

Wholehearted Generosity

Wholehearted Servanthood

Selected Texts

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November 15, 2009

Wholehearted Servanthood¹

Scripture

Two weeks ago I began a four-week series of messages titled, *Wholehearted Generosity*. Wholehearted generosity refers to a person who is completely and sincerely and authentically generous.

Wholehearted generosity begins with *wholehearted commitment*, which was the topic of the first week's message. Then, last we examined the topic of *wholehearted stewardship*.

Today, I want to look at the topic of "Wholehearted Servanthood." As was the case in previous weeks, this week's message will be a topical exposition rather than a textual exposition.

Jesus was a unique individual. He lived about 2,000 years ago, and during his short life (of about 33 years) he made several statements that some said put him in the category of either a madman or an impostor. For example, Jesus said:

- "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).
- "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).
- "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6)

If you have gone to church for even a relatively short period of time, you are familiar with these statements. But do you understand how radically preposterous these statements must have sounded to those who first heard Jesus say them?

He did not present himself merely as *a* way to God, but as *the* way to God. He did not merely claim to *know* God, but to *be* God.

That is why C. S. Lewis, the great Christian apologist of the last century, famously wrote in *Mere Christianity*, that Jesus was either a *liar*, a *lunatic*, or the *Lord* of all creation.

When people say that all religions are equally valid, and that all roads lead to God, we must insist, "That is not what Jesus said.

¹ Much of this material is from Kirk Nowery's book *Revolutionary Generosity* (Camarillo, CA: Spire Publishing, 2006), 17-38.

And that is not what the Bible teaches.”

Eternal life is found only in Jesus Christ. The Bible clearly teaches that “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

A little over 33 years ago I came to accept that Jesus was not only Lord of all creation, but that he was also my Lord. I repented of my sin, and placed my full trust in him alone. So, by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone I became a child of God.

The question I now face daily as a Christian is this: *How do I best live for Christ right now? How do I live my life in such a way that it reflects my status as a child of God?*

The answer, it seems to me, is found in imitating Christ. The Lord of all creation, the Lord of my life, lowered himself to become nothing, and then further lowered himself to die on a cross to pay the penalty for my sin that he voluntarily took upon himself. He came not to be served but to serve. His attitude must be reflected in all that I do. Philippians 2:4-8 describes his attitude well.

Let us read Philippians 2:4-8:

⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:4-8).

Introduction

We are called to a life of wholehearted servanthood. It is, of course, counter to our human nature. We want to be served rather than serve. We want to receive rather than give. That is how our fallen human natures function.

But Jesus calls us to something so much higher. The gospel

teaches us that the way up is in fact the way down.

The Twelve Apostles were like us in so many ways when they followed Jesus on earth. They argued about who was the greatest, who was the closest to Jesus, and who would get the most recognition. But Jesus said to them that “many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Matthew 19:30), and “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12).

Our natural urge is against being a servant. But Jesus gives us the power to overcome that urge and to live like he lived.

Lesson

In our lesson today I want to give you five important motivations for wholehearted servanthood.

I. We Serve Because We Are Forgiven

First, we serve because we are forgiven.

The apostle Paul said, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

We don’t serve in order to merit God’s forgiveness. We serve because we have already received God’s forgiveness. And our service is simply an expression of our gratitude to God for the forgiveness we have already received.

I read a story about a man who was dying who contacted a Christian, and asked him, “Would you come and visit me in the hospital? I want you to tell me about God.”

That simple request, while it would have excited most Christians, jarred this Christian. He instinctively wanted to say *No* to the request, but he sensed that Jesus was prompting him to say *Yes*. Fortunately, the words came out, “Yes, I will come and see you.”

You see, the reason for this Christian’s inner turmoil was understandable. The man in the hospital who wanted to see the Chris-

tian had an affair with his wife and caused their marriage to break up. They subsequently married and then later divorced, and the pain of the whole affair still haunted the Christian man.

“Whenever I thought of that man,” the Christian said, “I remembered that he was the reason my kids had to shuttle between two homes. He was the cause of tremendous grief. So there he was dying of lung cancer, days before a godless eternity, asking me—of all people!—to help him.”

One cannot but wonder: *How would I handle such a situation? What would I do?*

The Christian continued, “At first, I didn’t know if I could follow through with it, but then I remembered that it wasn’t about me and what I wanted. It was about God and what he desired from me as a servant of Jesus Christ.

