Spiritual Disciplines

Lesson 2: Wednesday September 1st, 2021

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**TEACHING NOTES**

**Spiritual Discipline: Serving**

# *Introduction*

Good evening church. I pray that you’re all well in the Lord.

Tonight, I will be tackling the spiritual discipline of serving. This spiritual discipline is integral in our day to day walk with the Lord. I pray that this lesson is a blessing to you. With that, let’s pray and dig in.

In our day and age, much of our media is tailored in such a way that it gives us false expectations about life. We’re fed narratives of Luke Skywalker and Frodo Baggins, protagonists who must overcome incredible adversity in order to grow into the archetypal hero that they are required to become. These movies invariably end with a tall order of fanfare and celebration. There really aren’t many movies that focus on the mundane activities of a normal person living a normal life. But is this not the reality of our lives? Do we not often echo the words of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes?

Eccl 1:9 ​What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Eccl 1:10 Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has been already in the ages before us.

The jaded attitude of Solomon is likely closer to the reality of our own life experience. We have a revolving list of tasks and to-do’s that seem to wear us down over time. Are you excited to once again clean the house, or go to work, or fix the car? Life can feel monotonous and tiresome, and this is much more of a normal experience as compared to what is traditionally communicated to us through modern films and television shows.

You might ask, what does this have to do with the spiritual discipline of service? Well – when you think about service to God in the here and now, you may be tempted to adopt the narratives that we’re fed from culture and media. I would warn you against that. You will hopefully see tonight that God, more often than not, calls us to ordinary and unnoticed hard work for Him and His kingdom. I want to adjust our expectations.

*Service is not about accolades from fellow man. Service is not about always wanting to do it. Service isn’t about us. Service is about others and God’s glory.*

One of my absolute favorite books on the spiritual disciplines says this in regard to the discipline of service:

“Wanted: Gifted volunteers for difficult service in the local expression of the kingdom of God. Motivation to serve should be obedience to God, gratitude, gladness, forgiveness, humility, and love. Service will rarely be glorious. Temptation to quit place of service will sometimes be strong. Volunteers must be faithful in spite of long hours, little or no visible results, and possibly no recognition- except from God for all eternity.” – Donald Whitney

The spiritual discipline of service is at times hard. It may take long hours (or simply hours your flesh would prefer to spend elsewhere). You may never be recognized for the work. Unlike the movies, you may never have much fanfare for what you did. But unlike Solomon, we *don’t* have to have jaded attitudes toward our service. Why? Because we live in service to Christ! He’s worth our joyful service and He sees all we do for Him. Every action and circumstance are to be lived for His glory for the good of our neighbor. You see - your service is to the eternal God!

Heb 6:10 For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.

Your service to our King is never in vain! God sees it—He knows! Keep that in mind tonight. Our service, which can be expressed in a varied way, will never be forgotten by God. Even in that, we are given so much grace!

Praise God.

Tonight, we will look at the definition of service. We will ask the question: what is it? We will consider the various attributes of the spiritual discipline of service. I will look to scripture to guide us on this journey. With that – let’s dig in.

# *What is the spiritual discipline of service?*

What is the spiritual discipline of service?

In the most basic sense, Service is action, works, or ministry done for the benefit of others, to the glory of God. This service can be done for the church and the world. However, in order to qualify as *Christian service*, it must be done with right (gospel-centered) motivations and be in accordance with God’s commands/design.

To start, let us look at a few Old Testament passages:

Deut 13:4 You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him.

Deut 11:1 You shall therefore love the LORD your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always.

The expression of love toward God is defined as keeping and obeying His charge, His statues, His rules, and His commandments. In the Old Covenant, this would have included all applicable law given under the covenantal requirement.

The point I want to draw out here is that when Israel submitted to the law and walked in accordance with the law, they were a blessing to not only themselves (as God’s people) but they were a blessing the world.

When Abraham submitted to God’s requirement upon him to willfully sacrifice Isaac, what was God’s response?

