

Today is our final lesson for our class on Living as a Church: And my assignment today is to speak to us about serving, specifically, serving one another as we seek to do life together as a church. We will pray in just a few moments, but as we begin our class, I want us to read and hear the words of a very important Scripture that teaches us about serving. So if you would, please turn in your Bibles to the gospel of Mark 10 v 42-45.

42 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. 43 But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. 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.”

This text teaches us that life and success in the kingdom demand a complete shift in our thinking, a radical transformation of our outlook and values. Christ makes it clear that the preeminent virtue in God’s kingdom is not rank or position, but service. Self-sacrificing service. This cuts against the grain of our hearts, this does not come naturally to anyone.

Hendriksen, commenting on this text, says it well- *“In the kingdom over which Christ reigns, greatness is obtained by pursuing a course of action which is the exact opposite of that which is followed in the unbelieving world. Greatness consists in self-giving, in the outpouring of the self in the service of others, for the glory of God.”*

Up to this point, the disciples’ have displayed hearts that have been shaped by the world around them. They are portrayed as men characterized by selfish ambition, enamored with rank and position. They would argue with one another about who should be the greatest. Their hearts are like rivers flowing in one direction, that must somehow be rechanneled in the complete opposite direction.

And Christ sets out to do this. And he does so in a peculiar way. It is interesting- Christ doesn't reprimand them for their zeal. He doesn't quench their desires for significance. He doesn't reprimand them for their aspirations for excellence. But he does lay the ax at the root of their self-centeredness and radically redefines for them- what it means to be great. And greatness, within the confines of Christ’s kingdom, means service, Selfless service. Sacrificial service.

In this text, Christ forces us to reflect. Christ wants us to carefully consider what it means to have a servant for a Lord. He says, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Now, the full weight of this statement would not be felt until the cross. But in view of the cross, it teaches us a very important lesson, always in season: Self-seeking, self-centeredness has no

place in a church founded on the self-giving sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We cannot be those who shamelessly seek after what we can get, when the Lord himself comes as one who gives.

John Frame writes- *“The incarnate Son comes into the world as the servant-king, who rules for the benefit of his people. Serving others in love is a divine attribute, one that serves as an explicit model for our behavior”*-

Today’s lesson, unashamedly, is a call to serve as we do life as a church. In a very real way it is a call to pursue greatness, to pursue excellence, as Christ-defines greatness. But more accurately, today’s lesson is a call to pursue Christ-likeness as we live as a church.

We need the word to guide us through this process, defining the expectations, the boundaries, the perspectives, the resources necessary. Only Christ can channel the rivers of our hearts into service that is acceptable and well-pleasing. We need to be transformed by the renewal of our mind. We need to listen carefully to what the Scripture says about service.

We need Christ's help. So let's pray.

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My first objective is to give us a brief theology of service drawn directly from a single passage of Scripture. In doing so I want to talk about serving in the church generally, providing what amounts to a bird's-eye view.

Then I want to narrow our focus ever so slightly, and briefly touch on the matter of spiritual gifts in the church. Finally, I want to drill down even further on two particular aspects of service applicable to every believer- the biblical call to encourage and edify one another and the matter of giving.

So we will move from very broad principles, and then narrow our focus to some specifics.

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So, if you would, please turn to our next text, 1 Peter 4.7-11. In this section of Scripture, Peter provides indispensable instruction concerning Christian conduct as we do life as a church-

As he provides this instruction he addresses, head-on, the important issue of serving one another in the church.

1 Peter 4:7–11 (ESV): 7 The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. 8 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. 10 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: 11 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.

Peter begins by laying a foundation- a foundation for the entirety of our Christian life, but a necessary foundation so that we might serve one another well.

Verse 7- The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.

Verse 7 sets the tone for our general mindset and outlook, as we seek to serve one another in the church.

Peter's words in verse 7: "The end of all things is at hand" is a reminder of where we stand, right here and right now, on the timeline of history. This type of language is not uncommon in the New Testament. It means that we are those who live in the final stage of what God is doing in this world- the next big thing is none other than Christ's return, final judgment and vindication, and the consummation of all things.

