

Reforming Servanthood The Centrality of Gospel in Christian Service

By Nathaniel Loren Palmer

[manuscript being published by permission]

PART II – The Aspects

Chapter 5: The Storming of Badajoz - Serving Commanded

The Forlorn Hope were treated like the walking dead amongst their peers. The name is literally derived from a Dutch term for the “lost ones.” The men assigned to a Forlorn Hope were tasked with being the first to assault the defenses of the enemy forces. Casualty rates for a Forlorn Hope in the British Campaign against Napoleonic France in the early 1800’s were extremely high. They ranged from around 90% dead or wounded. Being assigned to a Forlorn Hope was as good as being sentenced to death.

Over 3,500 British soldiers were killed in the Forlorn Hope in the storming of the heavily fortified French occupied city of Badajoz, Spain, in early April 1812. The carnage of lives occurred in less than two hours and was so devastatingly costly that the attack was almost halted. It was allowed to continue only when miraculously what remained of the Forlorn Hope actually fought their way into Badajoz and eventually captured the city. It was said that when dawn came on the next morning, it revealed such a horror of slaughter that the usually stoic Commander of the British forces, Sir Arthur Wellesley (accustomed to such battles and who later became the Duke of Wellington), wept openly and profusely.

God has placed many commands on humanity through the 10 Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Golden Rule. When we study all of these, we can quickly get the feeling that we are in a Forlorn Hope. The effort needed to scale the walls of heaven seems way beyond our power. To love God with our minds and hearts and love others as we do our self at all times regardless of circumstances seems impossible. **And left to only our willpower, it is.** The casualty rate is at 100%, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” Romans 3:23.

My soul feels weighed down and greatly disparaged by the hopelessness in trying to obey all of these commands every minute of each day. I feel the impossibility of them condemning and taunting me. So I am aware that in discussing how God commands us to serve him through serving his people, many of us can immediately feel like we just enlisted in a Forlorn Hope.

Thankfully, God did not abandon us to own our strength to obey His commands 100

percent of the time. God replaced our Forlorn Hope with the Eternal Hope in Jesus Christ. *“Jesus looked at them and said, ‘with man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.’”* Mark 10:27. Jesus lived a perfect life by obeying God's commands and thus became an acceptable sacrifice. For those who believe, God has credited Jesus' obedience to our life and made us righteous before God to spend eternity with Him in heaven. This is our Eternal Hope.

When we study the commands of God in Scripture, we should always be conscious of this Eternal Hope. So armed with that hope in mind, we come to the command God gives us to serve Him and to serve our neighbors. But are these even a command from God? Does God really take the act of serving Him seriously? Is serving just one option in the smorgasbord of worship opportunities?

Serving God through is a serious commandment given to us by God. It is not optional. We were created to serve Him to magnify the Gospel for His Glory and to benefit others. He designed serving to be practiced by all His people, in joyful worship to Him. God is incapable of making frivolous statements. So let's delve into His Word to understand this command. But let us do it with our Eternal Hope of Christ in the forefront of our mind.

The Command

“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” Ecclesiastes 12:13. If the whole duty of man is to keep his commandments as the writer of Ecclesiastes states, then we better ask ourselves if serving God is even a command from God.

If serving God is not a command then it becomes merely an optional task that humans can either take or leave, depending on how they feel that day. If serving God is a command, then it becomes a mandatory task that we must do. Make no mistake serving God is a commandment from God. He gives us the command not because our salvation depends on it but because it glorifies God both for who he is and what he did for us.

God's command for us to serve him and for care his creation is clearly revealed in the beginning chapters of the Bible. After breathing the universe into existence, God designed man in His image and named him Adam. Consequently the first thing God said to Adam beside *be fruitful and multiply* was to serve God. Genesis 2:15 *“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”* This command to serve is given before sin entered the world. Work and serving were not a result of the Fall. They are honorable commands from God. God tells Adam to serve Him by caring for His creation. Adam was to apply his gifts and his devotion to the task God had given him.

Further in the Old Testament we find more direct commands from God regarding serving. God tells Moses and Aaron to advise Pharaoh eight (8) times in the book of Exodus to *Let my people go, that they may serve me.* God does not say for Pharaoh to let the Jews

go in order that they may stop being persecuted, or let them go because God feels sorry for them. He tells the king of Egypt to let them go for no other reason than that they may serve God. God is so desirous of this that he brought plague after plague upon Egypt. When Pharaoh's own son dies as a result, Pharaoh finally releases the Israelites and tells them specifically to go serve their God.

Later on, as Moses leads them through the desert, God commands the Israelites in the 1st Commandment found in Genesis 20:4-6 "*You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.*" God is so desirous of our service towards him that He makes the command to serve Him and Him alone the first commandment. Saying that if this is not done He will visit *the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.* This is not the language of someone who does not care or is neutral on the subject of serving God.

As Israelites come into contact with other civilizations, God sternly commands them to serve only Him. "*this is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear,*" Deuteronomy; 6:13 and again in 10:20 "*You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear.*" These are very clear and specific instructions that God's people are serve Him and only Him.

God specifically directs his people to serve him in passages like Joshua 24:14, "*Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.*" This is a sincere direct command for service to God. God does lay the option to serve Him or not on the table. God was not merely suggesting or begging that they serve Him. Instead He explicitly commanded them to serve Him exclusively and then adds the two qualifiers of sincerity and faithfulness.

It is very evident that God commands the Israelites to serve him. But was that command rescinded with the coming of Christ? Does God command that we serve him in the New Testament? Throughout the New Testament God implores us to serve one another because of the grace we have been given. 1 Peter 4:10-11,

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Here Peter does not say, "*If each one of us has a gift, try to use it to serve.*" He plainly and clearly states that God has given various talents and we are commanded to use them to glorify God.

An interesting thing in the New Testament is that God's desire for people to serve Him

does not cease with Christ's return. According to Revelation 7:15, the saints will be serving God for eternity:

And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

We see that God's desire for us to serve Him is a historical, a present, and a future command.

Serious Stuff

Ok, we understand that God commands us to serve Him, but how seriously is He about serving? Nowhere is it more evident that God takes serving Him more serious than in the Old Testament. In the first five books of the Bible, God gives detail after detail for how the Israelites were to serve Him. He explains just exactly who could serve in the temple as well. God lays out the order of comprehensive rituals, the exacting measurements, and the precise materials that are to be performed in God's service within the Temple as seen in Leviticus 19:5-7,

When you offer a sacrifice of peace offerings to the Lord, you shall offer it so that you may be accepted. It shall be eaten the same day you offer it or on the day after, and anything left over until the third day shall be burned up with fire. If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is tainted; it will not be accepted,

Why did God stipulate such a detailed ritual for serving in his Temple?