Gen 22:15 And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven Gen 22:16 and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, Gen 22:17 I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, Gen 22:18 and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

While God is not calling us to the specific action that He commanded of Abraham, what this passage does illustrate is that God’s ways are the best ways for everyone involved. When we submit to God’s charge, statutes, rules, and commandments – it is always a blessing for God’s people and for the world. See that Jesus also taught that ‘expression of love toward God is defined as keeping and obeying His charge, His statues, His rules, and His commandments’ for believers in **John 14:15** “If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

With that, understand that service is the automatic outflow of true submission to all that God has commanded upon his people. This was true under the Old Covenant, and it is true now. When we are walking in accordance with what God has commanded us, we will be a blessing for others.

Jesus taught this very thing in the Sermon on the Mount: Matt 5:14 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Matt 5:15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Matt 5:16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

When we’re set free by the gospel, we *cannot* hide it. We *cannot* put it away. We *must* let our light shine. We must serve God and man. To deny this is to deny the power of the gospel! We would in essence be denying the Apostle Paul’s very words: Rom 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

***Old Covenant / New Covenant Considerations***

However, it is apt to consider the following: We are not under the Old Covenant. Instead, we are under the New Covenant. Does that mean we are not bound to keep God’s statutes, rules, commandments, etc?

Let us consider the following text: Matt 22:36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” Matt 22:37 And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Matt 22:38 This is the great and first commandment. Matt 22:39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Matt 22:40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Jesus is doing something very interesting here. He is distilling the two tables (or tablets) of the Ten Commandments into two summary statements. The first table of the law is primarily about Loving God and the second table of the law is about loving others.

Furthermore, Jesus is quoting Deut 6:5, which is a portion of the Shema. For thousands of years the Jews would recite the Shema every morning as a means of devotion to God. The Hebrew word Shema means to hear, but in Hebrew there isn’t a separate word for obey. Shema means to both hear and obey. It is expected that when you “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*” there would be obedience with the statement. In other words, when we hear the word of God - we will actively serve and obey the Lord in our homes, communities, families, workplaces, churches, etc.

Jesus rightfully points to the New Testament’s focus on love for neighbor. We are not to have selfish-love. Rather, we are to be supremely in love with God first and as a result of that love – we are to treat our neighbors as ourselves.

Jews under the Old Covenant were expected to know the law and keep it. In the New Covenant, Christians are no longer bound to positive law given under the Old Covenant. We needn’t keep the purity laws, judicial laws, etc. However, we are still bound to the moral law of God (as expressed in scripture in the Ten Commandments, to love God & love neighbor) and the Law of Christ (New Covenant positive law). As we submit to the moral law of God and the Law of Christ, it is expected that we would actively serve God, His people, and the world.

We are called to serve 2 groups of people: the local body (the church) and our neighbors (the world).

So, to reiterate: What is service? In love for God and others, service is to obey the Word of God and act upon it. Service is action, works, or ministry done for the benefit of others, to the glory of God. This service can be done for the church and the world.

Sounds simple enough. Well, obviously that may or may not be helpful to you tonight. Many people in the modern church, when thinking about service, are mainly thinking in terms of ‘Should I be a greeter, work in the coffee bar, or work in childcare?’ These aren’t wrong expressions of serving, but my intention tonight is to blow that assumption open so that we would see service as fundamentally something much more than that.

***How then should we serve? Gospel-empowered service.***

How then should we serve? Earlier, in my definition of service, I also made this statement: *In order to qualify as service, it must be done with right (gospel-centered) motivations* *and be in accordance with God’s commands/design.* When we think about serving God and man, are we doing so from a heart that is truly submitting to and intending to glorify God? And are we doing it because of the gospel and the Spirit’s work in us?

To help us drill down, I want us to think about the gospel. I want to read another quote from Donald Whitney that I believe is helpful for us:

“Do you remember what it’s like not to know Christ, to be without God and without hope? Do you remember how it feels to be guilty before God and unforgiven? Do you remember the terror of knowing you have offended God and that His anger burns toward you? Do you remember the horror of knowing you’re only a heartbeat away from hell? Now do you remember the experience of seeing Jesus Christ with the eyes of faith, and of understanding for the first time who He really is and what He has done by His life, death and resurrection? Do you remember the joy of your first awareness of forgiveness and deliverance from judgment and hell? Do you remember the initial, incomparable realization of your assurance of heaven and eternal life?”