Ever since the cross and resurrection, God's judgment and God's redemption have been clearly seen. Judgment has already taken place at the cross of Christ. We now await a coming final judgment. Vindication and eternal life are clearly seen in Christ's resurrection. We now await a final vindication. More so now, than at any point in redemptive history, what is at stake has been revealed to the church with unmistakable clarity. Every man and every woman will either meet with a glorious deliverance or condemnation. The verse teaches us that we are to live life with eternity's values in view. There is a heaven to be gained, and a hell to be shunned.

What does the weighty reality have to do with serving?

When it comes to doing life together, how will we serve others in the best possible way without this mindset?

How are we to judge the needs of the hour, without minds that know what hour it is?

When it comes to serving and serving one another, there are any number of pursuits we can give ourselves to. How do we discern between what is trivial, what is good, and what is best? A sober-mindedness that has eternity's values in view is essential if we are to serve others well. So this verse is like a compass that points due north, it keeps us oriented, grounded as we seek to serve others well.

Peter tells us “therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers”.

If I could put the thrust of this verse in language that may resonate with us, it would be the idea that this is serious business, we need God's help, we need to pray. We are to have a mindset that presses us toward prayerful dependence on God. And if we are not driven toward prayer, we are probably not thinking soberly and sensibly. Moreover, minds clouded by the pursuit of pleasure are not minds that pray. As it pertains to serving one another, we cannot serve others well if we are serving in our own strength.

Tom Schreiner- says it well in his commentary on this passage- "sensible and alert thinking is to be used for prayer, for entreating God to act and move in the time that still remains. The realization that God is bringing history to a close should provoke believers to depend on him, and this dependence is manifested in prayer, for in prayer believers recognize that any good that occurs in the world is due to God's grace."

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Peter goes on to say v. 8: “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” .

This admonition is hugely important for long term health within the church. Peter is realistic, he knows that various breaches will inevitably occur in the Christian assembly. Do life together long enough, and feathers will get ruffled. But we are to be like a healthy family. In a healthy family, love and commitment win the day, despite many breaches. And as believers lavish love on each others, in the bonds of love and commitment, the sins and offenses of others are overlooked.

This does not mean that there are no sins to expose or discipline. (Pastor Lopes addressed that reality two weeks ago). There are sins we address. There are sins that necessitate church discipline, sins that will jeopardize our souls, the souls of those around us, that jeopardize the health of the church.

At the same time, we all sin in many ways. None of us are perfect in word and deed. We must face the fact that sins will be committed, offenses will come, we will give offense and we will be offended, and the bulk of these failures, by the grace of God, are matters that we must be prepared to cover in love.

How do we cover sins in love? We shouldn't make a habit of turning over in our minds offenses received, rehearsing in our mind the same sins and failures again and again. The longer we live this Christian life, the better we know our own hearts, we know that we need this kind of covering love therefore, we need to display it.

The larger issue at play here is the necessity of genuine love as we move toward God pleasing service. Peter says that love is “above all,” and he exhorted his readers to constant love. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly.

Peter and Paul are in lock step on the central place of love when serving. We will talk more about this. But suffice to say, as it pertains to sacrificial service, love is the most excellent way, and an indispensable feature of our service. If we give away all we have, and if we deliver up our body to be burned, but have not love, we gain nothing.

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Now here is the reality. If we are still that type of people that will need "covering love", and we are those type of people, there will always be the temptation to draw back from one another. The temptation to disengage. The Apostle is aware of this and so he doubles down, giving important instructions. He insists that we “show hospitality to one another-without grumbling” (1 Pet. 4:9).

Hospitality in the Scripture can entail many things. I think the hospitality Peter envisions here is not limited to extraordinary displays of hospitality, such as opening up your home to missionaries, surprise overnight guests, or other Christians who are just passing through. No doubt it includes those things. But there is nothing in the immediate context to suggest that the hospitality envisioned here focuses solely on exceptional circumstances.

In fact, “one another” repetitions, “keep loving one another”, “show hospitality to one another” “serve one another” suggests a hospitality directed toward those in the local assembly. People who we might rub shoulders with on a regular basis. If anything, Peter may be expecting his readers to open their homes for the purpose of ordinary, regular Christian worship and fellowship, since at that time the local church often had to meet in the homes of its members.

Peter, with the words “without grumbling”, implies that those who open their homes may grow tired and weary in doing that. Hence, they are exhorted to be hospitable gladly, not caving in to the temptation to show hospitality with a heart that yields begrudgingly.

