

Serving

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[0 : 0 0] Now what I hope to do this morning is kind of split the sermon into two parts. So this first part I'm going to do just now, which is really looking at the grace of serving from the Bible, from the reading that we took in 1 Peter.

And then after that, there'll be something slightly more practical. There'll be some slides up on the screen with just explaining a little bit of who we are and what we do and why we need your help in such a real way as a church.

But I think, interestingly, I've been thinking a lot about, well, I guess life really, but specifically because on Tuesday I've been asked to speak at an evangelistic outreach at Edinburgh University, a lunchtime thing.

And the theme is purpose. So I've been thinking a lot about how you can relate the idea of purpose to the concept of believing in a personal and in a loving God and how without that life is very purposeless if you wind it back and if you strip it back to where, to our beginnings and to who we are.

So I think in the society we live in, increasingly without God, society increasingly has no purpose, ultimate purpose anyway, other than how society or how in my life I can let myself flourish.

[1 : 3 4] So it's all, it's kind of a self-centred reality that we have where if the ultimate truth is just self, if there's nothing else beyond that and beyond the world in which we live, then self comes absolutely first.

And everything, even others and society, becomes self-serving for us to a greater or lesser degree and I know that's a sweeping statement.

But altruism, that is the kind of unselfish concern for others, is, can be diminishing and I think is in some ways diminishing. And even when it is there in the world which we live without God and without that external reality, then serving others, altruism can be nothing more than just making our lot better.

For the few years we're here, it's just about perking life up and making it a bit better for me and the people around me and maybe to act in selfless ways but with no ultimate reason and for no ultimate purpose.

It's a bit like when we pray just now or the world in which we live will pray for the absence of war and the absence of war is a great thing. But the absence of war is different from peace.

[2 : 5 9] And so sometimes I think serving without God is different from understanding it and knowing what serving is with God. And I think as believers, as Christians, we need to battle against that philosophical, secular philosophical tide in which we're living where individuality and the individual is king or is queen, that is absolutely central because we have an identity, we have a transforming love in our lives, we have a purpose and we have a calling.

And we are to reflect that calling in our lives and in our understanding of our relationship with God and our understanding of our relationship with one another. God the Son is our example, Jesus Christ.

He came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. Matthew 20, 28, that summarizes, that subsumes the whole purpose of who God is in Jesus Christ.

And He has come to redeem us in order that we will serve God and serve one another.

That's what we've been created to do. So you ask about who you are and you ask about what you're doing, you ask about your life. Well, that is in Christ, that's what we are. We're created to love Him and serve Him and love one another and serve one another.

[4 : 22] Love has that certain characteristic. And so we are constantly confronted with the church as a commodity, as something to be consumed and we have to battle against that.

It's not a commodity that can be critiqued and walked away from when it falls short of our standard, which is easy for us to do. We find that easy. I find that easy.

I'm sure you find it easy. But the challenge is that we're called to love the church because it's people and it's fallen people, redeemed people, people that need forgiven and as a person I will need to be forgiven within that.

And it reflects, imperfectly of course, but it reflects the God community, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The ultimate, the prototypical, the original community that there is God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So the church and as we see them biblically serving one another, then we recognize and see our position. So spiritual serving, just want to say one or two things from this passage briefly.

[5 : 32] We recognize and see that it's other centered in all of its attitudes and considerations, keep loving one another earnestly since love covers a multitude of sins and as each has received a gift, use it to serve one another.

So there's the great beginnings of it. It's other centered. It's not about me, although it is sometimes about our gifts, but it's a fantastic paragraph here that speaks about the outward nature of grace and of love.

It's a spiritual reality that covers over the failings of others, looking over one another's sins, covering a multitude of sins.

Now that doesn't mean that we hide sins. It's not saying that sins don't matter and are unimportant, our behavior doesn't matter. It's talking about not nitpicking.

Not being nitpick, there's not being fault finders. It's easy, you know, there's lots of little things that we can nitpick and find about people, but it's cover them over because we love them, because we see and know who we are ourselves.

[6 : 40] So we say, well, that's okay, we recognize these kind of failings. But what we see is that grace first changes us. I wish everyone else was different.

I wish they were much better. I wish they served much better. But rather grace says, well, what is God and Christ doing in my life and my heart? And we see and recognize that that centeredness that Christ is looking in us and in our lives, using our gifts to serve others.

But it's also not only other centered, but it's also God sent us dependent on God, good stewards of God's grace, whoever it serves as one serving in the strength that God supplies.