Through all the details God was communicating how just serious serving was. He wanted the Israelites to see that serving in the temple was so important that one must take careful and measured steps. So serious in fact that service to God had to be done in certain ways or risk excommunication from both God and his people. Leviticus 19:8,"*and everyone who eats it shall bear his iniquity, because he has profaned what is holy to the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from his people.*" The head priest had to be so careful and precise to atone for sin that, performing rituals had to be done in exact timing and precision or else he would incur the wrath of God.

In fact God declared in the Book of Numbers 18:7 that anyone approaching the temple and not within his priesthood, would be put to death, "*And you and your sons with you shall guard your priesthood for all that concerns the altar and that is within the veil; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood as a gift, and any outsider who comes near shall be put to death.*" That's how serious God takes service to Him. These details and consequences are not characteristic of a nonchalant attitude towards serving by God. God is communicating how serious he takes service to Him, and correspondingly how serious we should take it as well.

But why does God take serving Him so serious? Serving is serious because God purposes it for his glory and our sanctification. God also uses service to persevere and protect His people. God warned His people against other gods that compete for their service will distract and ensnare them *“They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you”* Exodus 23:33.

God wanted to protect the Jews from dangerous distractions. God instructed them of His power through His detailed and serious approach to serving Him. He used service as the means of instruction to teach the Jews to consider the faithfulness and protection of God. *“And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day.”* Deuteronomy 6:24

But all this is from the Old Testament. Having the old covenant obsolete, does God still take serving seriously? Yes. The new covenant only changed the nature and access to serving the church not the importance. The writer of the Book of Hebrews, in chapter 10, addresses this question. He examines the change in covenants and the subsequent effect in our ability to serve God. This passage of Scripture explains the monumental shift in access to God between the Old and New Covenants. With the work of Christ, the throne of Grace has been made accessible for everyone. We can boldly approach without fear of messing up detailed rituals or uncleanness. We have the perfect holy substitute in Christ that purifies us completely and eternally regardless of action or failure on our part. This is our new access.

Before Christ, only certain priests could approach God. The approach could only be possible after a series of rituals and multiple cleansings. Today, the way to the throne of God is without obstacle for those who believe in Christ. We can approach God draped in Christ’s perfection despite our own imperfection. This new access does not change God’s serious nature towards service. After explaining the work of Christ and its ramifications for us, the book of Hebrews continues by stating *“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,”* This new access to God should infect us with a new passion for serving.

Command Conclusion

The command to serve God and His people may seem as daunting as a Forlorn Hope assaulting a fortified city. We cannot unto ourselves produce or acquire such righteousness. It is impossible for us to fulfill such a command to serve with our whole hearts 100% of the time. But God gives both a capacity to serve as well as the context in which to serve. God is very serious about us serving Him and consequently his people. Serving is not an option. Our options come in how we serve.

In the Old Covenant, serving was a complex and deadly proposition. In the New Covenant, the access to serve has been blown wide open because of Christ. We therefore

can approach God in Christ's perfect act of service. We can scale the walls of heaven, but not because we had enough firepower or chutzpah. God opened the gates himself. He let us in to serve him over the sacrificed body of His son. That is our Eternal Hope.

Chapter 6: I Can Bench That! – Humble and Noble Serving

“Oh my Lord I can not move my Arms, I can not move my arms!” These are the words I shouted laying in bed, while I tried to produce some movement in my numbed arms so I could get up. Several previous attempts in sitting up without using my arms had failed miserably and only resulted in me flopping back down to the bed like a dead fish.

In a desperate last move, I tried motivating my useless arms by yelling various encouragements and when that did not work I turned to direct threats. Still nothing happened, and with the prospect of showering, putting on a suit and tie, frustration swiftly overcame me. You can have strange thoughts wallowing armless on a bed; like for the first time since 8th grade graduation I actually considered the merits and practicality of the clip-on tie. I was going down hill fast.

The day prior to my arms becoming useless appendages, I had made a decision that I rarely make: to visit a gym. I hadn't been in a real gym before. Most of my limited physical activity revolved around swimming and tennis, but I wanted to see what all the hype around weight lifting was about. Upon entering the gym, I was not quite sure what to do so I just found someone who looked like they actually knew what they were doing. When the person was finished he asked me, “What weight level do you want?” Out of pure ignorance and not wanting to look like a total wimp I said, “The one you have is just fine.”

I found myself shoulder pressing 200 lbs; I had not lifted 200 lbs combined in the last year let alone at one time. So I went from machine to machine lifting the weights without a clue of what I was doing. The next morning, my “muscles” (I put this term rightfully in quotes) painfully and stubbornly rebelled. I was turned into to just a hunk of meat who could not get out of his own bed.

I found out the hard way with lifting weights, that not being Mr. Macho and starting slowly are the keys to success. My muscles simply could not take drastic change. So many times we want to just skip the groundwork and get to the truly important tasks. This happens both in the gym and sadly in the church as well. We want the esteem of others. We think manual labor is beneath us. We desire to be seen as leaders.

Well maybe that just describes me. Far too often I consider my gifting to be in leadership. Sometimes I imagine myself preaching to immense crowds dispensing my wise exegeses from scripture. Intermixed with this profoundness, I expertly interject hilarious yet poignant anecdotes that keep the crowd in stitches for weeks to come. I can hear the applause (a standing ovation no-less) and feel the palpable adoration from the masses in the filled to capacity stadium below.

Given this gifted future, why must I come early to church to lug around heavy speakers?

I do not have that same daydream about stacking chairs late Sunday morning while no one is around, sweat pouring down onto my nice shirt. I never felt the same gifting for stacking chairs or driving church vans. Have you ever used gifting as an excuse not to serve? I have. That is why I have not volunteered for children's ministry. Do they need me? Probably, but unless they really need me then forget it. My gifting is elsewhere, I wonder if they need a care group leader?

Do you see the ridiculousness and selfishness of this attitude? Would I say that I do not have the gift of love so therefore I am exempt from showing any? No way. So can I consider any task on Sunday morning beneath me and my gifting? In other words, are we to be *noble* servants who perform *humble* tasks? Exactly the opposite is true: we are to be *humble* servants who perform *noble* tasks. Serving is predicated on need and availability not primarily on gifting. So then how are we to regard serving? Serving is to be characterized by humility but yet considered to be noble.

Take Me to Your Leader

Browse a Christian book web site or bookstore and just notice how many books there are for leaders. There are books on keys to leadership, how to be a leader, studies on leaders. Next notice how many books there are on servant-hood. Hard to find are they not? We as a culture are obsessed with being leaders.