“I went to the hospital with the love of Jesus in my heart and told that man the good news that he could receive the gift of salvation if he put his faith in Christ alone. With a lot of emotion and tears of joy he opened his heart and prayed to receive God’s forgiveness.

“He died three weeks later, but I was told that he spent those last weeks of his life joyfully telling everybody about his new-found faith.”

That is wholehearted servanthood. It is going to someone who has nothing to offer you, someone who has actually hurt you deeply, and sharing with him the good news of the gospel. The Christian man was able to forgive and serve the dying man because he himself had been forgiven by God. And that is a powerful motivation to Christian service.

So, first, we serve because we are forgiven.

II. We Serve Because We Are Blessed

Second, we serve because we are blessed.

Proverbs 11:25 says, “Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered.”

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As we serve wholeheartedly, giving freely and generously of all that we have and all that we are, we extend Christ's kingdom. We become living examples of Christ's followers, and we discover the joy of being blessed in our service.

The Jordan River flows from northern Israel into the Sea of Galilee, which is filled with fish and irrigates the surrounding area.

When Jesus was an adult he made his ministry headquarters at Capernaum, on the north shore of the beautiful Sea of Galilee.

Jesus loved the Sea of Galilee. He knew its waters well. He calmed the Sea of Galilee during a furious storm. He preached the Sermon on the Mount overlooking the Sea of Galilee. He preached many other parables beside the Sea of Galilee, and did many miracles and other works of compassion there.

The Jordan River continues its flow out of the Sea of Galilee on the south and flows further south into the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is 1,292 feet below the level of the Mediterranean Sea. It is the lowest place on earth. Salt and minerals flow into the Dead Sea, making it 5 times more salty than any other body of water. It is virtually impossible to drown in the Dead Sea.

In 1983 I visited the Dead Sea and went swimming in it. I walked out until I was about waste high in the water. I picked up my legs and started to float—without any effort on my part!

No fish or creatures live in the Dead Sea. Why not? Because it is so salty and full of minerals that it cannot sustain life.

Both seas are fed by the same river, the Jordan River. But why the stark difference between the two seas? It is because the Dead Sea has an inlet to receive fresh water, but no outlet to send them on. The fresh waters pour in (at a rate of 6 million tons of water every 24 hours). . . only to stagnate and decay.

Many people are just like the Dead Sea. They are utterly self-centered, thinking only of receiving but never giving.

The challenge of wholehearted servanthood is to be like the Sea of Galilee, to give as readily as it receives. Listen to how *The Living Bible* paraphrases Proverbs 11:24-25, "It is possible to give away and become richer! It is also possible to hold on too tightly

and lose everything. Yes, the liberal man shall be rich! By watering others, he waters himself.”

So, first, we serve because we are forgiven. And second, we serve because we are blessed.

III. We Serve Because We Are Free

Third, we serve because we are free.

This past week we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Two years before that, on June 12, 1987, in a speech at the Brandenburg Gate, President Ronald Reagan challenged Mikhail Gorbachev, then the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, to tear down the wall as a symbol of increasing freedom in Eastern Europe. President Reagan said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”²

Freedom in all its forms is a wonderful thing. And true, spiritual freed is the most precious of all. God has blessed Christians with spiritual freedom in Christ, liberating us from the power and penalty of sin.

But freedom is a privilege that is also paradoxical: we are free, and yet we are also servants. That is what Paul is teaching us in Philippians 2:4-8. Even though Jesus was God, he became a servant. The Greek word that is translated “servant” is *doulos*, which is more accurately translated as “slave” or as “bondservant.” Jesus came not merely as a servant, but as the lowest form of a servant, as a slave.

That is why Paul says in Philippians 2:4-5, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. . . .”

We are to serve because we are free to serve—just as Christ served.

So, first, we serve because we are forgiven. Second, we serve

² <http://web.archive.org/web/20080622043537/http://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan/speeches/wall.asp>.

because we are blessed. And third, we serve because we are free.

IV. We Serve Because We Are Joyful

Fourth, we serve because we are joyful.

I have been to about half a dozen different prisons throughout my life. Fortunately, I have not gone as an inmate but as a pastor!

Prisons are not beautiful places. They are not the kind of places that you come home and say to your wife, “Honey, I have found a beautiful place I want to take you on our next romantic date!”

But the prisons I have visited are frankly like five-star resorts compared to the prisons in which the apostle Paul frequently found himself. He did not have hot and cold running water. There was no toilet in his cell. He did not get three meals a day. In fact, if his friends did not bring him food, he did not eat. There was no library or courtyard in which to exercise. There was no TV.

