



# Mutuality in Service

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### Mark 9:38-50

It is easy to get comfortable with our routines, positions, and standing in life, so comfortable we forget the purposes behind them. We find patterns for our living and quickly adjust to them with little thought for why those patterns came to be. If we are not careful, we miss the purpose and fail to accomplish our intended goals. We get sidetracked by the comfortable, the secure, the tested and tried. We lose sight of the bigger picture. That's what happened so often to Jesus' disciples.

This time it wasn't Peter who stuck his foot in his mouth, it was John. "Lord, we saw a man casting out demons in the authority of your name and forbade him, since he is not one of us."

John did not see the irony of his words. John missed completely that his action had little bearing on the direction of Jesus' ministry or even the purpose for God creating flesh to live among us. To be honest, his actions had no relationship at all with Jesus, nor had Jesus really entered the picture when he and the others had taken their stance to inhibit this stranger from casting out demons in the authority of Jesus' name. They had not been really thinking of Jesus, but of themselves.

They were not looking at issues of purpose. They were not looking at Jesus' concerns over what he wanted to accomplish. They were not assessing the man's actions and attitudes in relationship with those of Jesus, whose name and authority he was using. They were looking at themselves. They were struggling with issues of their own status, standing, authority, meaning, and worth.

The questions to which they were reacting went something like this. If this guy we've never met can come along and cast out demons in Jesus' name and authority, what happens with our standing among the people? Here we have been following Jesus daily for some time, traveling with him all around, listening daily to his teachings, going on mission trips under Jesus' direction, helping with the teaching responsibilities, watching his healing ministry, helping with the feeding of the crowds. This guy does none of that, but goes out on his own to claim Jesus' authority over unclean spirits and starts his own ministry without any of the preparation we are getting.

We can't let him do that! He needs the same equipping we are getting before starting such a thing. He should at least come to be sanctioned by Jesus and submit to a crash course we might offer him. Who does he think he is? He is not one of us! He has not been through what we have experienced. If Jesus is still working on us, this guy has not even started the process!

It's not fair! He is telling the world that our commitment to Jesus, our dedication to following Jesus' teaching, our daily serving and preparation is of no value! He is just claiming authority and embarking on a mission with no basis or background! How dare he insult us that way!

They were focusing so much on themselves, they missed the whole point. They were too concerned with protecting their turf, protecting their credentials, shining a spotlight on themselves, that they missed the pattern, direction, and priorities of the one they were following. Jesus was not interested in credentials for the sake of credentials. Jesus was not interested in structure or organization for the sake of structure and organization. Jesus was concerned about ministering grace, freedom, and salvation to one and all.

Oh, there was a point to their following Jesus. Yes, there was merit and blessing in being one of the twelve who sat at Jesus' feet and assisted in his ministry. That was never to have taken the limelight, however. The point of Jesus' ministry was not to build a hierarchy, an organization, an institution that would need protection from outsiders. The point of Jesus' ministry, the purpose of God creating flesh to live among us on earth, was about a ministry of reconciliation between humanity and God.

Jesus' answer is telling. He says, "Don't worry so much about him. You will in no way lose your reward because he ministers in a different way, serves me in a different manner, or does not meet with you expectations. Rather than worry so much about his ministry, you ought to focus on the purpose behind yours."

I have a task for you. I have a mission for you to accomplish.

That mission does not depend on my being perfect. That mission does not depend on the knowledge and understanding I have acquired in my discipleship. That mission does not depend on the days or years of dedication I have under my belt. It depends upon the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of Christ Jesus who gave his life on my behalf.

Paul deals with the same issue in Romans 14. He says that my decisions regarding the eating or not eating meat sacrificed to idols is no grounds for breaking the unity of the body of Christ. He says that attitudes and decisions regarding the proper day of the week for worship is no reason for breaking apart the body of Christ. Issues like these, things we might call doctrinal conformity or religious tradition, are no grounds for ripping apart the body of Christ. At the end of the day, we are all failures. We are every one of us guilty of not measuring up to the standards set by Christ Jesus.

We do not love enough. We do not forgive enough. We do not offer grace nearly as freely as we receive it. We have no standing. We have no position. We have no authority of our own. The only thing of worth we have is what Christ Jesus has done for us. It is on that basis that we are called to serve Christ Jesus, not on any merit or worth of our own. If it is by grace we are saved, redeemed, and commissioned, why do we feel an imperative to judge, criticize, or condemn another who is not so different from ourselves?

If we assume the responsibility to condemn others for not measuring up to our standards, we are effectively throwing away the grace on which our own acceptance is based. At the end of the day, we have no standing above others. We have no position of worth to set us apart. We are simply failures who have been loved supremely by God. For by grace are we saved, and this does not originate with us, but with God. Any standing we have is not ours, but what God has accomplished and created within us.

John was concerned with his own worth, as were the others for whom he spoke. Jesus said, "Don't worry about your reward. That is not at stake." We must allow others to serve Christ, as well. Their ministry is not a reflection of our worth or reward. It is a reflection of God's grace. We should be concerned for serving God, and less about how others might do it differently. Allow Jesus to be Lord, and just become servants. Otherwise, we just throw grace out the window. We shift the issue onto our personal worthiness. Should our standing in Christ no longer be based on the grace of God, then we really should worry. As long as we focus on our mutual service to Christ Jesus, we remain free in the security of God's grace, in spite of our own failings and the failings of others.

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