

Serve Creatively

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series: Seven Habits of a Disciple

Mark 10:35-45

Wouldn't it be great to have a Global Positioning System for the most important issues of life?

More and more new cars come equipped with the Global Positioning System or GPS for short. A constellation of 24 satellites orbiting the earth at an altitude of 11,000 miles makes it possible to pinpoint your exact geographical location. If you are looking for a place in a strange city, just enter the street address, and directions with a map will appear on your screen. GPS enables you to identify precisely where you are and where you want to go.

Wouldn't it be great to have a Global Positioning System for the most important issues of life? I'm looking for happiness. Which road do I take? I need a true friend or someone to love. Where do I look? I'm lost and don't know where to turn. Can you help me find my way?

Jesus doesn't typically announce his destination in advance to his disciples. Our Scripture lesson is something of an anomaly in this regard. In the verses preceding our lesson, Jesus gives his disciples an exact GPS coordinate on where he is going. He tells his disciples plainly, "We're going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, spit

on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise" (10:33).

Can Jesus say it any plainer? Is there anything about what he has just said that you don't understand?

Notice carefully what happens next. Two of Jesus' disciples, brothers James and John, who with Peter comprise the inner core of the disciples, ask Jesus a question: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask" (10:35). Essentially, they are asking for a blank check from Jesus.

My kids used to ask me, "Dad, could you do me a favor?" In children's parlance, this is called a setup. They are setting me up for something. It's a cardinal rule in parenting not to agree to any favor without first knowing the nature of the request. Trust me on this one. I've had to back my way out of favors I could not possibly fulfill.

Jesus responds politely, "What do you want me to do for you?" (10:36).

These disciples answer, "We want to sit one on your right and one on your left in glory" (10:37).

One reason I trust the Bible is on account of the way the disciples portray themselves. If I was recording my time with Jesus, I would be tempted to cast myself in the most favorable light possible. I am struck with how dim-witted, hard-hearted and stiff-necked these disciples appear in the gospels.

Are you here to serve or be served?

Essentially, these disciples are asking for box seats at the Messianic banquet at the end of time. They know the seat of honor belongs to Jesus, but they would also like to be seated at the head table, preferably one on Jesus' right and one on Jesus' left in glory. Clueless, I'd say!

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus tells them. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" (10:39). Naïvely, they answer in the affirmative.

Jesus speaks prophetically and cryptically: "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit on my right or left is not for me to grant" (10:39-40). What these disciples don't yet realize is that one day they will undergo a fate like Jesus. If you want to share in my glory, you must also share in my suffering.

When the other ten disciples catch wind of what the two requested, they are understandably indignant (10:41). This is not the first time Jesus' disciples have bickered over greatness in the kingdom of God. Turn back to Mark 9:33-34. Jesus asks his disciples what they had been arguing about earlier in the day. They must have had egg on their faces, for they had been quarrelling about which of them was the greatest. Incredible!

So Jesus calls them together for a little heart-to-heart. Roman rulers might lord it over their subjects, but it's not that way among you. "Whoever wants to become

great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be a slave of all" (10:42-44). In English grammar, this is called synonymous parallelism, in which the second half of the sentence repeats the first half. Those who want to be first or great must become your servant or slave of all.

Jesus applies the clincher in the final verse: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). Jesus came to serve, not to be served. Roman authorities demanded submission from their subjects. This king, however, comes to serve, not to be served. Are you here to serve or be served?

It only stands to reason that a servant Lord calls for a servant people. He enlists followers who want to serve, rather than be served.

The essence of the Christian gospel involves loving and serving God. That's why I conclude every service with the same benediction: Love the Lord and love the people, serve the Lord and serve the people. I end the same way every Sunday, not because I can't remember any other benediction, rather because loving God and serving God is the heart and soul of the gospel. If Jesus is our Lord, service is our ministry. Serv-ice is not performing little favors for God; service is what we are made to do.

We utilize the acronym SHAPE to portray the way God has shaped us for service. "S" stands for the spiritual gifts God has given us. "H" represents the heart God has given us for service. "A" portrays our

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aptitude - what we are good at doing and what we do well. “P” describes our personality, the way our temperaments match certain ministries. “E” depicts our experiences, how our daily encounters contribute to our life’s mission. Said another way, how can we use our gifts and abilities in the direction of our heart’s desire in a way that best expresses our personality and experiences?

Are we here to serve or be served? Let’s be perfectly clear. We aren’t saved by good deeds, we are saved by grace alone. We are not saved by good works, we are saved for good works. I said last Sunday, we should not only ask what Jesus saves us from, but what Jesus saves us for?

The fifth covenant or practice of a disciple is “Serve Creatively.” The verb “serve” appears in the imperative mood, because serve is the mandate Jesus issues to every Christian. Creatively is the adverb used to describe our serving. Adverbs that end in “ly” stand in syntactically subordinate position to the verbs they modify. Creatively acts as a modifier for the verb serve, so we serve creatively. It’s a common misconception that when it comes to creativity, some people have it and some people don’t. God has endowed every Christian with creativity for use in service.

Every organization to which I’ve been a part uses the 20-80 rule (sometimes called the Pareto Principle or the law of the vital few) applies. Twenty percent of the people do 80% of the work.

It’s true in PTS, Little League, political parties and every organization with which I’ve been associated.

The letters of St. Paul describe the church as a body in which every member has a role to play. Some of us have visible roles to keep and others of us serve out of sight. Internal organs may be hidden, yet they serve a vital role in our body’s well-being.

You don’t have to be in a position of leadership to serve the body of Christ. I am reminded of a young woman who was making application to college. She was an honest, conscientious student, so when she came to the place on the application where she was asked, “Are you a leader?” she answered with absolute candor, “No.” She received a rather curious letter from the college, “Dear Applicant, A study of application forms reveal that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because it is imperative that they have at least one follower.”

I invite you to take the blue card you were given as you entered worship today. We are conducting two stewardship campaigns this fall. One offering God our time and talents and the other pledging our money to the Lord’s service. So often we think of stewardship exclusively in monetary terms. Our whole lives are offered in service to God. We’d like you to indicate on this card where you would like to serve in ministry.

Some of you are thinking, “I’ve done this before and nobody called me!” Okay, we’re fallible, so now

***I wonder if
God hears any
new excuses!***

you know. We want you to push the clear button and do it again. We pledge to call you, but why don't you beat us to the punch and call us. Call our volunteer coordinator or one of the staff members listed on the back page of your bulletin.

You may be saying to yourself, I can't preach or teach or sing. Rick Warren writes: "Abraham was old, Jacob was insincere, Leah was unattractive, Joseph was abused, Moses stuttered, Gideon was poor, Samson was codependent, Rahab was immoral, David had an affair, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was reluctant, Naomi was a widow, John the Baptist was eccentric, Peter was hot tempered, Mary was a worry-wart, the Samaritan woman had several failed marriages, Zacchaeus was unpopular, Thomas had his doubts, Paul had poor health and Timothy was timid." I wonder if God hears any new excuses!

Now, about this blue card; you can ignore it if you'd like. After all, it's a free country. Better yet, why not use it as a spiritual exercise? Use it to indicate an area of ministry where you are currently serving or would like to serve. Feel free to indicate that you don't know where your talents and interests fit at VPC. This card doesn't obligate you; it only opens the conversation. You can use the back to write a personal note to God or direct correspondence to our church.

Think of your time and talents as an offering. Lord, what do you

want to do through me? I offer my life as an offering.

