

Walking with God as a Servant

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[0 : 01] This is the word of the Lord. Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you, but do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for people to see. They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long. They love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues. They love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called rabbi by others.

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth father, for you have one father and he is in heaven.

Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant.

[1 : 17] For those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Amen. I want to go back with everything now to Matthew chapter 23.

Matthew 23, we read it earlier. And I'm going to think with you about what it means to be a servant, because that's really the key to what Jesus says here, that to be a servant is the greatest thing of all.

So Matthew chapter 23, verse 11, the greatest among you will be your servant.

So that's kind of where we're going. Thinking about the kind of habits that shape us as human beings and good habits, spiritual habits that form us to be more like Jesus.

And so as we walk through the season of life, how do we walk with Jesus in a way that we can be servants of others?

[2 : 24] Got a little picture here of a kid playing with Play-Doh. So if you know what Play-Doh is, it's like plasticine. It's kind of soft and malleable. And you can shape it into lots of different things.

And that's true of us as human beings to a certain extent as well, isn't it? That the different pressures that come upon us, the different things that weigh in us in life, shape us that we also are malleable to some extent.

That people and circumstances and life can squeeze us in different ways. And shape how we feel and what we think and what we do with ourselves.

So kind of one of the questions I want to ask as we start off is just what's shaping you right now?

What's shaping the way that you see the world, the way that you're coping with COVID, the way that you're living in the day-to-day, the way that you feel and think about things?

What's shaping you? It might be Netflix and media and just all the time that you spend looking at a screen. It might be the 24-hour news cycle that's shaping your thoughts and feelings.

[3 : 42] It might be your social media feed. So all of that stuff can come in and weigh on us and really affect how we feel, what we're doing with ourselves, how we think about things.

But really, the thing that should weigh on us most, the primary influence in our life, the thing that should shape us most is God himself, our maker.

And so we want God to really weigh in our lives at this time, for God to be the primary influence in our thoughts and feelings, shaping our minds and hearts to be kind, helpful people in a world of chronic warriors and keyboard warriors.

So that's how some people are reacting to what's going on, worry, anger. But we want to be helpful, kind, servant-hearted people, not wrapped up in our worries and concerns and fears, but thoughtful and outgoing in how we're connecting with others.

If God is good, if God is love, if God is joy, if God is life, then that's who we want to be shaping who we are.

[4 : 56] We don't want the virus. We don't want the pandemic. We don't want the government or the economy to be the thing that shapes how we see everything. More than all our struggles, what we want is for God to leave the biggest mark on our lives to shape who we are, how we're living, and so drawing near to God is really important for all of us.

You might be still thinking that through. Am I somebody who believes in God? What difference would God make to my life? And I want to say that as Christians, our desire is to draw near to God so that his peace, joy, and love are the primary influences on our lives, that his heart of kindness moulds us so that we too will have a heart of kindness, even during the hard things of COVID. We want to draw near to God because he takes us beyond the narrowness and the nearness of our own horizons into a bigger world, a bigger story, a story about loving God and loving others and where that will shape us more than anything else.

So how can we be good servants of others in a time of COVID? Because Jesus says, this is our Thursday thought, the greatest among you will be your servant.

And that is a subversive thought. It's an act of resistance to embrace the teaching of Jesus here because our human nature and our culture will tell us, I'm here to be served.

[6 : 39] Other people need to meet my needs. But Jesus flips that and says, no, let's undermine that whole way of doing life and instead just think about what it means to be concerned, not with our own needs, but the needs of others.

Not to be hanging about waiting for other people to serve us, but being proactive and thinking, how do I serve them? The greatest among you will be your servant.

What does a great life look like? What does a good life, a flourishing life look like? It looks like a life where serving others is a habit, a reflex, just something that we normally and naturally do.

So first point, we are saved to serve. Jesus rescues us. He saves us from sin, brokenness, lostness, judgment, hell, condemnation.

That's what he rescues us from. What does he rescue us for? To live a new life, a life of love and of service. We are saved to serve.

[7 : 50] As a family, we have been enjoying some awesome TV during lockdown. And here's one of the great programs that we've really enjoyed.

I don't know if you can see that or not. It's Bear Grylls. And it's a program that's been on Amazon recently called World's Toughest Race. It's about expedition racing.

66 teams of four people are racing over 650 kilometers. And they have 11 days to complete the race.

The winners do it much faster than that. They have to climb mountains. They have to navigate their way through jungles. They have to walk up rivers mile after mile of boulders and water and waterfalls.