Prisons in Paul’s day (and in some countries still in our world today) were miserable, filthy, stinky, dark death cells.

And if imprisonment were not painful enough, Paul usually had to endure something worse: the stinging criticism of those who called themselves his Christian brothers. They verbally attacked and tried to discredit Paul while he was in prison.

Try to imagine yourself in Paul’s place. You are in a dark, dreary, dank, and dangerous room. There are many others there too. Some of the prisoners have contagious diseases. People die daily around you. The stench of sweat and urine and feces is powerful. You can hardly eat what little food there is—if you even have food—because you feel so nauseas.

Now, what is your attitude? What fills your heart as you sit there hour after hour, day after day, in those miserable conditions? Here is what Paul wrote to the Philippians (which was written while he was in prison):

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me

has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear (Philippians 1:12-14).

What an attitude! Instead of being inflamed with self-pity, Paul was encouraged by the positive impact of his negative situation! In spite of his difficulty, he was joyful.

Isn't this a powerful motivation to wholehearted servanthood? We have troubles and trials and difficulties. And sometimes they are really severe. But what is our attitude? We have Christ! We are new creatures in Christ! We are the recipients of God's infinite love! We can never be separated from the love of God because we are in Christ! How can we not be full of joy?

So, first, we serve because we are forgiven. Second, we serve because we are blessed. Third, we serve because we are free. And fourth, we serve because we are joyful.

V. We Serve Because We Are Loved

And fifth, we serve because we are loved.

In the mid-19th century a young man by the name of George Matheson went to seminary to study to become a minister. He was engaged to a beautiful girl whom he loved deeply.

While he was at seminary he discovered that he was going blind. When he told his fiancée that he was going blind, she gave back the engagement ring and told George that she simply could not be married to a blind man. As you can imagine, George was devastated.

Being a blind man in a generation that was already unkind to the disabled was a great difficulty. George needed someone who could assist him in his blindness. Fortunately, that assistance was provided by his dear sister.

But eventually, George's sister also fell in love and was soon

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engaged to be married. On the night of his sister's wedding he wrote a hymn that became well-known and much loved. Years later he described that evening on which he wrote the hymn:

In the manse of Innellan on the evening of the 6th of June, 1882, I was alone in the manse at that time. It was the night of my sister's marriage, and the rest of the family were staying overnight in Glasgow. Something happened to me, which was known only to myself, which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering. It was the quickest bit of work I ever did in my life. I had the impression of having it dictated to me by some inward voice rather than of working it out myself. I am quite sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes and equally sure that it never received at my hands any retouching or correction. I have no natural gift of rhyme. All the other verses I have ever written are manufactured articles; this came like a dayspring from on high.

His eyesight had left him, his fiancée had left him, his sister had left him, and George Matheson was left alone and depressed. But into the depths of that darkness of soul God sent the light of his compassion. George was reminded more poignantly than ever of the love that would never let him go. Here is the hymn:

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

O Light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to Thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in Thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to Thee:

I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from Thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.

“O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go” became one of the most widely sung hymns of its era, perhaps because so many people could identify with the personal nature of its promise. George Matheson never married, but became one of Scotland's leading pastors, often preaching to a congregation of more than 1,500 worshippers. In spite of his blindness, Matheson become known as a friend to the friendless, a man who touched thousands of lives. God taught Matheson in an unforgettable way the truths of wholehearted servanthood. He served well because God loved him.

So, first, we serve because we are forgiven. Second, we serve because we are blessed. Third, we serve because we are free. Fourth, we serve because we are joyful. And fifth, we serve because we are loved.

Conclusion

Wholehearted generosity includes wholehearted servanthood.

Let me ask you: are you actively involved in serving Christ? Are you involved in a ministry in our church? Are you like the Sea of Galilee (receiving *and* giving) or like the Dead Sea (receiving only but not giving)?

If you are not actively and regularly involved in a ministry, volunteer today! Get involved in children's ministry, youth ministry, missions ministry, or any one of the 21 ministries we have.

And as you do so, you will be imitating Christ. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons
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PRAAYER:

O Lord our God, you call each one of us (your children) to wholehearted generosity. And today you have shown us that wholehearted generosity involves wholehearted servanthood. We thank you for the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, 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.

O Lord our God, help us to serve because we know that we are forgiven, blessed, free, joyful, and loved.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.