Now, what does hospitality have to do with serving? On the most basic level, hospitality is serving. It meets pressing needs. It provides shelter and sustenance.

But, what I want us most to appreciate is this: hospitality facilitates our intentional presence in each other's lives. Perhaps it goes without saying, but how will we serve others well if we are not present in each other's lives. As Christians, one of the most fundamental prerequisites for serving well is assembling, formally and informally, with God’s people. And hospitality is a part of that.

Listen to the words of Hebrews 10.24: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works (serving), not neglecting to meet together (intentional presence), as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another (serving), and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Not neglecting to meet together is the implied necessary prerequisite to serving one another well.

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Let’s press forward in our text. There is more we are called to if we are to serve well.

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 proceeds to give us a framework, in an economy of words, of the content of our service to one another.

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And here I offer 8 straightforward observations from these 2 verses.

1. God has equipped each one of us to serve.

Verse 10 "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace."

Peter makes it clear that each member of the Christian community has received gifts, essentially, capabilities from God. Peter addresses his words to “each one”, that is, to each individual believer. This is a reality that Paul taught as well.

1 Corinthians 12:7 (ESV): To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Therefore, we should never feel useless or incapable of serving or serving well. Christ has equipped every member with something needful and useful for church life together.

2. These gifts and capabilities are from God.

"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace."

The word “gift” necessarily implies that the capabilities that each believer possesses are given by God, and the result of God’s grace. The word “received” reiterates the reality that these capabilities are from God.

What does this mean? Believers cannot boast or think about their gifts for service as something that originates from within themselves.

3. We have an obligation to steward those capabilities or gifts.

The text says "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."

The word translated "stewards" could also be translated "managers". Therefore believers have been entrusted with these gifts and capabilities. We should not willingly neglect them. We should nurture them, develop them, be desirous to use them, and look for opportunities to do so. Our God-given spiritual capabilities for service are a responsibility, and come with an expectation of faithful stewardship.

Matthew Henry writes- "In receiving and using the manifold gifts of God we must look upon ourselves as stewards only, and act accordingly. The talents that we are entrusted with are our Lord's goods, and must be employed as he directs. And it is required in a steward that he be found faithful."

4. God has given his church a rich variety of gifts.

"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace".

Most of us, when we hear the language of gift, have been conditioned to think about those specific spiritual gifts marked out by Paul in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12-14. And certainly, those gifts Paul mentions are included in Peter's framework. But Peter isn't overly concerned with parsing out particulars. Peter does not feel compelled to offer a list of specific spiritual graces in the way that Paul does. He keeps his language intentionally broad. He doesn't want to emphasize the extraordinary at the expense of the ordinary. I think that Peter is presenting an all-encompassing view of the abilities, capacities, and gifts that Christ gives us. Peter is concerned that we appreciate that what God gives to us for service is varied grace, manifold grace, it is diverse grace- capable of answering the many and various trials and meeting the many and various needs that inevitably arise as we live as a church.

This warrants a word of encouragement- We should not be unduly troubled that we will somehow miss our calling if we cannot nail down our exact gifts and graces, or fit our particular graces into the Romans 12 or 1 Corinthians box. Some members are Swiss army knives. Paul was not seeking to be exhaustive in those texts, and Peter is being intentionally broad.

This brings us to an important question: ***What are Spiritual Gifts?***

Wayne Grudem defines a spiritual gift as "any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church."

John Frame argues that any divinely given ability that edifies the church should be considered a spiritual gift. He mentions that the ability to sing in worship may be construed as a spiritual gift; or the ability to cook meals for church gatherings or those in need, he mentions ministries of mercy, or the ability to manage finances for the church body. You may disagree with him, you may have a more nuanced view. But at the same time we cannot lose sight of the fact that God does give varied grace in order that we might serve his church well.

Some gifts appear to be closely related to our natural talents and dispositions, some gifts are born out of the crucible of trial and life experience. Others are patently extraordinary. Some are a mix of natural gift and supernatural enablement. The reality is that the NT writers do not define their terms with scientific precision. They were addressing specific congregations from a pastoral framework- their aim was not exhaustive, scientific precision.

And whatever gift or ability we employ, we cannot lose sight of what I mentioned in point 2- such gifts and capabilities are from God.

Matthew Henry writes- "whatever ability we have of doing good we must own it to be the gift of God and ascribe it to his grace."