So you know, we just get up in the morning and say, well, I think I'll serve today. Because it's not just simply this is something that's simply natural. It is a spiritual endeavor that comes from spiritual motivation.

And for that we need the strength of God and the grace of God in our lives. That's what makes it unique. It is God dependent.

[7 : 51] And it is in God's strength. And it makes it unique because very often when we serve, we're looking for praise. We're looking for people to say, well done, pat us on the back, because that's our natural inclination.

And so we need God's grace. Not that encouragement isn't very, very important. I've preached in it recently here. Encouragement is good, but we need to take encouragement with the grace of God with humility and that great sense that God is the one who empowers us.

It's hugely paradoxical. So it's in the strength of God and it's other centered. It's also eager. We saw that in the second section we read in verse 8, the leaders of the church were encouraged by Peter to serve eagerly.

And there to be examples to the rest of the congregation. In other words, willingly. It's where we struggle so often as leaders to serve willingly, not grudgingly to do so in a way that recognizes what Christ has done for us and how willingly he served a rebellious and disinterested and disbelieving discipleship and others.

Our natural response in serving is quite often not eager, isn't it, if we're honest? It's sometimes grumbling. Sometimes we have that underlying philosophy.

[9 : 23] A friend in need is a pain in the neck. And sometimes it's a sense of mere duty. Well, I ought to do this. Maybe I'll have a good day if I do this, a bit of a quid pro quo.

If I do this for God, He'll make the sun shine on my life. Or at the end of all the different areas of service and life that we give, we'll have maybe at the odd minute at the end of the day, say, well, maybe I can give that.

And service to God. And it's therefore sometimes not eager. But again, we seek to be reflective. What a great challenge to have Christ-centered altruism, rather sometimes than the battle that we face against self-centered egotism.

But it's a tremendous thing. And it's a tremendous battle. And I find it easy to pick out all these things because I see them in myself so much. There's so much rottenness, so much wrong motives, so much that falls short of Christ-standard yet the freedom that we get when we come to Him and ask for forgiveness and seek to serve Him His way is a great thing.

So there's an eagerness, there's another centeredness, and there's a dependence. So can we take that as I finish this section just now?

[10 : 45] So within our own context here, within the congregation here, we seek not to be selfish in asking for your gifts and graces. We recognize that this isn't the only aspect of your church, of your Christian involvement.

We recognize it's broader than just the local congregation, that you have a life outside which takes up the majority of your time. But we do seek you to consider the works of service here.

You know we're also working against programs towards relationships. We seek not to be a busy, busy, busy church with lots of different programs taking up, sucking up all your time.

We don't want you to take up all your time maintaining this formal organization. We want you to serve Christ, serve people, serve the lost and the ordinary things of life.

And it is, we are a growing, worshiping community, and just like a growing, worshiping family, the more it grows the more you need to serve, and the more you need to help one another and organize things together for Christ and for His glory.

[11 : 55] And so what we want to do, particularly on a Sunday when we gather together in these formal acts of worship, is to do Sundays really well, really spiritually, with the right motive.

And within that to do the community that we meet as together really well and for the glory of God. So I think the challenge as we will come to the second part is, lots of people doing a little in the big church.

I think sometimes in a bigger church, and it's all relative, of course, this is very small compared to many other churches, but as the church grows sometimes I think we think, oh there's plenty of people to do these things, plenty of other people, so, but if a lot of people do a little, then it makes a huge difference to the few that maybe are getting burnt out and failing because there's so much.

And also to do it really well, prayerfully, eagerly, for God's glory, not to please me or the elders or your city group or your friends or the people next to you, but kind of having tunnel vision to do it for Jesus Christ because of all He's done for His glory.

And that is one of the priorities of our church. And to do it cooperatively, to be self-forgetful in serving, that's a really hard thing to do.

[13 : 23] Sometimes you respond when you're asked, sometimes to volunteer, sometimes to respond to those who speak to you, who have discerned your gifts and who maybe challenge you and thinking prayerfully about these things.

So it's a bibs and braces kind of attitude that we come one way, one way we come round and look and seek you to serve. So please remember these motives and what is taught here in this passage with regard to serving and the attitude with regard to serving.

And I'm going to come back in a minute or two just to explain a little bit about who we are and why we do what we do.

The first section of the sermon I called spiritual serving. And this section I've called a serving smorgasbord.