When we discuss how we should serve, it is appropriate that we should look at the effects of the gospel on the Christian.

What effect has the gospel had on our lives? We have been spared from Hell and even more, reconciled to the one true God! We have been reborn. We have been given a new heart. We are humble, for Christ was humiliated on our behalf. We are obedient, even unto death, as our savior was obedient unto death. He endured the wrath of God for us, so we are to endure as elect exiles. We are to be gracious to others because Christ was gracious to us. We are to be joyful and glad, for we have been spared from the eternal outpouring of God’s wrath that we deserved because of our heinous and offensive sin. We are to be a people who forgive openly because we have been freely forgiven through Christ’s work. We are to recognize our imputed guiltless standing because our sin guilt was paid for by the propitiatory work of Christ! We are to be ambassadors of love because Christ first loved us.

Our rally cry for the spiritual discipline of service can be summed up in this verse: Mark 10:45 For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

So church, our service needs to be because of the gospel and modeled after the Christ of the gospel. We serve with humble hearts. We serve because Christ first served us. We serve because it is commanded of us, we do so with obedience. We service with graciousness toward others. We serve with endurance. We serve with joyful and glad hearts. We serve from hearts that aren’t motivated by guilt, but rather from hearts that are motivated by His forgiveness. And, we serve from hearts that aren’t motivated by works-based righteousness, but rather from hearts that are humbled by God and know we’re draped with Christ’s true righteousness. We serve in love.

***Hypocritical Service***

Hypocritical service, sadly, does exist. But does hypocritical service serve God, the church, and the world?

I want to spend some time here as I think this is a real threat to gospel empowered service. This point flows naturally into our next portion of scripture that I want to cover. Turn with me to Romans 12. We will look at verses 1-12, but for now, let’s look at Romans 12:1. Paul says: I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Paul is encouraging the saints to present their whole being (soul and body) to God. Likewise, according to theologian John Gill, we should use “all the powers and faculties of [our] souls, and members of [our] bodies” to “the service of God for his honour and glory.”

Church, discipline yourselves for godliness. Make every effort to do this. As difficult as this proposition can be at times, do the good work! Our service to the church and the world *must* start here. We should not serve with pride or bitterness. To do so assumes that Christ has carelessly spilled his blood! If our service is begrudging obedience, then we again minimize the work and glory of Christ. We, in essence, are saying that our felt needs and circumstances are what’s important rather than our service to our King and His gospel. Again, a lack of grace, endurance, and joy in the heart of a person undermines our gospel testimony.

We must understand that when we serve God and our fellow man with wrong intentions, this is not Christian service. It is hypocrisy. Hypocritical service will not endure without demanding some return on its investment. Instead of *both* God’s glory and the good of others, in Hypocritical service there is always a selfish motive.

***Healthy Worship = Healthy Service***

Notice the end of verse 1, Paul says that when we present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice – it is spiritual worship. Our service must be a response to (and a part of) our own spiritual worship. If we’re not sitting under the regular teaching of our shepherds, if we’re not getting our own time in God’s word, if we’re not spending time in prayer – then no amount of service will be seen by God as acceptable in His sight. In order to present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, we must be diligent in the spiritual disciplines, and to do so is to empower us unto service that honors God and becomes a part of our own worship of God. Worship compels us to serve and our service to God, the church, and the world is a part of our spiritual worship.

We must be diligent to prioritize our spiritual health *SO THAT* we can serve God and man, rightly. To do so will not idolize accolades of men, but it will have eternal impacts on God’s kingdom. Let us trust God and not men!

Paul continues, he says Rom 12:2 “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Our service to God shall not be patterned after this world, it shall be patterned after the renewing of our minds. Because of our new nature, our minds are progressively shedding their fleshly desires and obtaining and striving for Godly desires. In order to combat frustrated or hypocritical service: let our motives be pure. Let us love genuinely. We are to assume humble natures that are patterned after Christ.