So, if your gift, in measure, involves employing your intellect that you were born with, ascribe it to his grace. If your gift involves hard-earned money, ascribe it to his grace. If your gift is born out of the crucible of trial and affliction, so that you can comfort others with the comfort that you yourself have received from God, ascribe it to His grace.

5. Peter does not list out an exhaustive list of gifts; but neither is he overly amorphous or vague. ***That brings us to our next point. Peter mentions two broad categories of service- the categories of "speaking" and "serving."***

"Speaking" and "serving" express the whole of one's activities. Paul expresses a very similar thought in Col. 3:17: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks for God the Father through him".

Now, it must be said immediately, from v. 10, that all gifts involve serving and edifying others in some capacity, whether it is speech or whether it is deed. But in breaking it down into these two categories, Peter examines these gifts functionally. Some gifts will involve service through speaking and others gifts will involve serving fellow believers through actual serving by way of deeds.

And if you were to do a study of some of the specific gifts that Paul provides, you would see they fall out nicely under the rubric of speaking and serving.

Now this entire point may feel like me stating the obvious, but as we seek to define God's varied grace- thinking about them in categories of speaking and serving keep one indispensable truth clear. *These gifts of grace are always other-oriented. We speak to others and we serve others. I'll say more about that in a moment.*

6. God also provides the strength for our service (4:11), and we should serve through God's strength.

1 Peter 4:11 (ESV): "whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies..."

Serving in our own strength is always a temptation. This applies to both ministry in word and ministry in deed. Those who minister the word for any length of time know this temptation well and we have to fight it constantly.

The same applies to those who set out to meet pressing needs. We go about these things in our own strength far too often, and we know better. We feel the press, the demands, and act as if the task is exclusively a matter of rolling up one's sleeves and getting the job done.

Often, God in his mercy will let us spin wheels until we have prayed. This verse teaches us that we must rely on God's power through prayer. Peter would have us look to the Lord from the very beginning to the very end of each ministry endeavor.

Why is it important that we serve by the strength that God supplies?

We will exhaust ourselves by trying to serve in our own strength, rather than serving out of a healthy dependence on God. In our own strength, we quickly dry up in our service, we become spiritual deserts, and we succumb to weariness and discouragement. Even if we serve in God's strength, weariness and discouragement will come. But we should not compound that through mere efforts of the flesh.

And my point is this- there is a fight to be fought in the Christian life. It is a fight to feed on Christ. Make sure your service is fueled by prayer and God's Word. Just as food provides physical strength, prayer and God's Word provide spiritual nourishment that fuels our service.

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Peter also insists that "whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God".

If we are not to serve in our own strength, those engaged in word ministry are not to serve up their own ideas. It is foolish to attempt to serve in our own strength, but it is destructive to

think that we can assist others with our own wisdom. Those who speak must understand that they are engaged in serious business that restrains them from trafficking in their own ideas. One commentator explains that we must be “intentional about speaking, not from narrow individuality, but from a posture of having listened to God.”

Our words, our wisdom, our counsel must be in lock step with the revelation that God has given in the Old and New Testament. Scripture must be understood as the sole source of divine revelation, the only inspired, infallible, final, and authoritative norm of faith and practice. We must be committed to Sola Scriptura. Materially, we must have a firm grasp on the gospel, and its wide-ranging implications, as revealed in the authoritative Apostolic teachings of the New Testament. If we are not firmly settled in these areas, we will make a big mess of things.

The words "whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God" does not suggest that somehow the words we speak become or should be considered revelation from God. Peter is not suggesting that. Nor do I take him to be saying that we can only counsel others with direct quotations from Scripture. But our words and wisdom must be patently submitted to and shaped and informed by God's word and God's gospel and must never contradict revelation, or come alongside it as equally authoritative.

7. We should serve, using our gifts and graces, for the benefit of others.

Verse 10 again: As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another

We cannot pass over this important point. We cannot adopt a self-centered approach to serving.

The point is that spiritual gifts are given to serve and to help others, to strengthen others in the faith. They are bestowed for ministry, not to enhance self-esteem. Paul emphasized the same theme time and time again, reminding believers that gifts are given to build up and edify others, not to edify oneself.