Okay, that's great, isn't it? Well, I like to end with no one else does. A serving smorgasbord, okay, is just to recognize and know what we are and what we do and it might give you a bit of an idea of some of our needs.

[14 : 43] We have here a vision for the city of Edinburgh. I know that many other churches in Edinburgh also do as well. I believe through God's providence and what God has been doing and is doing over these last 16, 17 years that God's leading us towards a church planting movement in the city of Edinburgh.

And I think at one level, at least in our own context, we're a catalyst for that certainly in the free church context here. In his providence and his grace, he's chosen to use stumbling, failing, falling people like ourselves.

And we want to be a serving church, a serving church that enables that to happen by God's grace with our resources, with our vision, with the support that we offer and by our example.

Now, you know, the people at our core to the congregation will know that there's been a text that has maintained and enabled me to carry on. And I hope sometimes you can carry on as we've moved forward, not only that he would do a new thing from Isaiah 43, but also from Acts 18, that he had the promise of God that he had many people in this city.

And we believe that and we believe that we are part of God's answer to that particular promise. And it's tough. It's been tough for us at many different levels.

[16 : 01] And we have been attacked and we've struggled and we've battled and we've made lots of mistakes. But I would ask that you would recognise and embrace and enjoy and be part of that vision and support us as leaders within that and be committed as you have been, as you undoubtedly have been over these last number of years, that we would move forward as foot soldiers together in this kingdom serving the Lord.

Now I feel old and worn out, I mean here, nearly 17 years, but the bad news for you is that I think God's got a little bit more for me to do here before that we pass, I pass the baton on, but I'm asking you, will you stay with it?

Will you keep going? Will you be part of the vision? And will you keep moving forward because we're just barely scratching the surface? It's a huge quantity of lost souls in the city and we want this city to be transformed by the gospel, not for the free church or for this church or for any other reason than that we've been holding on to God's coattails the whole way, just and no more, and He's brought us to this place.

And so we've recognised that we're a church that has the city centre vision that's committed to worship mission, community and discipleship and we want to plant churches throughout the city of Edinburgh.

It's a great vision, we've seen it happening in Cornerstone and Est Valley and it's beginning to happen in Harrington, we want that to happen again and again and it's impossible.

[17 : 38] We sometimes can't get out of bed thinking about it, but we believe that that's what God has for us and we seek to move forward in His grace and in His favour.

And we've said this before that the pillars of the work that we seek to do come from these things, the grace of God and the gospel of God, for growth in God to the glory of God.

These are simple things, we want them just to be imbibed in our living and in our thinking and in our acting as a church, that these are the things that are important to us. We want to decrease, we want Him to increase and the grace of God is all we have that we can share.

And the gospel is the unchanging gospel, it doesn't get better and it certainly can't get worse.

It's a great gospel that this community needs more than ever and we seek in all the impossibility of that to do that to the glory of God and we need Him, don't we, for that.

[18 : 40] So our priorities as we've looked over this last year at the church and as it's growing from being a small kind of manageable church to a bigger unmanageable church, from our point of view, then we've tried to structure the church so that we maintain the focus on these areas.

So we want to be a church that engages when we gather together in a living worship and that's not just, that's not a passive thing. It's got to be something in which we're all active, not just when we sing or whatever, but in our preparation, in our prayers, in our hunger and thirst after righteousness, our longing to receive what God has to give.

You've come to church today asking, well what is God? God knows my heart today. He knows who I am. He knows my needs and my failings and thoughts and how will He expose and comfort and forgive and redeem and challenge through the living worship, living worship and relational mission where we recognize it's hard to share the gospel.

We want to do that together. We want to do it in community because some people are better at speaking, other people are better at hospitality, some are better at inviting, some are better just at serving in different ways.

And so as a people together as a community in city groups or in friendship groups in the church, we share the mission of God and we do that by serving, serving in community, serving one another, serving in love.

[20 : 09] That always seems soft, doesn't it, we say serving in love. It's much easier to be disconnected, much easier to be self-righteous and legalistic and point, it's a hard, tough reality to serve in love in a community.

But that is what makes us sweetest and most like Jesus. And that's what we want. And also within that, these are not prioritized, I think they're all together in significance and equipping discipleship.

We recognize the need to teach one another one to one, to share in the Bible studies, to be mentored, to learn, to teach leaders to bring up a new generation with all these things, discipleship, men's meetings, women's meetings, different ways of discipling one another and encouraging.