The Christian life is about walking *in* truth, walking *in* light, etc. We’re actively trusting and presenting ourselves as holy before God. This can only be done when we prioritize healthy worship of Christ.

***Grace motivates us to serve***

Consider also that grace should motivate us to right service. Paul continues in our passage by highlighting that our living for God should be driven by the grace given to us by God: Rom 12:3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

Paul was a murderer. We casually express this often, but have you considered this? We shouldn’t whitewash scripture. Paul was guilty of stoning men and women. Cracked skulls, bone fragments and the sight of blood and dead flesh would have been witnessed by Christians as they were tormented by Paul of Tarsus. And yet, he was raised up as an Apostle by Christ. Why? Because his sin was less heinous than yours? No. Hardly. Paul calls himself the Chief of Sinners!

You see – grace levels us together at the cross. Because of Adam’s sin in the garden, we are all, by nature, guilty and deserving of God’s righteous wrath. All are desperate for God’s saving grace. Because of this, we mustn’t see ourselves as more highly than we ought to. We must put on humility. Let humility be the crowning attribute of your spiritual service to the church and the world. We can only be humble when we realize who we were before God saved us, through Christ, and where we were headed, as well as our ongoing dependence on the grace of God. Grace should motivate us to serve God well.

***Serve the church in sync with the body***

As we serve with grace inspired humility, fueled by healthy spiritual worship, we need not look far until we realize that much need and many healthy opportunities to serve can be found in the church.

Paul says, Rom 12:4 For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, Rom 12:5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

In the gathering of the saints, are you serving? It is implied here that you should be. And secondly, is your service in accordance with the needs of the body? The meaning here is that if we don’t need more greeters, then are you jumping in where there is a need? Look for opportunities to bless the body by assisting where there is need.

Paul reinforced this teaching in 1 Cor 12:21-26 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” 1Cor 12:22 On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 1Cor 12:23 and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, 1Cor 12:24 which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, 1Cor 12:25 that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 1Cor 12:26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Let us assume our position in the local body in accordance with the other members of the body *so that* we function in harmony. Let us understand that all roles in the church are essential. In the context of the church, we are called to do many jobs. They are all essential, just as the most minor body part is necessary to the body as a whole. Practically speaking, as you consider where to serve within the context of the local church, do so willingly to work in areas that are needed and requested. Remember, we are to serve with *humility* as patterned after Christ.

Donald Whitney recounts his conversation with a missionary in Africa in his book on spiritual disciplines that is salient on this point. He says, “I read of a missionary in Africa who was asked if he really liked what he was doing. His response was shocking. “Do I like this work?” he said. “No. My wife and I do not like dirt. “We have reasonably refined sensibilities. We do not like crawling into vile huts through goat refuse… But is a man to do nothing for Christ he does not like? God pity him, if not. Liking or disliking has nothing to do with it. We have orders to ‘Go,’ and we go. Love constrains us.”

You see, sometimes we won’t really care for the work we’re doing. That’s ok. I’m positive there are jobs that must get done at Disciples Church (and every other local church) that aren’t glorious or enjoyable all of the time. That’s ok. We’re commanded to be obedient. It is in that spirit empowered obedience we can have true satisfaction and joy. Why do we find that? Because we are working for our worthy and gracious King! As Paul said above, it is our spiritual worship. I implore you: *let us have this attitude when we work together in the body.*

***Gracious gifts from God for service***

Let us continue in our Romans passage: Rom 12:6 Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; Rom 12:7 if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; Rom 12:8 the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

My aim tonight is not to get into the varied points of the spiritual gifts. However, it is true that we are all given gifts of different measure by God’s grace. Paul’s point here is that we ought to use the gifts that God has given us.