Leaders are good, we need leaders who will guide us and help us focus on the cross of Christ. But as Christians, we are not called primary to be leaders but rather followers of Christ. Even if Christianity was about being a leader, that should motivate us even more to study servant hood. Jesus stated to the apostles in Matthew 20:27, "*But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,*" Studying leadership requires that we first master servant hood and humility.

So many times we equate preaching or leading worship as both super-spiritual and of more worth than any other way of serving. Our over joyful reaction to being asked to lead a small group, quickly turns to dispassion when we are asked to drive the church trailer. Christ taught and modeled that a servant was more than being seen as a leader. It is actually a vital and meaningful part of being a Christian. Jesus equated serving God and one another as a noble task of both great temporal and eternal worth. In fact, Jesus brought this very issue to forefront with his disciples.

In Mark 10:42-45, Jesus takes the disciples to account as they continued to argue who would be the greatest in heaven,

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be

great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

For Jesus, greatness was defined by servant-hood and humility. He reveals that things are different in heaven. Here on earth great rulers lord their greatness over others and people serve them, but in heaven the great ones serve others.

The writer of Psalm 84 states that even being a doorman in the house of God is greater than anything here on earth. The psalmist implies that whatever fame, riches, or power that can be achieved from all the positions on earth does not even start to compare with the reward of being but the lowliest servant in God's house.

For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you! (Psalm 84:10-12).

How can the writer say that one day serving God is better than a thousand days elsewhere? How can he write that being a doorkeeper for the house of God is such a desired job? Because he recognizes the character and majesty of God who “*bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly*” By performing the littlest task to bring honor to God, it is to glorify the King of the Universe who bestows untold favor and honor through salvation by the work of His Son Jesus Christ. That is worth more in the end, than everything here on earth we could become or do or accumulate.

Jesus during his earthly ministry uses himself as an example of this heavenly view of greatness. He is saying that even though he is God, he himself shows his greatness by serving through dying on a cross and atoning for sin. This is why serving in humility is noble, because it is the mark of greatness. Paul states that because Christ served us in such a dramatic and selfless way, that this sacrifice should serve both as an example and as a key motivational factor in our own serving.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2: 5-8).

Serving is so much tied up into what it means to be a Christian that many of the writers of the New Testament describe themselves as “*Servants of the Lord*” at the beginning of their epistle. In Paul states in 1 Corinthians 4:1 “*This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*” Paul wanted to be known not as a powerful speaker, as a wise man, or as anything else except as a servant of Christ. If

that is what the writer of most of the New Testament wants to be identified as, that should be good enough for me as well.

Understanding Humble Serving

So how then shall we serve? How do we glorify God by using the talents He has given us? We should start serving in “small” ways before we look to leadership positions. We have legions of young Christian men, including me, running around wondering whether or not we are “Called.” The answer is yes we are called. We are called to serve God and his church. We are called to be faithful at work and in our marriages. We are called to lead our families and all of this is to glorify God.

The question is not are we called to serve God or his local church, because both of these have already been answered in the affirmative. It is really whether or not our character and skills according to Scripture should be used to serve in pastoral role with pastoral responsibilities laid out by Scripture. If we are saved by faith alone and not works so that none may boast (Romans 3) then being in pastoral ministry has no bearing on one’s standing before God.

The pastorate is noble to be sure (1 Timothy 3). But it is noble not because pastors are better Christians rather because its roots are founded in serving. When Paul tells Timothy that being an elder is noble, it was because in the first century, people considered being a pastor a lowly job. It was thought of as not really “working.” Paul was saying the exact opposite - that being an overseer is a noble task that required someone of excellent character so that the Gospel may go forth unhindered. What Paul did not mean by this was that being an overseer was the noblest form of all Christendom. He did not say that the people in these roles should be counted more worthy. Paul wanted humble men to do noble tasks.

For Holy Scripture makes no distinction between them, except that those who are now boastfully called popes, bishops, and lords, it calls ministers, servants, and stewards, who are to serve the rest in the ministry of the word, for teaching the faith of Christ and the liberty of believers. For though it is true that we are all equally priests, yet we cannot, nor, if we could, ought we all to, minister and teach publicly. Thus Paul says, "Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. iv. 1). – *Concerning Christian Liberty*, Martin Luther.

In both Matthew 25 and Luke 19, Jesus gives the apostles a parable describing the kingdom of heaven like a master leaving his servants some money to manage while he is away. Two of the servants invest the money they have been given and turn a profit. The master upon his return is extremely pleased with them and states that “*Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.*” These servants proved they could manage well and could be

trusted.

The master seeing their trustworthiness and their ability to invest could now have confidence that they could manage greater amounts. So too is it with us. The church has a responsibility before God to care and shepherd God's people. Leaders must be known and tested to ensure the proper care and oversight. Besides, are we so sure of our abilities that we cannot learn something by starting in what we would consider "small" roles (even though God would not consider any service to him small)?

Paul is a prime example of how God uses starting "small" to work for His plan. In Galatians 1: 15-24 Paul recounts his first few years after the Damascus road. During his first couple of years as a Christian, Paul was not out making huge impact into the Christian community. Instead he traveled to Arabia, presumably to wait out the wrath of the Pharisees.

When he returned, Paul did not go to the Apostles and say, "Hey I am back, where can I lead because I need to use my gifts; oh and by the way I will be writing Scripture someday so you know I am really gifted." No, he went down to Syria to serve in the church there. Fourteen years later, just before his public ministry to the Gentiles starts, we still find Paul serving the local church in relative anonymity. When Paul is sent out, he is equipped with everything he learned at the Syrian Church. He learned what church life was all about.

That being said, just because we started "small" does not mean that we will be promoted into leadership. We may be serving in non-leadership roles for the rest of our lives. We have to remain humble and keep the Gospel in front of us at all times. Serving is not a means primarily to leadership. It is a means to magnify the Gospel and glorify God. That can be done from the pew or the pulpit. We need to serve where the church most requires it, not where we most desire it.

So while, people in vocational ministry do have greater responsibility for the local church. They do not, however, have greater significance in the eyes of God than someone who serves by say driving the church trailer. Both were saved by Christ's work on the cross, not by their type of work in the church. Both are commanded to serve and to love others. Both can magnify the Gospel for the Glory of God.

The Story of Tim

Tim is a lawyer in New York City. He has a top-flight education having earned a Masters Degree in Law. Tim tries cases before courts that have deep impacts in his community and on people's lives. They make TV shows about people like Tim. Yet if you walked into *Sovereign Grace City Church* in Brooklyn on a Sunday morning, you would find a \$50,000 education hitting a button on a projector to advance lyric slides. That would be

Tim, who flips slides after he has made the long commute from Manhattan and then helped set up speakers and sound equipment. You would think someone with that kind of education would be up front preaching or leading a more intellectually stimulating ministry.

