

PART 5: THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD (D)

"A Church of the Towel"

Read Mark 10:45, Ephesians 4:12

"The Lord's Church is called preeminently to be a serving church."

- T. Austin-Sparks

"We should be guided in all our works by this one thought alone – that we may serve and benefit others in everything that is done."

- Martin Luther

In the last three lessons, we have been looking at the identity of the church, what the church *is*. We have considered three frequent and guiding images of the church that we find in the New Testament— 1) the temple presence of Christ, 2) the kingdom outpost of Christ, and 3) the united body of Christ.

Now, in light of our identity, we want to consider what the church *does*. What is our mission as Christ's temple presence, kingdom outpost, and unified body in this world?

Recently, I was speaking with a young gentleman in the Portsmouth area, and I asked him, "What do you think the main purpose of the church is?" He thought for a second and then said, "Well, I guess it's getting people together every week and reminding them to love each other and stop being so stupid."

Distinction Between Mission and Activity

There is some truth to his comment, but our talk revealed that there is a lot of confusion (even amongst Christians) on what the mission of the church is. One of the reasons for this confusion is we often fail to make a distinction between the mission of the church and the day-to-day life and activity of the church. What I mean is that there are a lot of things the church is commanded to do. We're commanded to love God, to fear God, to love our neighbor, to walk in wisdom, humility, to forgive, to pray, to give, etc. But all these you could say is the obedience of the church, but what is our mission?

The Nature of Mission. Our English word 'mission' comes from the Latin word 'missa', which means sent. We find the same root behind our English word 'dismissal'. In a dismissal, you're merely being sent out. But in a mission you're being sent out to accomplish something. So, the question is —what is the church being sent out by God to accomplish in this world? Whatever that it is, that is our mission.

The Source of Mission. The church is not a Fortune 500 company or a mere secular organization where individuals get together and craft their own mission. We are the body of Christ, united in a divine purpose that transcends personal agendas. Our mission is not something we invent; it is a sacred calling waiting to be uncovered in the Scriptures. Christ's Word is what illuminates the church's purpose. With this in mind, the two Bible verses in this lesson act as guiding lights in discovering the mission God has for us.

Additionally, we can learn a lot about our mission from the words of Jesus at the very end of John's Gospel, when Jesus said, "As the father has sent me so I am sending you" (John 20:21b). What was Jesus sent to do? From our passage in Mark, we see that Jesus was fundamentally sent to serve. And tying this to us, in our Ephesians passage we're told that the church is to be equipped—mended or knit together—for the work of what? Ministry. The word ministry means service. Every type of church ministry is a type of service. Therefore, just as it was with Jesus, the church has been sent out by God to serve.

1. The Identity and Mission of Jesus. As the church of Christ, we derive our identity and our mission from Jesus himself. Who is Jesus? He is both Beloved Son, and Holy Servant. Jesus wasn't a beloved son or a holy servant, he was both. His sonship did not negate his servanthood, and his servanthood did not negate his sonship. It was from the assurance of his sonship that he was sent out to serve.

A Handful of Examples. In Isaiah 53, and other passages in the OT, we're told that the mission of the Messiah was to be a suffering servant. Matthew, when speaking of Jesus, quotes Isaiah, "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles" (Matthew 12:18). And elsewhere, what does Jesus himself say? "I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:27b). Peter in his prayer in Acts identifies Jesus as "your holy servant" (Acts 4:27). And Paul says, "He took the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:7).

How did Jesus serve? The life of Jesus on this earth was a life of comprehensive service. Scholars have recognized a seven-fold ministry of Jesus.

- Jesus served by leading his disciples to attend the sacred festivals and synagogues, to sing hymns, and to pray—1) the ministry of worship.
- Jesus served by preaching and teaching the word—2) the ministry of discipleship.
- Jesus served by loving and listening and building community—3) the ministry of fellowship.
- Jesus served by sharing the gospel and reaching the lost—4) the ministry of evangelism.
- Jesus served by healing the sick, doing justice, and showing compassion to those in need—5) the ministry of mercy.
- Jesus served by dying for our sins at the cross—6) the ministry of reconciliation/peacemaking.
- Jesus served by establishing the New Covenant church – 7) the ministry of church planting.

Jesus' entire life was characterized by both sonship and servanthood. It was from the assurance of His identity as the Father's Beloved Son that He was sent out as the Father's Holy Servant.

