to serving Him by doing good works. According to Paul those good works make up our destiny, what God had prearranged before we were conceived for us to do, and then in Heaven we will be rewarded for simply doing what He wanted us to accomplish while on this earth. For some their destiny will be teachers, nurses, factory workers, businessmen/women, stay at home housewives, mechanics, farmers, pastors. We will be rewarded for how we served Him in what He has called us to do, and these are all equal in God’s sight. We serve right where He has place us. God needs followers in every area of society, who will represent Christ right where God planted them. So, once we become a believer, we become a servant of God, but what does it mean to be a servant, to obediently serve the Lord?

God’s primary way of working in this world is through us – His followers; however, the dilemma we all wrestle with is this: *“What is my destiny? What is my calling? How do I serve Him? What does God want me to do with the time I have on this earth, so I don’t miss out on my rewards?”* At the end of this series on discipleship, we’ll be looking at God’s calling on our lives to be His light in this world, to share His love with others by spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ, which is the highest calling on all of our lives, but today we will be looking at how each one of us here are called to serve, which is to have compassion on others, helping those in need, especially the less fortunate.

God has called the church to follow Christ’s example by going about doing good, which means: practicing justice, showing compassion, mercy, and kindness to His entire creation. In fact, serving others is so important to God that when the church fails to be His representatives in this world, then all those acts of devotion we do for God, our praise and worship, the reading of His Word, our prayers and fasting, are worthless to Him, because we are saved to do good works. We are to put our faith into action! Listen to what James tells us, ***“My dear brothers and sisters, what good is it if someone claims to have faith but demonstrates no good works to prove it? How could this kind of faith save anyone? For example, if a brother***

or sister in the faith is poorly clothed and hungry and you leave them saying, 'Good-bye, I hope you stay warm and have plenty to eat,' but you don't provide them with a coat or even a cup of soup, what good is your faith? So then faith that doesn't involve action is phony!" (James 2:14-17). How can others know you are a follower of Christ if you don't serve others? If you don't demonstrate your faith!

So, if we believe that our only role as believers is to come to church whenever it's open, to worship, to pray, to read from the Bible and hear a sermon, then we have been deceived, our faith has grown cold and self-serving. Consider what God told the Israelites through the prophet Isaiah when they were going through all the motions of serving God, but stopped serving others, *"The multitude of your sacrifices – what are they to me? Says the Lord. I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New moons, Sabbaths and convocations – I cannot bear your worthless assemblies"* (Isaiah 1:11-13). The Israelites were obedient in bringing all those outward things to God, but inwardly they were self-centered, worldly, corrupt, sinful, and disobedient to God because they had no compassion for serving others. It was all about them and their acts of worship. Their impact on society was zero!

Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount reminds us that it's more important to build up our treasures in Heaven than on this earth – *"Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up yourselves treasures in heaven where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"* (Matthew 6:19-21). Heavenly treasures such as loving others, serving others and doing good, revealing the truth and bringing Christ's light to the lost, are treasures that we are sending ahead to eternal home in Heaven, where they can't be stolen or ever lose their value, and Jesus calls this a heart issue. A Christian accountant who prepares tax returns made the following statement – *"You can tell a lot about a person by their tax returns. A tax return is kind of like a selfie of our generosity!"* Our tax returns can speak about our faith, because what we do with our money tells us something about the condition of our heart. And then, not only our tax returns, but also our bank accounts and credit card statements are also a kind of a selfie, a snapshot that

reveal a lot about our lives – do we tend to serve ourselves or serve others. Jesus cautions us to watch what we do with our money, and not be caught up with all of that consumerism that’s so prevalent today. Jesus gives us another warning in **Luke 12:15**, ***“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”***

The key to a successful life is putting our love into action through generosity, not only with our wealth, but also with our time, gifting and talents. Since we are made in God’s image and God is generous, then we were created to be generous, it’s what shapes our lives. Among the most important ways that we give back to God is through the ministries of the church that we attend, so when we give our tithes and offerings as an expression of our worship and gratitude to God for His many blessings upon our lives, we allow the church to have a much bigger impact on the world around us than we can make individually, because there’s strength when we pool our resources together, getting a bigger bang for our buck. There’s joy in generosity, especially when you can serve together. What a beautiful picture of unity among believers takes place when they serve together! And while happiness can’t be bought – a multitude of scientific studies have shown that giving generously of our time, efforts, gifting, and wealth makes people happier. Jesus taught the same principal when He said, ***“Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you”*** (Luke 6:38). God is generous to those who are generous. God loves to give to His children who have a servant heart!

