

“Around the Bases: ΔΙΑΚΟΝΙΑ”

“For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
Galatians 5:13-14 ¹

Although I never actually lived in Memphis, my parents lived there for forty years. Many would say that Elvis Presley was Memphis’s favorite son of all time; yet in spite of his enormous success, those who knew Elvis well said he died at the age of 42 an unfulfilled and unhappy man. His ex-wife, Priscilla, said this about him: “Elvis never came to terms with who he was meant to be or what his purpose in life was. He thought he was here for a reason, maybe to preach, maybe to serve, maybe to save, maybe to care for people. That agonizing desire was always with him and he knew he wasn’t fulfilling it. So he’d go on stage and he wouldn’t have to think about it.”

From what Priscilla said, I suspect that Elvis was aware of the biblical truth that *“We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”* (Ephesians 2:20). He just never thought that was what he was actually doing. And as I’ve commented before, very few things in life are more distressing than to finally get to the top of the ladder and discover that you’ve leaned it against the wrong wall.

What really matters at the end of the day is not *how long* we live, but *how* we live. What matters is not the *duration* of your life, but the *donation* of your life. You and I weren’t put here just to take up space. We were put here to serve God, and the way we serve God is by serving other people. Indeed, the only way we really *can* serve God is by serving others.

The Bible’s word for “serving others” is “ministry.” I expect that when most people hear the word “ministry,” they think of a pastor or a vocational religious worker of some sort; but to do “ministry” simply means using the spiritual gifts, passions, abilities, personality, and experiences God has built into one’s life to serve other people in God’s Name.

In the New Testament, the words translated as “service” and “ministry” are actually the same word—“diakonia” (Διακονια). And similarly, the words translated “servant” and “minister” are the same word—“diakonos” (διακονος)—from which we get the word, “deacon.”

The truth of the matter is that all of us are called to ministry. The call to salvation includes the call to ministry, and any time you help someone in Jesus’ Name, you’re ministering. You’re serving. All men who follow Jesus, all women who follow Jesus, all youth who follow Jesus, all children who follow Jesus—every one of us who follows Jesus is called to serve!

Now the good news is that God not only created us for service, but God also gave us a model for how to go about it. God came to live among us and said “This is how you do it. I want you to watch Me, and do what I do.” And so God came to earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and you were created to become like Him.

When Jesus walked among us, He told His disciples, *“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 [διακονος], and whoever wants to be first must be your slave [δουλος]—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”* (Matthew 20:25-28).

You’ve heard me say many times that, consciously or unconsciously, each of us organizes our lives around two things: securing **a life that matters**, and developing **relationships that**

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last. Like Elvis, we all want to feel that what we're doing with our lives is worthwhile. The world's methods of keeping score suggest that the way to attain significance is to "get all you can, can all you get, and sit on the can"; but Jesus told us that "*whoever wants to save their life will lose it,*" while "*whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?*" (Luke 9:24-25).

According to Jesus, real self-worth, sturdy self-esteem, and enduring significance don't come from what we gather for ourselves, but rather from what we give away in various kinds of service to others. Jesus even told us that it's necessary to give our very lives away in order to actually find them.

These promised blessings notwithstanding, most of us find that we struggle with at least four tendencies that make service to others more difficult. These tendencies are self-centeredness, materialism, mistaken motivation, and perfectionism. Let's look at each of these briefly.²

Self-Centeredness. Although we may know that the Bible tells us not to focus on our own interests so much as on the interests of others (Philippians 2:4), most of us find this difficult to do. And we know that the Bible tells us to "*love your neighbor as you love yourself*" (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39), but on most days that's rather a challenge, isn't it? One of the main enemies of serving one another is the fact that we stay so busy with our pursuit of those things we think will cause our own lives to be significant that we miss the opportunities that are actually the source of that significance.

So far as we know, Jesus visited Jericho only once. As He was leaving the city, *two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"*

The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

Jesus stopped and called them, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" he asked.

"Lord," they answered, "we want our sight."

Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him (Matthew 20:29-34).

One of the crucial points to notice in this encounter is that Jesus *stopped*. This simple fact helps us to see that one of the keys to meaningful ministry is the willingness to be interrupted. Nearly all of the people Jesus healed—the blind man, the lame man, the paralyzed man, the dead child—all of them were interruptions.³ Indeed, virtually all of Jesus' miracles of healing took place as the result of being willing to be interrupted.

You may remember that John Wesley's life motto was: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can." That's what it means to be a minister for Jesus. While the fact that a need exists and we have the means to meet it doesn't necessarily mean that it is God's purpose for us to meet that need, it is important that we take that possibility seriously. We have to be available.

Materialism. The second barrier that blocks our availability for service is materialism. In our first text this morning, Jesus told us that "*No one can serve two masters. Either you will*

² These points are abstracted and recombined from Rick Warren's sermon, "You Were Shaped for Serving God," purchased through the Saddleback program, *40 Days of Purpose* some years ago.

³ Mark 8:22-26; John 5:1-16; Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 5:29; Luke 8:49-56.

hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Luke 16:13). Notice that Jesus didn't say, "You should not serve both God and money." He said, "You cannot serve both God and money."