1 Cor 12:7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1 Cor 14.5 The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

Eph 4:11–12 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ

Peter’s focus is often lost today. Some become fixated on spiritual gifts, not out of concern for how they might serve others or bring glory to the Lord. Rather, our motives are more closely akin to self-fulfillment. We want to utilize our gifts in an effort to self-actualize. And if we are

not careful, this can lead to us becoming fixated on doing our own thing. We must not lose sight of the fact that our gifts, whatever they may be, are given to us for the service of others.

8. We should serve, using our gifts and graces, for the glory of God.

Verse 11: 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.

When those who speak utter God's truth rather than their own, and those who serve do so in God's strength rather than their own, God through Jesus Christ receives the glory. Christ is shown to be the one who has provided the wisdom and strength for ministry. Christ is the one who is praised by all parties involved. If wisdom and strength come from the Lord, he gets the glory as the one who empowers his people.

We must be careful, as we serve, that a subtle shift does not take place in our thinking. Anyone who has begun a ministry in Christ's name finds it very easy to shift the ownership of the enterprise. It becomes our ministry. Though we would never say it, we might feel it. Successes demonstrates our wisdom, insight, and administrative skills. We give lip service to God's enabling grace, but we trust in ourselves and do not look to God, or give glory to God. May God help us.

How do we keep ourselves back from this error?

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Here I want to say a few things about Serving as Worship.

When we conceive of worship, perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is what takes place between 11:00 and 12:30 on Sunday morning. And that is worship. No question about it. We at Grace take congregational gatherings seriously, and we should seek to order them in a biblically faithful way. The bible is clear that all of life is worship. I am personally persuaded that gathered worship with the body of Christ is at the heart of a life of worship. Corporate worship is intended by God to inform and elevate a life of worship.

Sometimes, however, we become myopic when we think of what it means to offer God acceptable worship, and the congregational/corporate aspect of worship becomes the only grid through which we conceive of worship.

But if you read Romans 12: verse 1-11, you will see that the presentation of ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship- draws attention to serving one another as our response of worship- and as we do so, it can be said that we are serving the Lord as we engage in that service to one another.. Romans 12 is a vision of worship

that extends beyond the nuts and bolts of Sunday service. It is whole life worship that centers on serving the Lord and serving one another.

Let's read that passage.

Romans 12:1-11:

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. 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. 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. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, 5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; 7 if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; 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. 9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. 10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.

So the flow of thought is this: in view of the mercies of God toward us → we are compelled to present the totality of our lives a living sacrifice which is worship → and that worship entails exercising gifts (thereby serving others in the context of the local congregation) → and all of these things can properly fall under the umbrella of serving the Lord. Therefore it can be said that serving others is serving the Lord. Serving others is part of our worship.

Isn't this what Christ taught in Matthew 25:35-40

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' 40 And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

This realization of service as worship will help guard us from a self-centered, consumerist vision of church life. Misconceptions about serving the church often stem from an erroneous

conception of the church. Many people view local churches like a business. The pastor is the CEO and the people are consumers. They think the church exists to provide them and their children a menu of programs, activities, and events. But if we adopt Peter's vision of all believers enabled by God to serve, and if we adopt Paul's vision of serving others as part of our acceptable worship of God, the whole thing is transformed.

Perhaps the most important observation from the Romans 12 passage would be this:

All of our serving, serving each other, serving the Lord- all of our serving must be, as a matter of first and utmost importance, a response to God's grace, a response to God's mercy-

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.

Our serving must not be conceived as efforts at cultivating God's favor. Before we present our bodies, the totality of lives as living sacrifices of self-giving worship and service, everyone of us are called to stand on the cliff of Romans 12.1, take in the glorious vista of Romans 1-11 which put on display the abundant mercies of God, and apply those mercies liberally to ourselves. The mercies of God, the gospel realities of Romans 1-11, are the foundation from which our service must spring.

This will help keep us back from a guilt-laden approach to service.

And this will help keep us back from making service- our service.

And as we serve, we need to constantly keep before our eyes the glorious mercies of God.

This is the pattern. The word of God shows us again and again, how our service is rooted in how well Christ, in the gospel, has served us.

With our remaining time, I want us to look at two specific modes of service, one primarily word-centered, and one primarily deed centered. Encouragement and giving.

Any consideration of what Christians do when they meet together must take seriously the New Testament teaching about encouragement and edification.

Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians puts it simply: 'encourage one another and build one another up' (1 Thess. 5:11).