And then, Jesus makes the same point in His teaching on *“The Sheep and the Goats,”* found in **Matthew 25:31-46**. On that day when we face Jesus and make an accounting of our lives, this is how Jesus said He will test how His church served Him, ***“Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for the least of these, you did not do for me.”*** When Christ returns, He will separate the people according to how they served Him, and the criteria Jesus will use for which ones are sheep and which ones are goats is in how generous they were in feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, did they invite strangers into their homes, did they clothe the naked, look after the sick and visit those in prison. With this final verdict for how they served others, which reflected their love for Christ. ***“Then they*** (those who didn’t serve Christ by serving others) ***will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous*** (those who served Christ by serving others) ***to eternal life.”*** So, you can see God takes how we serve others very seriously!

So, what does the Lord require of us? Here are just a few of the many examples found in the Bible:

- ***“Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow”*** (Isaiah 1:17).
- ***“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”*** (Micah 6:8).
- ***“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy”*** (Proverbs 31:8-9).
- ***“Proclaim good news to the poor...bind up the brokenhearted...proclaim freedom for the captives...release from darkness for the prisoners...comfort all who mourn and provide for those that grieve”*** (Isaiah 61:1-3).
- ***“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver”*** (2 Corinthians 9:6-7)

It is impossible to be the kind of Christ-follower Jesus longs for – without concern for justice and mercy for the vulnerable, the weak, the marginalized, the homeless and the poor. This was Jesus’ ministry when He walked this earth – He ministered to, had compassion for, and never turned His back on the poor peasants; He was not afraid to touch the untouchable lepers; He hung out and ate with the worst of sinners; He healed the mentally and physically ill; He cast our demons from those that were tormented, and He raised the dead. And when Jesus ascended back to Heaven, He turned over His ministry to His followers to continue what He began – giving every one of His followers the privilege, authority, and ability to do the same until He returns to set up His millennial kingdom rule on this earth. Jesus has so much confidence in you and me that He blessed us in doing what He did and even greater things. Serving and giving is our calling in living an obedient life of faith!

I am ordained with the Free Methodist Denomination, and we as Free Methodists are followers of John Wesley who ministered in England during the eighteenth century. Back in Wesley’s day, when people were saved, they were not only called to live a life of holiness, but it was also expected that every believer would be fully

engaged in transforming society around them – where they lived, worked, and hung out was their mission field. So, true godliness and holiness for a Methodist believer was not simply keeping themselves from sin and evil but was also about loving one's neighbours and your desire for them was not only to be saved but also to have adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care and education. So, the early Methodists started schools, hospitals and health clinics, as well as ministries for feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, job training for the unemployed, facilities to care for orphans, and many other ministries to help believers engage and transform their communities. Unfortunately, over time the church has given over many of these service to government and private non-Christian agencies. The church today is not involved in serving our communities as they once did, but we still have an important role in providing many necessary services that are not covered by government programs and secular agencies. I don't know how this happened over time, but possibly, we had forgotten our calling to serve and give generously and sacrificially, finding it much easier to let others do it; thereby, losing our impact on society for Christ!

In the past the church played an important role in politics as well – but today, the majority believe that Christian faith has no place or business in government affairs and the political arena. However, this belief goes against our God given responsibility as citizens to speak up for the vulnerable and marginalized in society, who don't have a voice. Some believers also don't vote during elections; however, I believe our vote is very important because it reflects our convictions and gives us a voice to persuade our politicians to be concerned about those ethical issues that are spoken about throughout God's Word. It is said, *"If you don't vote, you voted for the wrong person!"* Government has a record of passing ungodly laws, because very few believers speak up and voice their concerns. We need to have Christians involved in politics and I am thankful for those that are willing to serve. The US recently celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's birthday on January 17th. Dr King often spoke about the need for the church to speak up for the vulnerable and those experiencing discrimination, racism, and injustice. In one of his famous speeches, he said this, *"The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state."* (Martin Luther King's speech *"A Knock at Midnight"* given on June 5, 1963). Believers are to be the conscience of our community, our province, and our country, and not remain silent and disengaged!