* *Are you called and qualified as a pastor? Then serve, teach, lead and protect the flock.*
* *Are you talented in your service to others? Then work to be hospitable and find moments to provide to the needs of others.*
* *Are you gifted with teaching? Then work to teach with what accords with godliness.*
* *Are you gifted with material possessions? Then give generously as God has given you much through Christ.*
* *Are you gifted with encouraging others? Then encourage unto the Lord!*
* *Are you gifted as a leader? Then lead with zealous devotion for God!*

You may not know in full what gifting God has given you, and that’s ok. As you live a life *for* God, through Christ and with the indwelling Spirit - He will make it known. A decade ago, I would not have imagined that I would have been standing in front of our church teaching on a spiritual discipline, but His plans are not our plans. Praise God for that!

As you grow and walk with the Lord, keep note of the ways that God is growing you – and perhaps you will start to see the unique ways the Holy Spirit is working within you for the advancement of God’s kingdom!

# *Final Application*

As we close tonight, I want to try and draw out some application. If I can be guilty of anything, it’s been that I’ve painted a very broad picture of what the spiritual discipline of service is. While I think that is necessary, I understand that it may be difficult for some.

As a means to help us look at a specific service to our brothers and sisters and the world I want to look at 1st Peter 4:9-10. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. 1Pet 4:10 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.

Here Peter exhorts us to show hospitality and to use what God has gifted us to bless others. As promised, let’s make this very practical.

Do you have means by which you can bless someone? Maybe you’re thinking that your means are meager or small. Let us not judge what God has given us to steward. If you have been given a small pot or cooking vessel, you can make soup in it to share with another. Let us not think that we must be given much in order to give to others. Remember – our service reflects what God has done for us through Christ. How are you putting the gospel on display? Are you feeling shamed to think that you’ve been given little so you cannot possibly bless others? Then you must be rebuked. You must see that God has given each of us a portion to steward. So, if you have a pot, you can make some soup and share it with others to bless them and share the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let’s look at the flipside. Perhaps you’ve been given much, and your sinful struggle is to hoard your possessions. Perhaps you’re the sort that believes that you’ve built your wealth from your hard work and determination apart from God’s providence. My rebuke to you is similar “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal” – instead, see that God has commanded you to show hospitality without grumbling. Use the gift that He has given you to serve others. Humble yourself and open your home and put the wealth that God has given you to work in order to show the world that you are not bound by the pursuit of material acquisitions!

The point here is – show hospitality to one another. Find ways to do it. Invite people over for a meal. Seek to provide a need from a fellow friend. Look for big and small opportunities to serve.

Peter continues, 1Pet 4:10 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.

What is the gift you’ve been given? Have you been given a keen ability to make people smile, then do so for God! You all know my wife and how she has the ability to make people feel cared for and loved. How amazing is our service when we let the Holy Spirit lead us in these gifts. Are you good at repairing cars? Then lend a hand to a person on the side of the road to help them out!

Perhaps mechanical repair isn’t your forte. That’s perfectly fine! Think about what God has given you. Perhaps he has given you much wisdom in your battles with anxiety and depression. Can you not use the gift of wisdom for the proclamation of Jesus Christ? Many people in our society are scared, anxious, and depressed. Help them see that true and immense security can only be found in the all-powerful God. You can share with them the unshakable sovereign power of God that comforts you in moments of distress.

Finally, I do want to caution you from the thinking that you ought to always find things that will satisfy an itch to serve. Yes, God does sometimes give us assignments to serve in ways that work in alignment with our personal preferences, but often that is not the case. As I’ve spoken about earlier, let us look for ways to serve that we may not necessarily even want to do.

1st John 3:-16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

Brothers and Sisters, regardless of how you feel about a circumstance – we’re to lay down our lives for others (to love one another) because Christ first loved us. My prayer for us all tonight is that we would embody this as we discipline ourselves for service in Christ’s kingdom.

I close again with the quote that I started with: “Wanted: Gifted volunteers for difficult service in the local expression of the kingdom of God. Motivation to serve should be obedience to God, gratitude, gladness, forgiveness, humility, and love. Service will rarely be glorious. Temptation to quit place of service will sometimes be strong. Volunteers must be faithful in spite of long hours, little or no visible results, and possibly no recognition- except from God for all eternity.” – Donald Whitney

Work well for the King. Show the world His grace and love. Shed the expectations of earthly returns on your service. God will vindicate you in eternity.

Let’s pray!