They have to climb cliffs. They have to canoe across oceans. It's a really incredibly challenging event. And there are a few teams in this event that are in it to win it.

[8 : 53] And these teams are absolutely incredible. And there's no room for weakness in these people. They are just machines. But the majority of teams in the world's toughest race are actually quite different from that.

I mean, they're obviously very fit, capable people. But they're not in it to win it. They're much more about the experience, about the journey, about doing this together. And in those teams, there is space for weakness.

People with dodgy knees, bad backs, replacement hips, or even an old guy with Alzheimer's is brought on to one of the teams. And these teams work in such a really attractive, compelling way. The way that they really help each other through this race is amazing. It's really moving to watch it. That all the time they're serving each other, encouraging each other, helping each other along. And as they do so, they form really powerful bonds of community and love. They forget themselves and their own needs and their own exhaustion. And they help others through the uphill slogs, through the thick jungle bush, through moments of exhaustion, through moments even of breakdown.

[10 : 04] The way these teams work, no one is forgotten and no one is left behind. This is inspirational TV. It's also a great picture of the church.

No one is left behind. No one is forgotten. The weakest members are honoured. We help each other to get through when things are really tough.

We help each other. We serve each other. When Jesus says we're to be servants, he's saying we're to be helpers. We're to serve. We're to help each other. And the kind of team spirit that you see on World's Toughest Race is really Christ-like, isn't it?

And that sense of putting others first and helping each other and forgetting nobody. And all of these teams, of course, have a leader who does everything that he or she can in their power to get all the other team members to the finishing line.

And in our team as a church family, we've all to help each other move forward through the toughest obstacles, through the hardest times. We don't forget anyone.

[11:13] We don't leave anyone behind. But I want to say this really clearly. Our team has the best leader. We have Jesus. And what's Jesus up to in a time of COVID?

Every day he is serving you. Every day he's helping you. Every day he's doing all that he can and that all needs to happen to allow you to move ahead.

Because he's serving us, we have everything that we need so that we can then serve others. God pours into us so that we can then help others.

So we are to be helpers. God is a helper. God is our help, our refuge, our strength, the Psalms tell us. And when he's shaping our lives, we become helpers too.

The more you draw near to God, the more God weighs on you and shapes your life and makes an impression on who you are, the more you'll become a helper of other people.

[12:16] I've really been enjoying this verse the last week or two. Because, I don't know, COVID makes me feel miserable a lot of the time. And I just think this is just something I've got to grip my teeth and get through and it's not going to be good.

And it's just, you know, it's going to be the pits. And I just can't wait for it to be over. And then I read a verse like this and I'm like, well, maybe I've got this wrong. God is able to make all grace abound to you so that in all things, at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. So, all things, pandemics even, at all times, even during a time of lockdown, God has seen this, that I will have all I need and that you will have all that you need.

Why? Because his grace keeps abounding to us, even during hard times. And because his grace abounds to us, even in the time of COVID, then we're able to do every good work.

We're able to help others. We're able to forget ourselves. We're able to escape being wrapped up in our own misery to step outside that and to do every good work.

[13:35] So, what's shaping you? The media, the news, your social media feeds, they will tell you this is a time of great deprivation.

You're deprived of freedoms. You're deprived of social contact. You're deprived of opportunity.

You're deprived of your holidays. You're deprived of friendship and social contact.

You're deprived of work, perhaps, or money. And you've just got to grit your teeth, survive it, get through it. But we're not being told that we might actually flourish in this time.

We're not being told that we might actually grow spiritually, despite the hard season. And that we will grow spiritually and flourish even, because the Lord is with us and will make all grace abound to us.

God's grace still abounds today. And you have everything you need today because you have Jesus. And he is more than enough to allow us to flourish.

[14:38] So, that's what I want us to really get hold of then. It's get hold of Jesus. Get hold of the salvation life you have in Jesus. And see that that life is not just there as a therapy to make you feel better.

But it's there to enrich you so that you can serve others and enrich the world around you. Enrich the relationships around you. You are saved so that you can serve.

And serving matters more than status, doesn't it? So, that's the second thing that I'm saying. This story, we've got these religious leaders, these Pharisees that we read about.

And, you know, they have a place of authority and respect in their culture. And so, insofar as they teach scripture, Jesus says they should be listened to.

But he also points out an incredible hypocrisy amongst these religious leaders. They do not do, they do not practice what they preach.