A friend of Tim's once visited the church and witnessed him serving. As Tim recalls, "He was amazed that I would sit there and push a button during worship. An ox can haul speakers, but serving is about what I can do, not what I could do." What a great testimony of a heart radically changed by the grace of God. To those who do not know Christ, a highly educated man using his Sunday morning to serve in such mundane ways must seem crazy, but to God it is the most glorifying of tasks. Here is a humble man performing a noble task.

No matter how "low" we think a serving opportunity is, it does not compare to how low the Son of God went to give up his relationship with the father. He was beaten, mocked, and hammered to a Cross at the hands of those he created. God poured His entire wrath for our sin onto Christ and made him cursed. Jesus endured all of that to save into His eternal kingdom those very same people. Nothing compares to that. No matter how much my pride tries making things equate with it, no act of service will ever top that. In that light, every task that testifies to Christ is to be considered noble.

Lifting weights and serving are only similar in that starting slow has major benefits. However, serving is to be characterized by humility. The church needs humble people doing noble tasks. This is only way that the Gospel is magnified, God glorified, and others are cared for. I wish I would have known to start small when I entered the gym. If I had then most likely I would have been able to dress myself the next morning. This is always a good thing.

Questions

- 1 Do I see any aspect of serving the church less worthy or spiritual than other ways of serving?
- 2 Is my motivation for serving in order to draw attention to me or to God?

Chapter 7: Date Night at the Golden Arches - Excellence in Serving

What if on a date night with my wife, I pulled up at the drive through window of McDonalds? Would she be “lovin’ it”? Unless she was a Mickey D fanatic, she would rightly get the impression that I do not value her nor time spent with her. Even if I biggie sized her meal, that would still be an anemic display of the level of love and respect I had for her. I did not make our date a priority or special. What does that communicate to my wife? What do my mediocre efforts explain about her value to me? She certainly would not feel very special even if I did order her that happy meal. In fact, she may even be severely tempted to think I did not care for her at all.

On the contrary, if I get all dressed up and take her to her favorite restaurant in town, would that communicate something different? Of course! By striving for excellence we demonstrate a level of respect and honor. Because where we spend our time, thoughts, and resources denotes where our values are. The more I strive to be excellent to my wife the more I communicate her value to her. Can this same principle be applied to serving with excellence? Does our excellence hold any meaning or value?

I have this tendency to think that because my salvation rests in Christ, and not in my works, that I can be lazy when I serve. Does it matter that I do not tune this instrument or keep the books straight? Who cares if I show up late for handing bulletins? God’s sovereign so He will take care of anyone I missed. I am already saved so why does it matter if the chairs are in straight rows? We can use questions like these as excuses to be complacent and lazy.

But as we will see, serving and excellence are intricately and inseparably woven together. For starters, we are only able to serve God because Christ’s service to us was first excellently perfect. He modeled what it means to serve with excellence. If Christ was not perfect in his life or his sacrifice not excellent, we could not have the hope of eternal life that we do have. While we can never hope to match the excellence of Christ, as we serve we are to demonstrate excellence for two important reasons: First serving with excellence brings glory to God and then secondly it communicates Christ’s excellence to others.

Glorying God

Our first motive for excellence is that it brings glory to God. As former enemies of God we strived for excellence in and of ourselves. Our desire was that everyone and every thing must be excellent to us or else they were lazy and stupid. We wanted our own way, our own kingdom, and our own slaves. But God in his mercy changed us. We went from striving for our own excellence to resting in and wanting Christ’s. Does excellence really glorify God or does it really matter? In our desire for excellence we magnify the Gospel and glorify God.

Excellence can to us be very subjective. If one person thinks the best way to set up books

by author and another person likes them by subject, which is more excellent? Well there is no more excellent way to setup the books. It is our desire for excellence that glorifies God. Sometimes despite our best efforts we can never be anything other than mediocre. I will never run a four-minute mile no matter how much I want to. God is not so much concerned with the results than with our heart. If in our heart we strive to communicate God's excellence through our best efforts, then God is being glorified. We are praising Him by our devotion. We are worshiping him. Excellence then becomes a product of worship of God.

But when God sees that truth is ascribed to Him, and that in the faith of our hearts He is honoured with all the honour of which He is worthy, then in return He honours us on account of that faith, attributing to us truth and righteousness. For faith does truth and righteousness in rendering to God what is His; and therefore in return God gives glory to our righteousness. It is true and righteous that God is true and righteous; and to confess this and ascribe these attributes to Him, this it is to be true and righteous. –
Concerning Christian Liberty – Martin Luther.

Like my date nights with my wife, I spend time and energy on what I value most. My allowance of mediocrity testifies to my value of God. We should be excellent in serving because it is the manifestation of the value of God himself. Our mediocrity can be construed as ingratitude. Ingratitude for being made in His image. Ingratitude for His providence. Ingratitude for salvation. At some point to serve God and not strive for excellence is an oxymoron.

As we strive for excellence by resting in His, we bring increasing glory to God because the whole world sees the power of God to change a hopeless sinner. 1 Peter 4:11, *“whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”* Peter states in this oft quoted passage that the purpose of our serving is to primarily glorify God. We have received the gift of salvation in order that we may bring God glory, not the other way around. We should not abuse our newfound access to God by using it as an opportunity or excuse for mediocrity.

Despite this greater access to God, this does not give license to treat either God or his church as mundane. Yet many of us have this propensity to become complacent with the things of God. We can all treat this new unlimited access with the apathy that accompanies familiarity. This complacency so often causes my passion for serving God to slowly deteriorate.

When the passion is gone, motivation goes with it. We typically call this becoming “burnt out.” Most of us have experienced this at one time or another. Left unchecked, over time the grace of God slowly fades to gray in our eyes. Our passion for something once so vital and so amazing has now morphed into something we treat as routine or common. This familiarity will breed informality and mediocrity. The apostle Paul warns us not let this happen by using our freedom to serve more diligently, *“For you were called to*

freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13).

In most cases, my problem is not laziness or busyness. It is a lack of gratitude and perspective of the true cost and meaning of the Gospel. Thankfully, God is ever merciful to encourage us by renewing our hearts afresh as we meditate on the Gospel. As we come to understand the implications of Christ’s excellence, we come to a place where our serving takes on a whole new meaning. We realize that serving with excellence glorifies the Savior who first purchased the ultimate excellence for us. We magnify the Gospel and glorify God in excellence with which we set up books, decorate the foyer, and park pregnant ladies’ cars.

Communicating the Value of Christ

The second reason excellence has value is that it communicates the value and power of the Gospel to those who do not know Christ. Now what does being excellent exactly bring to the table? The more we strive to serve others and the church with excellence the more of God’s excellence and grace is on display for unbelievers.