Last Sunday – I said that the 66 books of the Bible are God’s love letters that teach us how to love God, love others and love ourselves, so we as Christians are to be known to the world by how we love one-another, especially the unlovable. And how we express that love is by serving and doing for others what we would want them to do for us. So, you need to treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you. In **1 Corinthians 13**, the Apostle Paul gives us this wonderful chapter on love that’s often read at weddings. Paul starts out this chapter in this way, **“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal”** (1 Corinthians 13:1). Paul is reminding us here that others judge our Christian walk by our love. So, if I go about letting everyone believe I’m a Christian by the words I speak, then my talk better line up with my walk, and my walk better be filled with all kinds of service towards others – or I’ll be seen as a phony, an imposter, a hypocrite, who goes about giving Christianity a bad name. The Apostle John in his first epistle goes to the extreme by calling these, so called unloving believers, unbelievers, who claim to know God, but they don’t, **“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love”** (1 John 4:8). For a believer, love is a way of life! A believer always seeks the good of the other person – to bless, to encourage, to care for, and serve the other above themselves as we go about asking the question, “What does love require of me in this situation?”

As well, grace is central to the Christian faith – our reading from Ephesians 2 tells us clearly that we are saved by God’s undeserved kindness and wonderful grace, and not by our good works. Jesus’ life, sacrificial death and resurrection is our example of God’s grace in action, because Christ did all of this for us, and then our rightful response is to do the same for others. So, we are called to show others the same undeserved kindness and grace that God has shown us. The word **“KINDNESS”** appears over 240 times in the Bible, and at times is also translated as mercy, something the other person doesn’t expect or deserve. So, each day in our morning devotions and prayers, we need to offer ourselves to God, giving God permission to use us as His instrument of healing, justice, mercy, and love. In this way, we are saying to God, **“Here I am Lord, send me,”** and then we need to pay attention during the day for opportunities or God moments, for Him to answer that prayer. If every Christian did that every morning and were open to His divine interruptions during the day, just think about how our communities would change. So, an important part of our Christian walk is to be willing to allow God to interrupt our lives. That’s easier to say than to put into practice! We get busy and

often forget that prayer we lifted up to God during our morning devotions, of giving God permission to use us. If we don't pay attention to those unexpected interruptions, that gentle nudge of the Holy Spirit, then we won't notice those that God had put in our path, and we miss out on another deposit into our treasure bank kept in Heaven!

That was Jesus' point in the parable of the "*Good Samaritan*" – Jesus told this story in **Luke 10** to illustrate what it means to pay attention so you can love your neighbour as yourself. A religious scholar asks Jesus. "Who is my neighbour?" and Jesus tells Him a parable. You all likely know this story well, how a man was beaten and robbed and left for dead by the side of the road. As it happened, two religious Jews came down the road and walked on by, not wanting to stop and get involved for some reason, but when a travelling Samaritan (who were despised by the Jews as second class citizens) saw the man he had compassion on him and stopped to help, bandaging, and treating his wounds, and then putting him on his donkey, taking him to the nearest town to be cared for until he recovers. Jesus asks the religious scholar, "*Which one of these three men who saw the wounded man proved to be the true neighbour? The religious scholar responded, 'The one who demonstrated kindness and mercy'*" (Luke 10:36-37). This parable shows us what love in action looks like!

It's clear from this story that love is the willingness to allow yourself to be interrupted, to take some risks, to give up some of your comforts and make sacrifices for another in need. Jesus noticed the people around Him who needed help. Jesus never made excuses or walked on by, pretending He didn't see those in need, hoping someone else would stop and help. As a result, these divine appointments became some of the most important teaching moments of Jesus' ministry, and thankfully we can read about them in the Gospel accounts because Jesus always showed compassion for those in need!