It's tough to be a Christian today. And you don't want church to be the place where you come and you're discouraged and you're desperate to leave and you think, that's over for another week.

I'll sort of stumble on until next week and then I'll survive church again. We want it to be a place you long to come to because you long to meet with God through His people, but also to meet with God through His people during the week that we have as well.

[21 : 35] Okay, I'm rambling on far more than I should have. But anyway, so we come, these areas that we have, worship, mission, community and discipleship, we've decided we structure the church organizationally in these spiritual heads as it were, and also an organizational ministry.

So we've got worship as a ministry, as a ministry team, we've got a worship ministry team that's overseen by three or four or five different people.

There's an elder, a deacon, and that's the same with all the groups. But the idea is to delegate everything down and to do it all under the spiritual oversight of the elders, the leaders.

So the worship ministry covers things like Sunday worship, preaching, prayer, the liturgy, the worship, the music, welcoming visitor assimilation, that sounds very technical and cold and community-like, sorry, welcoming people.

And keeping them is really what we're about, is that we want to welcome them and make them feel at home and keep them here because we want them for God's glory.

[22 : 43] And vision casting, it all comes under the worship and the idea of who we are and other things. That's the kind of areas that are covered and looked after by the worship ministry team. And within that, we're looking then and continually looking.

Sometimes we don't look very well, sometimes we don't understand very well what people's gifts are. So something a day like this is where we just let you know some of the needs.

And if you have musical and singing gifts, if you would like to explore praying in public or if you have reading and teaching gifts, if you're great again to some people that are really great again to know people who stand at the door and who just are wonderfully welcoming and warm, if you want to help organize church events and hospitality within that, under that heading, then there are opportunities.

And we've put out tables today, so at the end of the service, there'll be different heads of these teams will be at the tables and you can sign up if you feel so led by the Holy Spirit to do so.

But please know and recognize that these are just some of the areas in under worship that we're looking for help and support and those with gifts in that area.

[23 : 56] And then we have mission ministry team, which oversees a lot of the big stuff that we do in the visionals stuff, the church planting and the evangelism and the mercy and the international mission work that we're engaged in or support at least at some level.

And so the requests here are in a sense they're more general, it's more about ethos and the kind of attitudes we want to keep developing as a church and that we seek to recognize and know, do you have a heart for reaching out to the poor and how that looks like in the city, what looks like in our gathered congregation, your heart for sharing your faith, do you have evangelistic gifts, do you have a heart for international mission and supporting and encouraging and developing links that we have there, would you consider moving house for a church plant?

Radical. But nonetheless the kind of thinking that we want to encourage and to inspire thoughts and deliberations about when we think about mission, God centered, God glorifying, seeking to reach out and meet the needs that we believe He is putting in our path.

And then community is a third of the five ministry teams that we have, that looks after the pastoral care side of city groups as opposed to the teaching discipleship side and we've got the Sunday catering which you all benefit from and enjoy every Sunday and maybe don't think about where it comes from and who organizes it and who buys things and how it's always smooth and wonderful and the best biscuits in the free church.

And hospitality, in fact in any church, hospitality, family meals, baby meals, Struan was born this week and we like to give meals to the family who have had a baby, just one less thing for them to worry about, it's a simple and a gentle thing and it will be done through the city groups who will all have an opportunity to provide the meal and it's a nice and simple thing.

[26 : 00] Different events, connect meals in a Sunday, city group meals, all of the things that are kind of unglamorous, ordinary, hugely significant and hugely important, particularly in an increasingly isolated individualistic, lonely society and that includes Christians in the church.

So in community, we want to be, this is a phrase I've coined personally, organic and organized, so we want community to be organic, in a sense it's difficult to organize community, it's different to manufacture, the word I'm looking for, you can't manufacture community and love can you?

A practical level, we want it to be organic so that we seek to be in a community, but also as we grow it does, there does need to be a level of organization as we seek to get to know each other and seek to care for one another, so are you willing to open your home, can you host, beans on toast, that's all it needs to be, are you willing to feed church families or individuals in need, are you willing to visit the housebound or the sick, we very fortunate, we have very few who would be in that category but it's an unseen and important and significant work, are you able to serve before church, can you be part of the catering teams, we need more people to join our events team which helps when different things happen in the church, they are all down to earth and dull and boring I know, but then the fourth is discipleship and that covers adult discipleship and mentoring, creche, kids church, the den, identity, in a spiritual formation we seek to do together maybe seven days of prayer or we're considering doing a Bible reading thing all year next year which we encourage everyone to do, biblical counseling, faith and work, some of these are underdeveloped, some of them are not developed but these are the kind of areas and the works that we seek to do in discipling people in the faith and drawing them closer and closer to Jesus Christ, you may be looking at this and think I didn't know any of that goes on,