What does it say about God’s grace and love to us if when an unbeliever walks into the church; they are greeted with only a shrug? What if they also find a messy sanctuary, off key music, and disgusting bathrooms? Lack of care and excellence says very little of the holy and powerful God, who sacrificed His perfect Son to save mankind by becoming cursed in their place.

Now God does not need any of those things in order for his plans for a guest to be fulfilled. Our failures and complacency do not hinder him from saving souls in the slightest. We desire excellence because it communicates what God has done for us to others and it invites others to come discover the God that people desire to be excellent to. *“But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:16).*

When Christ was hung on the cross and took our sins upon him, he declared us entirely righteous and cleansed us of all our sin. He did not compromise for just a taste of his righteousness imputed to us nor did he settle for cleansing some of our sin. What Christ achieved for us was the ultimate in excellence. 2 Peter 1:3, *“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence”* He endured God’s entire wrath so that we may have the un-searchable riches of God, that is eternal salvation. Jesus did not take just a portion of God’s wrath and then quit because it was painful or inconvenient for him. He suffered it all so we could have it all!

Jesus’ work on the cross was not just excellence manifested but also excellence purchased. The salvation for us accomplished by Him is eternal and final. In John 10:28,

the apostle John recounts Jesus' words "*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*" Eternal salvation spent in communion with God is our inherited excellence that Jesus' active excellence achieved.

On top of all this, God is one who designed all this excellence, Isaiah 28:29 "*This also comes from the Lord of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.*" God defined what excellence is based on attributes from His own character. God in essence is excellence; He has never made a mistake, never needed cosmic whiteout and has never taken a mulligan. For God is the author of excellence, we are not. Psalm 150:2 "*Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness!*" In fact, we are modeling a vital characteristic of God to others in the way we strive for excellence.

This discussion leads us to ask, "If God is excellent does that mean I have to be?" The answer is a joyful no. What? You just said God is excellence and we should model that in our lives. Which one is it: Yes or No? Well kind of both really. We should strive for excellence but at the same time we do not have to be excellent. That sounds weird and contradictory I know but stick with me.

We can never be excellent like God demands us to be. We are fraught with our sin so much so that even our best deeds are infested with it. The prophet Isaiah writes of this truth in verse 64:6 "*We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.*" Lest we think sin is an Old Testament phenomenon, Paul states in the book of Romans that even when he does good, the evil in him is close at hand (Rom. 7).

Alternatively if we, in our own power, could achieve excellence like God, then we would not need a savior or God for that matter. But we can not. However, the good news of the Gospel is that in Christ we have already achieved all the excellence we need. Christ came to earth, lived a perfect life, and obediently died on the cross in our place. He is our only excellence.

So if we already have all the excellence we need in Christ, why then should we be excellent in anything we do? Here is the other half of the not so contrary contradiction. We should strive for excellence because it brings glory to God and expresses the power and value of Christ to an unbelieving world. Just like taking our wives to fast food restaurants on our date night, accepting mediocrity does not show value of the Gospel in our lives.

End It

We have now walked into a spiritual minefield. If we are not careful to rest and trust in Christ's excellence as opposed to our own, then we will be in danger of legalism. CJ Mahaney in his book, *The Cross Centered Life* defines legalism as "seeking to achieve forgiveness from God and acceptance by God through our obedience to God." When we focus more on being excellent than on Christ's excellence or when we base God's

satisfaction of us based on our excellence on not his, we fall into legalism, which is a false view of God.

With the new access we have to God, He desires worship and dependence, not informality. To Paul this inheritance into the Kingdom of Heaven bought by Christ's blood was not to put us on an informal base with God. It was done so that Christ might receive the praise of his glory and so that his righteousness would be highlighted.

So what does a date night have to do with serving? In both we should strive for excellence. Excellence glorifies God and communicates the power and value of the Gospel to others. Although we already have excellence through Christ in a spiritual since, God uses our earthly excellence to bless others.

Through mediating on and then resting in Christ's excellence we come to desire excellence in our lives. We want to strive to serve with excellence because of who Christ is and the work he did on our behalf. By meditating and resting in Christ's excellence, we learn never to settle just to take our wives to the drive-through window. We learn how to Glorify God more by defeating mediocrity and complacency in our serving.

Chapter 8: Magellan and Me - Treasuring Christ

Four hundred years before Lt. Onoda's stubborn holdout on the Island of Lubang, another tiny Philippine Island named Mactan was the stage for a far more historic event. Saturday April 27, 1521 ended with the famous explorer Ferdinand Magellan floating dead among the gentle waves of Mactan Harbor. He was racked with sword cuts and the poison from a dart still contaminated his body.

Magellan's journey to this little harbor in the Pacific Ocean (the ocean which he named) started two years earlier, half a world away in Seville, Spain. With five ships and two hundred and sixty men, Ferdinand Magellan attempted to do the impossible, find a western route to the Spice Islands of Asia and return home. Magellan was to find the route that would break the Portuguese stranglehold on spices. If he succeeded he would also be the first to circumnavigate the world and prove once and for all that the Earth was round.

The King of Spain Charles I promised Magellan title and rule over any lands he discovered. On top of this, he would receive twenty percent of all revenue from these lands. These benefits would apply to rest of his lifetime and to his heirs as well. Magellan had the opportunity to amass great wealth and power for his family for generations to come.

So just how did Magellan wind up in such a tragic end? It seems on the island of Mactan the chief of the Lapu Lapu tribe named Sula was not extremely keen on submitting to Magellan, nor his Christian religion. Magellan of course was not about to allow dissent in his new Empire. Against the advice of his crew and refusing help from allied tribes, he

sent an invasion force of sixty men to show how “Spanish lions hunt their prey.” Magellan walked into ambush and the Lapu Lapu decimated the force and killed the “Christian King” (as Magellan fancied himself). Alas, that dream died at the same time Magellan fell dead in the waters of a small Philippine Island. Which ironically would have been all his, since he was the first European to discover the Philippines.

The circumstance leading to Magellan’s spectacular, gory death were not, as has often been suggested, an aberration, the result of an unusual tactical error or inexplicable lapse of judgment. Rather, it was the direct outcome of his increasingly belligerent conduct in the Philippines, where he burned the dwellings of people who could easily have been converted to Christianity by diplomacy rather than force. Through frequent displays of his military might, Magellan convinced the islanders – and himself – that he was omnipotent... His thirst for glory, under the cover of religious zeal, led him fatally astray. In the course of the voyage, Magellan had managed to outwit death many times. He overcame natural hazards ranging from storms to scurvy, and human hazards in the form of mutinies. In the end, the only peril he could not survive was the greatest of all: himself. – *Over the Edge of the World*. Laurence Bergreen pg 284.