In **Matthew 20** – Jesus gives a great teaching on greatness in the Kingdom of God. In this chapter Matthew tells us of the time when two of Jesus' disciples were arguing about which one of them was the greatest. Arguing about that future day when Jesus would claim the throne in Jerusalem as King. Arguing who would sit on His right and who would sit on His left, to rule alongside of Him. When the other disciples heard about this argument, of course they would have been upset at the pride and arrogance of these two disciples, but possibly they may have been thinking that they had a better shot at one of these honourable positions than John

or James. When Jesus heard about this argument He saw it as a teaching moment, so He stopped in His tracks to set them all straight on how the Kingdom of God operates, ***“Kings and those with great authority in this world rule oppressively over their subjects, like tyrants. But this is not your calling. You will lead by a completely different model. The greatest one among you will live as the one who is called to serve others, because the greatest honour and authority is reserved for the one with the heart of a servant”*** (Matthew 20:25-27). And then at the Last Supper, Jesus demonstrated this teaching by giving them an example to follow, by retrieving a basin of water and a towel, and washing each of His disciple’s feet. Doing the menial task that was left for the lowest slave in the household!

Jesus made it clear that first place in God’s kingdom only goes to those who are willing to serve others – because in God’s kingdom, *“The first shall be last and the last shall be first.”*

Here’s a modern day parable about the kingdom of heaven to drive home this point – One day Apple decided to give away free iPads at a certain time and a certain place. You arrive and there’s a long line that has already formed. A security guard comes up and says, *“Your place in line is determined by how wealthy you are and how important you are, so tell me how much money you have and how famous you are.”* You give him the information and he moves you up in the line or back in line, depending on your status. Finally, after a lot of reshuffling, everyone is standing in order of wealth and importance. Standing near the back of the line you’re thinking, *“Gee this isn’t fair, the people at the front of this line probably don’t need a free iPad. They probably already have several. In fact, they probably already have everything they need. Why are they here?”*

Finally, Steve Jobs comes out and stands in front of an 18-wheeler loaded with iPads. He has a bullhorn and asks, *“Who wants a free iPad?”* And everyone goes nuts. Then He says, *“Okay everyone, here’s what I want you to do. I want you to all turn around and face the opposite direction.”* Then he hops into the 18-wheeler and drives it beside the line all the way to the back of the line, which is now the front of the line. And he starts handing out the iPads to the poorest and least important first. Why? Because *“the last shall be first and the first shall be last”* isn’t that’s the way the world works. Well, of course not! We all know that’s not true in the real world! The world has its own way of ranking importance. The world thinks someone is really important if they have a lot of people working for them, running at their every beckoning and call. Let me say it this way: *“The*

world determines greatness by how many servants a person has; but in God's Kingdom, greatness is determined by how many people you serve."

In God's upside-down kingdom, first place goes to the servants, to the people the world puts at the back of the line of importance. Even within the church we are often guilty of putting some ahead of others – our gifted leaders and talented musicians and singers. We put them on stage and give them a microphone and have them perform for us. But in God's final accounting, those who sing beautifully aren't first, and those who preach eloquently aren't first. Instead, those who serve humbly and are generous givers are first, because when we meet and stand before Jesus He won't say, "*Well sung good and faithful singer.*" And He won't say, "*Well said good and faithful speaker.*" What Jesus will say is this, "*Well done good and faithful **SERVANT.***" We are all equal in God's eyes, those on the stage and those in the background are all equal servants, gifted in various ways to serve. So, it's how we serve others, how we carried out our God given destiny on how we will be judged when we face God in heaven. Our rewards will be according to **Ephesians 2:10**, "***For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.***" God had prearranged before we were born what He wanted us to do, and we will be rewarded for simply doing what He wanted us to accomplish while on this earth, regardless of what that task may be, we will be rewarded in how we carried out our destiny. In whatever way God has called you to serve Him, your obedience to that calling will be your reward in Heaven!

I want to close with a covenant prayer by John Wesley that invited the early Methodists to pray at the beginning of the new year:

"I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will; rank me with whom you will. Put me to doing; put me to suffering. Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you. Let me be full; let me be empty. Let me have all things; let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious, merciful, and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven."

Amen.