I didn't know we did these things and then that's our failure that we haven't made that clear, so discipleship ministry work some of these, do you like playing with toys, I know you do, I've seen you come to our house and play with the toys we have for the kids and shove the kids out of the way so that you can play, I know I can see that, so we need more people for creche, you know it's great to have a growing creche but we have a legal responsibility to make sure that we oversee and have the right numbers for these, for the number of children we have huge responsibility and a huge blessing and a huge challenge, so we do need more people for creche, there will be opportunities to sign up, do you have gifts in teaching children, we need more kids church teachers among some of the other discipleship issues, so these are kind of core and important needs and I know it's sacrificial, can I go back to what we were saying earlier about the kind of servants and the kind of service we look for in Christ's kingdom and then the fifth one is the kind of practical dealings that enables the building and the church and the worship service practically to happen, it's tremendously significant and important, so the sound and the screens, the communication, the website, the social media, bulletin, print materials, building management, IT, all these things, it's a whole lot of things that maybe we forget that goes to making this one hour

Sunday morning service happen in your warmth and comfort and I hope ability to read and see and be informed from the Wednesday email or the Sunday bulletin, so there's IT skills and experience, sharing your testimony on the website, practical or DIY skills, always a great need in a congregation of professional lawyers and teachers and everything else, we don't have many builders and workmen and scaffolders, we need some more, well hope not scaffolders, well we would, I would love scaffolders but not in a professional capacity because I think all that scaffolding and work has hopefully been done, photography and video, all these kind of things and it's just a reminder to us of what is happening and what we seek to do, now I know we missed out lots of things here but do speak to us, any of the elders, Deacon myself or Corey, at any time if you have an area that you're interested in, we will take your interest today if you sign up for things and we'll look at things and responsibilities and where the need is greatest and we'll try and balance out, we don't want people doing a whole lot of things because they get burnt out and it's difficult to coordinate, so we'll seek to do the very best we can under God to serve and to share together the gifts of God, so really all I would do in conclusion is to encourage you,

[31 : 26] I know we live in a hugely busy society, I know that you're, and I know that you're all genuinely, fully engaged in much of what you're doing and we also know that this isn't the only opportunities you have for Christian service and we love you to be serving and working in your communities, in your workplaces, getting to know your friends there, sharing the gospel with them and hoping you will introduce them to your wider Christian community here in the church, but if there are areas where you can serve, just lots of people doing a little to the glory of God eagerly and in His strength to keep you close to Jesus Christ and reflecting Him both in your love for one another and in your love for Him, then that would be just a wonderful outcome from today because I know it's already happening, I'm not coming here in the position of it, it's such a great example and so many people are doing so many things, it's tremendous, but as we grow we look for that to happen more, so there will be opportunities at the end of service with the tea and coffee just to meet with and to discuss and to talk through some of these things.

May God have the glory in all that He does, let's pray together. Father God we ask and pray that you would help us and that you would bless us and that you would wash over us with your cleansing grace, you'd forgive what we do with the wrong motives or what we do maybe selfishly or carelessly, but you would give us wonderful, gracious, dependent hearts to serve you.

Today I thank you for the congregation and for their incredible work and witness for their service, for their willingness to get to know people, for the opening of their homes, for opening of their hearts, opening of their lives to one another here.

Thank you for their prayers, for their friends, for their commitment to praying, to mission, to planting churches, to going the extra mile, to the risks that are involved, to not being content with just what we have for their inspiration to drive forward and to keep going and to overlook sins and to be forgiving.

They give thanks for all that they are and for all that they do and for the leadership of the congregation and for their commitment in all the business and pressures and struggles of time and effort that they give and commit to the church, for the staff who work and for what we seek to do help us to as much as possible keep things simple and relational but organized well and to God's glory and in a way that inspires and encourages us all.

[34 : 26] So I thank you on this day, on this day of remembrance and on this day when we think of those who in a very tangible but very horrific way were willing to serve their country and many have lost their lives in so doing.

And may we recognize the greater glory we have in serving the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, the crucifixion that it requires in our own hearts, crucifying us to self and to the dying to self and the living for Jesus because that is life to the fool.

May we know and recognize that today. Amen.