Ferdinand Magellan endured horrible conditions to discover the passage west, which bears his name (the Strait of Magellan on the tip of South America), to a new ocean. He radically changed the balance of power in Europe and permanently altered the direction of scientific thought. He opened the way for the Gospel to be preached in previously unknown lands, although his methods of evangelism are not to be desired nor recommended. Yet for all of his accomplishments, Magellan treasured power and his own glory most of all. What he treasured so much, led to his tragic untimely death on a small island in the south Pacific.

At some point in my Christian walk the church service became my kingdom, my island of Mactan. I oversaw Sunday administration for the church service and it usually ran flawless. I relished the praise and visibility the position gave me. I was sure I was destined for a call to our Pastoral training program. Amidst the perfection that was Sunday morning, came a lone voice of dissent. Someone informed me of a complaint about the way with which we had run the sound cord from the stage to the soundboard. I felt my competency and authority were being questioned. Anger welled in my heart and I replied, “If that person does not like it fine. They can rip the tape up, relay the cord, and tape it back down. I did not see that person here at 7:30am.”

At that moment, I treasured my power and glory more than I treasured Christ. My authority was more important to protect than the unity Christ sacrifice achieved. I had stopped magnifying the Gospel and began magnifying myself. In order magnify the Gospel; we must first treasure the object of the Gospel - Jesus Christ. Treasuring of Christ will motivate us to serve Him by serving others. “*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” Matthew 6:21.

Treasure the person of Christ

Have you ever noticed that when we care deeply care for someone that we will do stuff we do not normally do? That we do it because it is valuable to the person we serve? My wife continually will buy me Star Wars books and accompanies me to the movies whenever a new one comes out. Though she does not share a passion for all things Jedi related, my happiness is such a treasure to her that she will do things she normally would never do.

Seeing me happy sustains my wife during long lines at the movie theater. It sends her searching every store within 100 miles for the perfect Star Wars gift. My wife serves as a great example to me of how I should value not only her but also reflects how Christ loves me through her. She neither shares nor understands my obsession with Star Wars, but she does all of this for me because she loves and values me.

Treasuring the person and the work of Christ is essential and foundational to serving His church. If we do not hold our Savior as precious, then how valuable will we hold his people that he so passionately loved by dying on the cross of their behalf? Without this worth placed upon Christ stacking chairs, playing music, greeting people, and teaching their kids all become dry exercises devoid of meaning and worship.

For the inner man, being conformed to God and created after the image of God through faith, rejoices and delights itself in Christ, in whom such blessings have been conferred on it, and hence has only this task before it: to serve God with joy and for nought in free love. – *Concerning Christian Liberty*, Martin Luther.

We cannot simply “just do-it” when it comes to serving God and His people, rather we must serve because it both holds value to us in as much as it has value to Christ. If Christ and his saving work on the cross have no value to us, then in our sinful desires we will not seek to serve Christ. We would seek to serve only ourselves.

In Luke 6:45, Jesus is telling His followers that what we hold of value will be the driving force behind our actions, *“The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”* The good treasure in the hearts of believers is Christ. But why is Christ to be treasured?

Christ is worthy of worship because the foundation of our eternal salvation is solely bound in the value and worth of Christ. His worth includes both his person and work. Without God’s approval of Christ worth, His sacrifice would not have been sufficient to atone for our sins and we would still be under the Law and not under Grace.

The worth of Christ was evident from the beginning of His ministry. As Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist God stated that Matthew 3:17 *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”* This bestowal of pleasure is of great importance. God is not merely making a proud statement over his Son, but is commenting to us about the

worthiness of Jesus to atone for our sin once and for all.

This was a statement of evaluation to assure us that Christ was an acceptable substitute. Without this approval and assurance from God, then we would have very little hope that Jesus' substitutionary death on the Cross was actually accepted by God. We would then be constantly wondering if the atonement actually worked. We would be looking to arbitrary things like our bowling scores for assurance of our salvation.

Furthermore, Jesus' worthiness did not end when he ascended into heaven after His resurrection. Paul writes to church at Philippi that Christ's worthiness was fully materialized in heaven. After ascending to heaven He was seated on throne of heaven and then all of creation was placed under his dominion. Philippians 2:9-11 *"Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* All of what Paul is saying does not and cannot occur if Christ was not worthy of such honor.

Treasuring Christ's Work for Us

Christ's finished work on the Cross is also extremely valuable to us. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus' death did accomplish atonement for our sin. It paid for all the sins we will ever and had ever committed; all of them wiped away forever by one sacrifice. What Jesus accomplished on the Cross was not like an allergy pill, in that it wears off after 12 hours or after the 100th sin we commit. His atonement for our sins has no shelf life; we are covered by His blood and by His righteousness forever. The worth of Christ's work is an immeasurable, unfathomable treasure.

Paul, in the book of Romans, examines Christ's work and its immense value to us in verses 18-21,

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

There is no figure, no concept, and no grid for how valuable Jesus' act was for us! We could not come close either in man-hours or money to estimate the value of eternal salvation for just one person, let alone for the whole church throughout time.

Consequently, if Jesus' work held no value, we would still be objects of wrath under penalty of sin. John 3:36 *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not*

obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” Just think what we deserved because of our sin and compare that to what Jesus has accomplished on the Cross - namely inheritance to an eternal kingdom and fellowship with God. To those who were rightfully objects of wrath, God extended undeserved favor by sending his only Son to live a life we could not. Christ became a perfect sacrifice and died to pay the penalty of our sins.

In the course of his ministry to spread the value of Christ to the world, Paul was imprisoned, beaten, left for dead, ship wrecked, and harassed. Paul could have settled down in Antioch and lived a comfortable life as a tent maker; he did not have to go through all the pain and suffering in spreading the Gospel. In talking to the Church at Philippi, Paul says that knowing Christ and having this salvation is worth everything in this world.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Philippians 3:8-10).

Paul treasured Christ throughout his trials and near death experiences but I treasure Christ so long as I remain inconvenienced and comfortable. Paul’s value of Christ motivated Him to do amazing things and allowed him to endure amazing hardships so that he may further the spread of the Gospel. Without the value he placed on Christ, Paul would have accomplished little and would have turned back at the first sign of danger or discouragement. Paul continues with this theme in Colossians 3 verses 23-24, *“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”*

The reality of the worth of Christ and His work helps us to combat obstacles that we can place in the way of serving God. We shy away from serving the God because we feel inadequate or unworthy because we subjectively feel the weight and condemnation of some sin. But as we study the Scriptures, we begin to realize that it is not our worthiness that is the basis for serving. We come to an objective understanding that our privilege and ability to serve is solely based on Christ’s worthiness. Even more than that, the fact that unworthy people like you and me can serve God’s people in the local church should so inspire us to love and serve God even further and harder.