[15 : 42] They tie up heavy loads, put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. So, there's a critique of the Pharisees here. And what's Jesus' key critique is this.

These religious leaders are not helpful. They are not helpful people. And they are not helping you. And so, they are not godlike or godly.

They may be religious, but there's something wrong with their religion. It's crushing. God helps us, but Pharisees crush us.

God takes our burdens, but Pharisees add to our burdens. And they burden us in order to promote themselves. They're motivated by a desire for praise and admiration. Look at what good people we are, they say.

They scheme, fight, struggle for positions of power. And they won't serve others. They want others to serve them.

[16 : 48] They won't lift a finger to help anyone else. It's their kingdom, their vision, their ego, their ambitions. And if people get hurt along the way, that doesn't really matter.

Because their cause is righteous. Now, I just want to say that that kind of religion is toxic, isn't it? I mean, these people wouldn't have seemed like bad people on the surface.

You know, they were very respectable. They're working hard, they say, to lead the Jewish people back to God. But what they're doing is creating a crushing spiritual burden for people of unrealistic lifestyles that nobody can live up to.

And they say, that's what a good person is. That's what you have to be. And all they're doing is they're showboating. They wear outfits with their phylacteries, which are little boxes that carry bits of scripture.

And their tassels that were attached to their prayer robes. And they're showboating their spiritual or religious elitism. And all they're doing, really, is they're locking everyone else out.

[18 : 04] They're relying on human effort, human obedience, rather than Christ's work and Christ's obedience. So when we think about religion, we have to be discriminating, don't we?

To say, is this something that is good, that allows people to flourish, or is it something that crushes humans and destroys them? Is this about the abuse of spiritual power and manipulation of others? Or is it about serving others and loving others and laying down our lives? So if you're exploring religion, apply this test. Does this religious idea, does this religious teaching give me rest?

Or does it just tell me to try harder? Because the Pharisees were all about try harder, be a better person. Whereas Jesus was like, well, you can't actually do that.

So I'm going to obey the law for you. I'm going to die for your sin. I'm going to give you a salvation that you can never earn on your own. I want us then to just really think carefully about how we serve others.

[19 : 15] And whatever position God has put us in life. How we let go of the desire for prominence and for control over others and power. Because true greatness lies not in prominence but in service.

In helping others more than being helped. This is the upside down kingdom of Jesus, isn't it? We go low to be lifted high. We make ourselves nothing and Christ is everything.

We don't invest everything in ourselves but we invest all we have in others. We're not status conscious. We're helpers. And Jesus says if you're not a helper, you're a hypocrite.

Because faith without works is dead. If you're going to be saved, if you're going to follow Jesus, be clear. This is what Jesus is calling you to. To be a servant of others.

And his servant heart where he lays down his life for us is what shapes the servant heart in us. That we'll lay ourselves down for others. So be a servant hearted person.

[20 : 29] Now service means serving someone other than yourself. That's where I want to go with this. This is not a self-interested altruism. I was reading a book last night called The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins.

And he talks about the basis for sort of human morality and goes back to the selfish gene. And the ideas that he expounded there. And just this idea of self-interested altruism.

Jesus takes us somewhere different from that. And to a giving of self. That's actually a dying to me. And a living for something else.

Something greater. So we're not just about serving ourselves. We're not just about serving others for what we get out of it. I was reading this book, Destructive Witness.

And he talks about, you know, there are lots of good people who are not religious. Lots of people who do a lot of good in this world who are not religious. And Alan Noble talks about that as a horizontal transcendence.

[21 : 33] That we find meaning, purpose and fulfillment for ourselves in serving others. We're serving others ultimately because the end is to make ourselves feel better about the brokenness of our lives.

And Jesus takes us out of that and says, no, that you're not the end. You're not. It's not about you in the end. It's about something greater and better than you. Something more lasting.

Something more wonderful. And so we don't just serve others for our own sake. We become much more other-centered.

So how do we do that? Well, often in our lives there is a gap between what we say and what we do. That's what Jesus is critiquing here.

There used to be a thing in the London Underground, I don't know if it's still there, that said, mind the gap. Every time a train came in at the station, it would say, mind the gap, because there was a gap between the edge of the platform and the train. And you had to mind the gap.

[22 : 32] For many believers, there's a gap between what we say and how we live. We think, we claim to be servants of others, but actually the life we live is very self-centered, self-indulgent.

Alan Noble in this lovely little book here, *Disruptive Witness*, talks about that as excarnation. And excarnation is where we do not embody our relationship with God.