And as we step back and survey our New Testaments, encouragement, with the aim of building one another up, emerges as one of the most important ministries we see taking place in the New Testament, and we are all called to be engaged in it.

As you read through Acts, a central emphasis among the apostles in the early days of church expansion was the ministry of encouragement (Acts 13:15; 14:22; 15:31–32; 16:40; 18:27)."

Acts 15:30-32: So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.

Acts 16:40 So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.

Acts 18:27: (speaking of Apollos) And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed.

And as you read the New Testament, you find the themes of edification and encouragement throughout.

But what is encouragement? And what does it do?

Kevin Deyoung describes it this way- encouragement is "highlighting the evidences of God's grace either in the gospel or in a gospel-centered person, to the glory of God." So there is an objective element to encouragement, drawing our attention to hard and fast truth, and a somewhat subjective element to encouragement, highlighting what we see to be evidences of God's grace in the life of a believer.

Mark Chanski describes it this way-“What adrenaline is able to chemically and physiologically do for the body, encouragement is able to emotionally and psychologically do for the soul” .

Both Chanski and Deyoung, in their treatments of encouragement, highlight Paul, and his words Romans 16 as a model of encouragement. We do not have time to visit that passage- but there we find concrete expressions of encouragement like direct commendation, communicating our approval, name recognition, passing on good reports, and cheering others on. But there's also indirect expressions of encouragement, like appropriate physical touch, body language, and expressing empathy.

Words are often the most common means of encouraging others.

Solomon tells us, “Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad” (Prov 12:25),

and

“Isaiah 50:4 (ESV)- a prophetic text that speaks of Christ, which says "The Lord God has given me (that is Christ) the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary."

And during Jesus' time of ministry on the earth, we observe on several occasions where He encouraged others. He told a paralytic to Matthew 9:2 (ESV): “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”

And to a woman whom He healed of a hemorrhage, He said, Matthew 9:22 (ESV): “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.”

The Lord calmed His disciples when they were frightened during a storm (Matt 14:26), saying, “Matthew 14:27 (ESV): “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” .

And when He informed His disciples that they would face future tribulation (John 16:33a), He also said, John 16:33 (ESV): But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

In all these instances Jesus used the Greek verb meaning “to be firm or resolute in the face of danger or adverse circumstances, to be enheartened, to be courageous.”

"In the New Testament we learn about a man named Barnabas, whose name means “Son of Encouragement” (Acts 4:36). Barnabas was an individual whose words and actions were characterized by the quality of encouragement. As an example of his character, we read that the church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11:22), and “when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God” (Acts 11:23a), he “rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord” (Acts 11:23b).

Here, the word encourage translates the Greek verb *parakaleo*, which means to “call to one’s side.” The picture is that of one person who comes alongside another and provides support, encouragement, or edification that strengthens that person in their soul to accomplish a task or finish a race.

I have come to appreciate Hebrews as an epistle replete with encouragement, its fair share of warnings no doubt, but an epistle of encouragement that also exhorts us to encourage one another. The letter serves as a model of encouragement, showing us how to encourage others with objective truth. The author is faithful to draw our attention to Christ constantly, who he is, what he has done for us, what he is doing for us, and what he will do for us.

Hebrews 10:24–25 (ESV): And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Hebrews 3:13 (ESV): 13 But exhort/ encourage one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

It is interesting, there is daily quality to encouragement in these verses, so it is something we need, and need regularly, but something that can be difficult to actually implement in our daily walk with each other.

Interestingly, the church father Tertullian mentioned that Barnabas, Paul’s traveling companion on his first mission to the Gentiles, authored Hebrews. Now, we simply do not know who authored the book. But I can see why, on one level, Tertullian would make that connection. The association of Barnabas with the book of Hebrews may be because he was described as a “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36), and Hebrews 13:22 describes the letter as a word of encouragement (or exhortation).

Hebrews 13:22 (ESV): 22 I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation/encouragement, for I have written to you briefly.

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I must press on to say a few words about giving-

This is an aspect of living together as a church that no doubt may be construed rather broadly- we serve one another by giving our time, our energy- our immaterial resources. The extent of these contributions is often unseen, and really quite substantial.

As we give ourselves in a variety of capacities, inherently, we pull resources of time and energy from other pursuits.