Treasuring Christ’s Work in Us

Sanctification is the means by which God changes our hearts through the blood of Christ to purify us to serve Him. Its culmination is the full transformation into a perfect body without sin upon our death or Christ’s return in which we will serve God forever and ever. This is treasure we have in store bought by the death and resurrection by Son of God that was made necessary by our rebellion towards God. The writer of Hebrews states

in verses 9:14 “...*how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*” This sanctification by God is the closest we will come to accessing this heavenly treasure.

The Bible is clear that this sanctification, this taste of heavenly things, is accomplished by God and for His Glory. Paul states in 2 Corinthians 4:7 “*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*” By this Paul wipes out any room for boasting about ourselves in our degree of sanctification. Like everything in His Creation, sanctification is about God’s glory not ours. But by God’s grace he lets us taste of treasure in heaven so that the Gospel maybe magnified and sent forth in order that lives may be changed and more lost souls might receive the riches of heaven, that is eternal life with God.

Ephesians 2:1-10 is perhaps the best synopsis for why, given salvation and sanctification, we should treasure Christ in this passage. In it Paul summarizes our history, our present state, and our future state in Heaven. Before Christ we were bankrupt both morally and spiritually being lead astray by our own passions, a condition that caused us be subject to God’s judgment and wrath. In his divine mercy, God acted to bring those who deserved nothing but wrath unto untold riches in Heaven. He did this by pouring out this judgment and wrath on his perfect Son in place of those who should have received it. By this sacrifice, he has given those who believe the immeasurable riches of Christ.

Recently, in a meeting with a service team at my church, I asked everyone why he or she served. A very astute teenager said something so profound I wanted to share it you, which was, “When serving has become duty to me then that usually means God has become duty as well.” If we do not understand the treasure we have in Christ, we will treat serving as a duty and as trivial. We will use serving as means to glorify ourselves and not God.

The End of the Matter

All of this leads us back to Matthew 6:21, “*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” As we consider what a treasure we have in Christ and all the ramifications and blessing of counting him as our savior, our heart will be joined to him and as Paul says we will be truly alive in Christ. This joining of our devotion and affections to Christ will give us a heart to serve the things that He is devoted to namely His bride, which is the Church. Our worship to God and service to Him is rooted in the immeasurable treasure we have received in Christ.

This treasure cannot be measured in monetary units but measured in changed hearts and affected lives by the wisdom and power of Christ and His finished work of our salvation. If my wife loves me enough despite my flaws to exhaust herself finding Star Wars paraphernalia, then how much more should I be motivated by the perfect Lamb of God to go out of my way to serve Him by caring for his people?

But by God's grace he lets us taste of treasure in heaven so that the Gospel maybe magnified and sent forth in order that lives may be changed. That more lost souls might receive the riches of heaven, which is eternal life with God. Paul states in Colossians 2:1-3 how much he yearns for the church to fully understand the impact and power of Christ so that they might fully enjoy what he calls *all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery*. As we have more assurance and knowledge of just what Christ accomplished, then they will treasure Him even more.

Out of Magellan's original five ships, only one (the *Victoria*) made it back to the Canary Islands and then Spain in 1522. The eighteen starved and exhausted remaining crew had traveled around the globe in three years becoming the very first to do so. Upon arriving the crew made a discovery that would change the way the modern world operates. Somehow, despite accurate record keeping, they had lost an entire day. This caused quite a stir in the scientific community so much so that the Pope called a council to investigate the matter. The crew of the *Victoria* just discovered the International Date Line. Upon investigation of our Christian lives what unseen things shall be discovered?

Questions

- 1 Am I more aware of the details of what I am doing than am I of what God has done for me?
- 2 Do I treasure Christ when I serve?
- 3 What is my view of the local church and its importance to God?

Chapter 9: Mutiny on Ice - The Holy Spirit in Serving

We will never know last words and thoughts of Henry Hudson. The explorer's feelings, as he watched his ship the *Discovery* sail away without him, are lost to history. Victimized by a mutinous crew, he was abandoned on July 22, 1611, along with his son and eight others, in a small rowboat in the middle of the arctic sea (now modern day Canada). The sea where he was vanished now bears his name, Hudson Bay. The day of the mutiny was also last date he was seen alive. Henry Hudson and his castaways have never been found or accounted for.

Henry's life was consumed by his fanatical obsession with finding a northern water route to the Pacific. During his four voyages for both England and Holland, he searched in vain for the elusive Northwest Passage. He discovered and claimed for the Dutch the territory of New Amsterdam including most of what is now New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. He was the first European to sail into what is now northern Canada claiming several portions for England. However, he was impeded by ice, harsh conditions, or landmasses each time. Henry Hudson never realized his goal.

The crew of the *Discovery* finally had enough after Hudson insisted on continuing the

search despite a year of exploration with nothing show for it but frostbite. Low on food and morale the crew mutinied against Hudson. Despite having inexhaustible passion and drive to discover the Northwest Passage, Hudson was never equipped to make it a reality. He did not have the latest GPS system or detailed maps. He did not own Gortex jackets and subzero equipment. His wooden ship could not break through the ice pack. He was ill equipped to accomplish the task he so desperately wanted to do.

Many of Christians find themselves in a similar position in trying to be the type of servant God calls us to. It is extremely difficult to maintain our passion of Gospel when serving is hard and thankless. Likely many people reading this would describe themselves as “burnout” on serving. They feel like every time they try to get motivated to serve they just run into obstacles. They feel ill equipped to serve the church with the devotion and worship it deserves. So how are believers equipped so that the Gospel is magnified for the glory of God? How is it possible for a soul, consumed with its own cravings, to be changed to one that would joyously and selflessly serve others? You may feel like Henry Hudson adrift among the icebergs.

Under our own power it is virtually impossible to be the servant God calls us to be. That is why we need something more powerful and outside of ourselves to help us change. We need the Holy Spirit. That is the only way a soul consumed by sin and craving its own need’s would be changed to one that would joyously and selflessly serve God - not to mention other people.

This metamorphosis and power can only be accomplished by a work of Holy Spirit changing hearts with the knowledge and truth of the Gospel. “*But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you*” John 14:26. Illumination of the Gospel is the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit and this enables us to serve others. The Holy Spirit equips us for serving by first providing context to serve through regeneration and then through empowering serving through our God-given talents.