2. The Identity and Mission of the Church. As the church of Christ, we are given in Christ both the identity of sonship (chapters 1–3) and the mission of servanthood (chapters 4–6). We're told in chapter 1 of Ephesians that we have been adopted as God's children and "blessed in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:5–6). The first three chapters of Ephesians is all about the spiritual riches and resources we have as the royal children of God in Christ. Then, as an overflow of the gospel, Ephesians 4–6 is all about the mission we have been given as the servants of God in Christ. The order of these six chapters is critical because we do not serve in order to be saved; we're saved in order to serve. And once you see that the central mission of the church is comprehensive service, you'll find it all throughout the New Testament.

A Handful of Examples. Describing the unbelieving world in Romans 1, Paul says, "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25). It's never a question of whether you're going to serve, but rather who or what you're going to serve. A Christian is someone who has "turned from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

But make no mistake, serving the Lord is not the opposite of freedom, or a form of self-atonement; it is the discovery of true freedom in response to Christ's atonement. As Paul says, "But now we are released from the law...so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit" (Romans 7:6). The new way of the Spirit is serving from a deep assurance that we are the forever children of God who have been given all we need to serve Him and others. We hear the same thing from Peter: "Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God" (Peter 2:16). What do we long to hear one day from Jesus? "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23).

Are we children of God? Yes! That captures our core identity. Are we servants of God? Yes! That captures our central mission. Ministry is not a profession for a select few; it's a way of life for every believer. The church is a missional community of dignified servants (royal priesthood) who bear witness to the gospel of Jesus.

In what primary ways do we serve? As the church of Christ we are joining in the ongoing sevenfold ministry of Christ. In short, Jesus served and Jesus still serves today through His church (See Acts 1:1, Colossians 1:24). We serve by the Spirit in the same comprehensive way Jesus served—through the ministry of 1) worship, 2) discipleship, 3) fellowship, 4) evangelism, 5) mercy, 6) peacemaking, and 7) church planting.

Jesus went on to say, “And you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). Our sevenfold comprehensive service bears witness to the truth and power of the gospel.

What is the mission of the church? As the temple presence of Christ, kingdom outpost of Christ, and unified body of Christ, you could say our mission is to be a joyful witness to the gospel of Jesus through serving the Lord, each other, our community, and the world.

The way to be great. Let’s close this lesson with a simple children’s poem that can reframe the way we think about greatness and ministry “success.”

“There once was a girl who had to be great. To do big things and grand things before it’s too late. She had grown very tired of the job that she had. Taking care of her brother was making her mad. She thought, ‘A much bigger job – I deserve this one thing!’ And so the girl decided to meet with the King. She made an appointment and the day finally came. She was ushered right in and the King called her by name. She said, ‘Cant you give me something better to do? I want to shine bright; I want to serve you! I want to stand tall and know I’m a star.’ The King said, ‘Okay, serve me right where you are!’

The little girl went home mad and upset. ‘There must be some mistake,’ she said, ‘I’m not through with this yet.’ So she marched to the king and she opened the door, ‘Please let me be great,’ she asked him once more. The King smiled back and said, ‘you’re already a star just go home and serve me right where you are.’ The girl hung her head and wanted to cry. ‘All I want is to shine and reach for the sky.’ She went back to her home and started to ball. ‘It’s no use,’ she thought. ‘I’m done with it all.’

But the next day she thought, ‘I know what I’ll do, I’ll ask the King this – how am I serving you?’ So she asked the King this and to her surprise, the King had a tear of joy in his eyes.

He said to the girl, ‘If you only knew, that your brother is my grandson I’ve entrusted to you. I’ve hidden him away so the throne would be safe, I’ve given him to the care of someone so great.’

She couldn’t believe it. Could it really be true, the future king was the brother she knew? The girl ran home with joy in her heart. She hugged her little brother and began a new start. And just like that girl, to be a great star, just keep serving the King right where you are. You are doing the work that’s been appointed for you, by the King who sees all that you do.”

How do we become a great church? Greatness is not measured by large attendance numbers or state-of-the-art facilities. According to Jesus, it’s determined by service. “The greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 23:11). To be a great church we just keep serving the King right where we are. For if our mission is to serve, then regardless of visible results, our joyful service as a “church of the towel” is nothing short of success.