Elsewhere Jesus warned us that "*the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful*" (Mark 4:19). One of the most important decisions we have to make once we become followers of Jesus is, "Am I going to be a Kingdom-builder or am I going to be a wealth-builder?"

Now if God wants to give you wealth, that's great. Making money is not a bad thing, but God doesn't intend for gaining wealth to be the Number One Goal of our lives. Your wealth is not going to cross over with you into eternity, but your character and the people you've touched for Jesus will.

Jesus' advice was that we "*use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings*" (Luke 16:9). By this He meant that if we steward our resources for the purposes of His Kingdom, some of those who enter the Kingdom as a result of our stewardship will precede us to the heavenly city and will be there to greet us when we cross over into glory. "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,*" Jesus said, "*where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*" (Matthew 6:19-21).

Mistaken Motivation. The third attitude that gets in the way of our service might be called "mistaken motivation." This is what Jesus was talking about when He told us to "*Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven*" (Matthew 6:1).

Self-promotion and servanthood don't mix, but it's really easy to get them confused. And if we're honest with ourselves, a lot of our service really is **self**-serving. We serve in order to get others to like us. We serve to be admired. We serve to achieve our own goals.

Sometimes our service is really an attempt to bargain with God: "God, I'll serve You, but I'm also expecting You to protect me and those I care about." We may be serving, but all the time we're serving, we're also thinking about how noble we are. We may practice humility, but as we do, we're thinking pridefully about how humble we are!

The truth of the matter is that it's hard for us to really know our own motivations; and even at our best, I doubt that our motivations are ever completely empty of self-interest. One good litmus test for our motivation is to pay attention to our attitudes and feelings when someone else gets the credit that we believe should rightly be our own.

Along that line, Dr. Jack MacGorman, one of my seminary professors in Texas, used to remind us that "There is no limit to what God can accomplish through your life, so long as you do not touch the glory." I find that a helpful idea to bear in mind.

Perfectionism. The last, and perhaps the most surprising, barrier to effective service, is perfectionism. The barrier of perfectionism works like this: "When things settle down, when I finish school, when I feel better, when this happens or when that is finished, **then** I'll serve the Lord."

Ecclesiastes warns that "*whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap*" (11:4). Another way to say that is that "*If you wait for perfect conditions, you'll never get anything done.*" Persons who have the heart and mind of Christ do the very best they can with what they have . . . today. They don't wait.

I fear that we sometimes are in danger of making an idol out of excellence. We say, “If you can’t do it in a first-class way, don’t do it at all.” And while there are situations in which that adage might be useful, in most cases it’s probably better to follow “The Good-Enough Principle.”

The Good Enough Principle simply affirms that people and situations don’t have to be perfect in order for God to bless them. If God only used perfect people, what would ever get done in this world? God doesn’t use perfect people because there aren’t any. We’re all a bunch of misfits. We all have weaknesses. We all have faults. We all have failures. We all have handicaps. But God can use every one of us to make a difference . . . if we’re available.

Yes, it’s tempting to say, “I’ll start serving God when things settle down.” But the fact of the matter is that things aren’t going to settle down. They’re just not. So go ahead and start serving while things are *not* settled down . . . and then *keep* serving, until Jesus comes.

When all is said and done, you can do one of two things with your life. You can invest your life in things that will die with you, or you can invest your life in things that will outlast your time on earth.⁴ One day each of us is going to stand before God and He’s going to ask, “What did you do with what I gave you, the talents, the abilities, the background, the experiences, the freedom, the education, the family experiences?”

It will not be a good thing to respond, “Well, Lord, I was a little busy with my ambitions and plans, and I never got around to serving You.” If we say that, God’s going to say, “What were you thinking? Did you think I put you on earth to live just for yourself? I told you in my Word that *you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace* (1 Peter 4:10). I didn’t give you those abilities just so you could serve yourself! I gave you those gifts for the good of My Kingdom (1 Corinthians 12:7)!”

On the night that He was betrayed, Jesus told the Father that “***I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do***” (John 17:4), and the Bible tells us that “*we are . . . created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*” (Ephesians 2:10). While doing those good works doesn’t save us—salvation is not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:9)—completing those works of service that have been prepared for us *does* have something to do with the reward we’ll receive when each of us stands before God’s judgment seat.

The Bible encourages us to “*Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain*” (1 Corinthians 15:58). For those who have been about the Master’s work, the conversation will go like this: “*Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!*” (Matthew 25:21).

I began with Elvis, and I’m going to end with him as well. Elvis won three Grammy awards, all for Gospel Music, and on one of those albums,⁵ there was a song that went like this:

After the lightning and thunder,
After the last bell has rung,
I want to bow down before Jesus
And hear Him say, “Well done.”
He is my reason for living,
He is my King of kings.
I long to be His possession.

⁴ See William James, “The great use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.”

<http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/28/great-life/>

⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/He_Touched_Me_\(album\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/He_Touched_Me_(album))

He is my everything.

So here's the question for today: **Is God going to be able to say "well done" to you?**

Diakonia

Leader: *“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (Luke 16:13).*

People: ***“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10).***

Leader: *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:8-10).*

People: ***“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).***

Leader: *“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 did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).*

People: ***“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:13-14).***

Reader One: The Word of God for the People of God!

People: **Thanks be to God!**