

Serving the Family

Genesis 45:4-13; John 13:12-21; Romans 12:3-13



As the body of Christ, we are part of God's family. Being part of my family includes responsibilities of service. Sometimes we serve with joy and grace, at other times without. Do I have to take out the garbage? Don't you want to do the dishes tonight? Why does the dirty laundry have to smell? We often view our responsibilities as chores, but they are also opportunities to help one another. When we each do our part, we all come out ahead. Serving the family is really just learning how to live. Ministry at home becomes a model for ministry elsewhere.

Sometimes families don't make life easy. Joseph had always been at odds with his half brothers. Today's reading finds Joseph at a particular advantage to exact revenge for being mistreated. For a while, Joseph fell prey to a desire for retaliation. In the end, he chose to set aside selfish concerns to meet the needs of his family. It was not an easy decision for him.

Joseph had been sold into slavery, though the brothers had first plotted his death. What kind of allegiance did he owe them after such ill treatment? They had disowned him, disregarding his life and their relationship as worthless. In his new position of power in Egypt, the brothers came seeking food for their families. Why should he still consider them his brothers? They had denied his kinship by selling him as a slave. Sure, he wanted to renew contact with his father and Benjamin, but these brothers before him had abused him, treating him like dirt!

Joseph finally decided that his responsibilities toward them were more important than the quality of the brothers' deeds. He decided that meeting their needs was more important than settling scores. He set aside the pettiness of revenge to deal in grace. From his position of power, he became a servant of his family's needs. Their relationship was still difficult, but it gained new life under graceful service.

Sometimes the harder part of service is the receiving. Jesus called the disciples to submit to His performing menial service for them. They were uncomfortable. It was a lesson in leadership and loving others. They were concerned with being great in the kingdom that was fast approaching. Jesus did not care so much for the concepts of greatness. He cared for the concept of loving service.

Peter struggled with allowing Jesus to wash his feet. Likely, there were two issues involved. There was the "I am not worthy" portion of the equation. There was also the concern that position precludes menial service. Jesus laid both issues to rest. His words and actions focus attention to the fact that service has nothing to do with a person's worth. No service is beneath us, and no one unworthy of our service.

The words are simply to hear. Living up to them is not. How do you respond when a sick drunk becomes your responsibility? The landlord and neighbors complain of the stench of diarrhea of one too drunk and sick to find the bathroom. Do you bathe him in the shower when he is too drunk to stand upright? Do you clean and disinfect the house simply because you have met him and know his need?

Service and ministry within the body of Christ is preparation for our mission in the world. We learn to serve among those we love. We learn to extend that to others in a church family. We learn to

reach out to a broader body of Christ in our community. Each step reminds us of the scope of God's love, far exceeding the limits of our own.

Sometimes the difficult part of service is its requirement of humility. In meeting the needs of others, I must set my needs aside. We have heard that part of the message over and over. At the same time, however, I must allow others to meet my needs. To do so, I must accept that I have them. Contrary to the ideals of the can-do pioneering spirit, we were not created for independence and self-reliance. God created us for interdependence. We were fashioned for living as community and family. As the body of Christ, we meet each other's needs. We feed the hungry, provide for the poor, minister to the needs of the sick, bereaved, friendless, homeless, and hurting. We minister to the needs of others not to gain the goal of a pedestal, but from a sense of love, compassion, and honesty.

Too often, we think of serving the needy as the correct side of the equation. Unintentionally, we equate being needy with failure. We don't condemn these in need outright. We classify our own needs as failure. We deem it failure to achieve that ideal of self-reliance. It is as though we equate self-reliance with God's design. Having needs is no moral failure, it is human. We were created to need one another. We were created to rely on one another. We were created to serve one another.

Sometimes we forget that service is one of the essential purposes for our existence. It brings meaning to life. Paul reminds us that service is to be offered with a smile. Service should flow as an expression of worship. It is a gift in response to God's love. It is the practical way that we carry out our surrender to Christ Jesus. It is the "how to" of presenting our whole selves as living sacrifices to God.

Participation in active service is not an extra activity for the especially spiritual few. It is the very expression of our daily worship and belonging to the body of Christ. Furniture was not crafted for museum displays. Cars were not designed for the show room floor. Farm tractors were not built for downtown parades. Each was designed as a useful tool. Its purpose is fulfilled in the tasks for which it is best adapted. We are not so different.

We were equipped with different abilities, each with a purpose. So now Paul reminds us that the express reason for having abilities is that we might use them in service to others. We often talk of spiritual gifts as the express means through which our Christian service is expressed. We seek to define our spiritual gifts as though to limit the scope of our ministry to those areas of special gifting. If we read the New Testament carefully, however, spiritual gifts are God's special anointing for those moments when our talents and abilities do not cut the mustard. Peter spoke in tongues at Pentecost, but used John Mark as his interpreter. Paul essentially tells us that all of our abilities and possibilities of service are to be used as an expression of our worship.

Service then has nothing to do with worthiness. It is an expression of worship. John Wesley spoke of doing all the good we can by whatever means we can to all the people we can as long as we can. This is the attitude of service. This is the expression of worship for our daily living. We serve the family, not because of who they are or what they do, but because of God. It is one of the responsibilities and joys of being part of the family. It is in serving and in being served that we become like Christ. What will be the shape of your ministry? We were equipped to be useful. How will we serve together as members of God's family?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*