For those of us who are engaged in the work of ministry broadly, be it Adult and Youth Sunday School, Small Groups, Kingdom Men, Women of the Word, Vision Youth, VBS, various bible studies, service projects, retreats, conferences, service and worship leading, prayer meeting, and one on one counseling and ministry- each of these endeavors force us to channel resources away from other noble pursuits. Inevitably, this means less family time, less time with our spouses and children, less discretionary time, less time for recreational pursuits, and less time for pursuits that translate into monetary gain. Ministry in word or deed means giving. All ministry entails giving in substantial ways. Let us be quick to appreciate that reality and acknowledge others in meaningful ways when we see them giving.

What I want to direct our attention to in our final minutes is giving more narrowly defined, namely, giving our money as an act of serving. And here I lean heavily on D.A. Carson in his treatment of these passages.

The longest sustained encouragement in the New Testament to give money is found in 2 Corinthians chapters 8–9. I am not going to exposit the relevant texts, but I am going to draw attention to the various emphases that emerge from 2 Corinthians 8-9. On your own, you can reflect on these passages and the various emphases that emerge from Paul's inspired words to us.

1. Paul stresses that the Macedonians' financial giving was a function of the fact that “they gave themselves first to the Lord” (2 Cor. 8:5).

Giving money is no substitute for giving oneself to the Lord Jesus. Rather, giving money should be an expression of the deeper, more essential reality of giving oneself to the Lord. And if that essential piece is in place, then the giving of money becomes an act of worship.

2. There is considerable stress on perseverance, consistency, and follow-through in this matter of giving in this passage. Apparently, the Corinthians had pledged the year before to give a certain amount- but had lost resolve. Now Paul has to send Titus to encourage them to bring to completion what they began.

2 Corinthians 8.6- “Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace.”

What is the lesson? Planned, regular, generous giving is often better than the big binge that is wrung out of us by an impassioned, emotional appeal- in part because regular giving reflects a heart consistently devoted to Christ and his work.

3. Paul judges that Christian generosity is one of the things in which Christians generally should excel—along with such virtues as pure speech, knowledge, complete earnestness, and love for godly leaders.

(2 Cor. 8:7): But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

Giving is something that each of us should gravitate toward, and seek God for grace to do and do more generously. God recognizes profound seasons of need when we are the recipients more so than the giver. But even in that context, a heart of giving should be the property of every Christian. It is not an enterprise relegated to only those of means.

Remember that Christ commends the widow for her two mites. And here Paul commends the Macedonians- “We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave

according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—

May God give each of us discernment as to how to give, even when giving means some measure of sacrifice on our part- and do not lose sight of this truth-

2 Corinthians 9:8: And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

4. Paul does not want Christian generosity to be the result of a new legal demand: “I am not commanding you,” he writes (2 Cor. 8:8). The highest possible incentive to be generous, in a self-denying way, is found in the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). For Paul, it is unthinkable that anyone who really delights in knowing this Christ could be stingy.

5. Paul wants the Corinthians to know that although this money is going to help other believers (presumably the poor believers in Judea), this is not to be a thoughtless, haphazard endeavor on behalf of God’s people. Giving is not to turn into a proverbial robbing Peter to pay Paul, an effort to enrich one group of believers while impoverishing another.

2 Cor. 8:13-14: “For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness.

This passage speaks to a carefulness, a thoughtfulness in giving. Not a cavalier, or irresponsible approach to giving. But that doesn’t mean a stingy, closed-heartedness. It means an honest assessment of need, an honest effort at meeting genuine needs, and a responsible allocation of the monetary resources entrusted to us by God.

6. Paul takes extraordinary pains (made evident by his choice of emissaries he enlists to transport the money) not only to do what is right in financial matters, but to be seen to be doing what is right (2 Cor. 8:16–24).

“But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going[d] to you of his own accord. With him we are sending[e] the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will. We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man. And with them we are sending our

brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you.”

This is especially important when it comes to handling money entrusted to God’s people. Those who serve as intermediaries and guides for the allocation of money, better have honest and right hearts. That is a given. But here there is a further requirement. They must seek, as far as possible, to be seen as behaving above board when appropriating the Lord’s resources. Conflicts of interest in matters of money can tear a church apart. Maybe not overnight, but certainly over the long haul. Even small failures in this arena will eat away at the trust of the people, not to mention stifle further giving.