The First Equipping

Christians are equipped to serve God first and foremost by the working of the Holy Spirit in them. Without that person of the Trinity, we would never understand the person and work of the other two members. Nor would we have any desire to serve God or his people. The Spirit of God first and foremost changes our hearts to accept the Gospel. Without this change, we would never have even thought about or wanted to serve others. We cannot desire to serve God unless we first understand Him. This elucidation only the Holy Spirit can provide. Jesus explains to his disciples that unless the Holy Spirit comes that they could not otherwise understand the Gospel,

*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.
When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak,*

and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 14:12-15).

The Spirit of God works within us to magnify Christ. Its job is to pierce the veil of sin and help us comprehend the things of God. It enlightens the meaning of Scripture and convicts our conscience of sin we commit, John 16:7-9. Without the Holy Spirit our hearts could have never been changed to fully understand the Gospel. As Romans 7:6 states, *“But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.”* It seems that this new life in Spirit has set us free to where we can understand the Gospel.

But we could have achieved the same awakening apart from the Spirit of God? The answer through the New Testament is no. Romans 8:1-8 gives the definitive statement on the work of the Holy Spirit on our lives as well as our incapability to equal that work,

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Without this external revealing by the Spirit, we would be left sweltering under the Law without any hope of measuring up to it. We could see how we were supposed to live and act but could never come close for any length of time. Romans 8 continues to talk about the Spirit work in us in verses 9-11 by stating that if the Spirit dwells within us that is how we can be sure that we are in Christ. Great so just how do we get this Holy Spirit?

If we have placed our faith in Christ and repented of sin, God promised to send the Holy Spirit to us. God provides the Helper as a seal of our forgiveness. *“And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,”* Acts 2:38. The Holy Spirit is a gift by which God uses to help us to magnify the Gospel and glorify Him, Titus 3:5 Without the Spirit of God being present in our lives we would have never placed our faith in Christ. Subsequently we would have no reason to serve Him.

Hebrews 9:14 gives us evidence of the Spirit's role in our serving by stating, *“how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”* It is clear here that the Holy Spirit that regenerates our hearts to serve God and worship him as lord and savior. This is why the Holy Spirit is so vital to serving in the local church. It is the only way we can realize we our own sin, recognize we need a savior, and then

treasure Christ for being our savior.

As the Holy Spirit teaches us and awakens our souls to the wonderful, freeing truth of Christ's propitiation for our sins, we realize just how hopeless we were and how rich we have become. Without this first and infinitely more important work of the Spirit, we would have neither power nor impetus to serve.

The Second round

Thus the Holy Spirit not only makes serving God and his people possible, but He also enables and equips us to serve. Regeneration is the primary and most important gift of the Spirit but secondarily the Spirit continues to purify our hearts and develop gifts. Hebrews 1:14 states, "*Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*" The more we understand the Gospel, the more we realize the importance of the Spirit's work and power in us.

Paul talks about capitalizing on this revelation by serving through the empowerment of the Spirit in letter to the Romans verse 12:11, "*Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in the spirit, serve the Lord.*" Here Paul is exhorting believers to not rest in the grace given to us, but be stirred up in the Spirit of God to serve him that made that grace possible and then procured it through the death of His Son. Paul implies that being in the Spirit and serving are directly correlated. We see this practically applied in the emergence of church in the Book Acts, where Christ tells them to wait for the Spirit who will empower them to preach and endure hardships.

But why does God leave the enabling of serving to the Holy Spirit and not in us? Because if serving God was left to our strengths and devices alone, then God would not be glorified. This leads us to 1 Peter 4:10-11,

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

It glorifies God when we trust, rely on, and rest in His power and goodness. That communicates and celebrates everything about the character of God, as well as our dependence on Him, first for salvation and then for works. Through these gifts the Holy Spirit continues to act to provide the motivation and power to use the talents God has given us to worship him and benefit his people, who are the local church.

You see, then, that, if we recognize those great and precious gifts, as Peter says, which have been given to us, love is quickly diffused in our hearts through the Spirit, and by love we are made free, joyful, all-powerful, active workers, victors over all our tribulations, servants to our neighbour,

and nevertheless lords of all things.– *Concerning Christian Liberty*,
Martin Luther.

God gave us the Holy Spirit to equip us to help one another so that we may fulfill his command to serve. He also gave us a wonderful context in which to serve him. That is the local church. The church is God's primary vehicle through which his Gospel is magnified as his people are sanctified. The Church is not only an essential tool God uses to equip people to serve him but it is also the main framework through which serving is done.

Gene Veith Jr. in his book (which I highly recommend) *God at Work* deals with Christians serving in their vocation. On pg 42 Gene writes, "And yet for all of our sin, we nevertheless serve and help others even against our will – not of ourselves, but because of the power of God exerts in our vocations." This is the work of God through the Holy Spirit. He gives the power to focus our gifts on serving others and not our selves.

The Holy Spirit also helps us to endure hardships and discouragement when we serve. If the Holy Spirit only enlightened us to the Gospel once, we would have saved for sure but our passion for God would have quickly faded. Just like my own experience with serving, if the Spirit were not constantly highlighting the Gospel to us then as obstacles come we would quickly abandon trying. We cannot by ourselves comprehend all the glory and riches of heaven not fully understand the amazing grace given us in Christ. We will not know the entirety of those subjects till we are in heaven. The Holy Spirit does know these things. It acts as our interpreter to encourage and remind us of them. As burnout and obstacle appear that hinder our worship, the Holy Spirit is there to navigate us around them. "*And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*" - Philippians 1:6. We need to just to listen.

Concluding on Ice

We, apart from the Holy Spirit, cannot empower ourselves to serve God and one another. This is very evident in the example of the Israelites in the book of Exodus. Witnessing firsthand the plagues God brought forth, one might think that God had proved, once and for all, both capable and faithful in the eyes of the Jews. But after seeing God deliver them from slavery and parting the Red Sea so they could escape, the Jews began begging to go back to Egypt when they experienced a minor food shortage. "*Is not this what we said to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness*" (Exodus 14:12).

They had seen God in his power and witnessed how he was faithful to his promises. Yet they doubted whether he could provide something so simple as a little food. How many times have we grumbled in our desert despite God's continued grace in our lives? Thank God for the Holy Spirit to open our eyes and cause us to reflect on. Praise the God that saved us for eternity! Without the Spirit, we would be absent from Heaven and useless

here on earth.

The Holy Spirit is instrumental in helping us serve to magnify the Gospel and glorify God. It first enlightens our own hearts to our need for a savior. It then empowers us to use our God-given talents to serve God to the benefit of others. Without the Holy Spirit we would be incapable of changing our own way and our hearts to glorify God. We would be as frustrated and as hopeless as Henry Hudson was trying to find the Northwest Passage. God gives us the Holy Spirit so we may never feel on Sunday mornings like we are hopelessly adrift in a sea of ice.