It's just something in our heads. It doesn't change what we do with our bodies. We have all these beliefs in our heads, but they don't affect what we do in the day-to-day. Whereas actually Christians are to be people of incarnation.

We bodily incarnate the love and the kindness of God to serve them. And we want to serve others because it's helpful. And we want to serve others because it's disruptive.

It's an act of resistance in a me-centered, narcissistic culture. As we serve others, as we die to self and give ourselves for others, then it reminds people Jesus is still present in his people and in this world.

[23 : 40] That there is virtue and there is goodness. So I want to ask you to do this. Write down three ways that you're serving someone in your family or your flatmates or your spouse.

So can you think of three things that you do regularly and habitually to serve someone that you live with or someone in your family circle if you live on your own? Write down three ways that you habitually serve others at Cornerstone if you're part of our church family.

And, you know, you might have a memory of what you used to do pre-COVID, but I'm asking what are you doing now to serve others? What are three acts of kindness that you're showing to others in Cornerstone?

Three habits that you've got. Write them down. Three ways that I'm serving my colleagues. Three habits that I use. Or my school friends.

Three ways I serve my community. Habitually, just as a reflex, without thought. This is my muscle memory. This is just what I do. Ways of serving my neighbour or volunteering or going to local shops and supporting local businesses.

[25 : 05] So make serving others a habit or reflex a muscle memory. Find ways to connect with others and devote yourselves to this purpose.

Now, I don't want to just be a Pharisee and lay some more burdens on your shoulder. I don't want you to leave this sermon thinking, Neil McMillan just gave me a list of 12 ways I have to serve other people and it's just too much for me and I can't do it.

How do we live a life of service without that making us busy or proud or exhausted? Through Jesus. Because Jesus is still serving you every day. He is helping you serve others. He is calming you each day in the face of worry.

He's strengthening you each day in the face of weakness. He's protecting you each day in the face of adversity. He's providing you for you each day. In the face of need, he's shepherding you each day.

[26 : 16] Every day, the God of heaven and earth is bustling around, being your servant, helping you, making sure that you have everything you need. So you don't do this out of your own strength or resources.

He's serving you, providing what you need so that you can rest in him and serve others. And Jesus is strengthening you.

The way he serves us frees us to serve others. So your vertical relationship with God, that relationship with Jesus, that daily relationship with Jesus that we want to shape us, we want that to be the primary thing every day in our lives, feeding into us, nourishing our souls, so that our horizontal relationships with each other will not deplete us, will not be so demanding that they destroy us.

We're resourced and nourished every day by our relationship with God so that we can give to others rather than being super needy and making them our source of hope and life.

We don't need to be transactional in our giving because God is our strength. We can give freely without looking for anything back.

[27 : 31] We can be hyper generous. Second Corinthians, I've been reading a lot in chapter eight, it tells us that in severe trials, a Macedonian church was going through a time of terrible trial, worse than pandemic even.

And out of that severe trial, amazing generosity welled up from them. Mind-blowing generosity. Why? Because God's grace abounded to them.

God makes all grace abound to you so that in all things at all times, having all you need, you will abound in every good work. So how is God's grace flowing to you in a time of COVID?

Through the Bible, through prayer, through connecting with other Christians, through enjoying the beauty of the world around you.

I just love what Rosalind said about God painting the skies every day and the beauty that there is to enjoy there. So treasure God's grace communicated especially through his word and through prayer.

[28 : 37] And then let God's grace flow from you. So that's the question, isn't it? How is grace flowing to you? Answer that if you can. How is grace flowing from you?

And take practical steps to connect with people, to serve them. It might just be sending a little text. How are you doing? It might be phoning somebody. It might be forming a little prayer relationship with somebody.

Say, let's pray for each other every week and let's pray together every week. Or go for a walk or whatever we're actually allowed to do at any particular point in this process. So Jesus still serves you.

Jesus strengthens you. I want to say, worship Jesus. If the Bible is true, you were made to worship God. That's where you'll flourish.

Worship Jesus. He served us by giving his life. He's a great savior. And we trust him. And we love him.

[29 : 39] He died for us. And so we adore him. He brings good folk from evil. He brings beauty from ashes. He brings joy from sorrow. He brings life from death.

So we praise him and exalt his name together. So invest your life in worship. Listen to good songs that help you worship God.

Read your Bible. Talk to people that help you worship God. Pray with people that will help you worship God. Look around you to see what there is in this world that causes you to worship.

That gives you habits of gratitude and thanksgiving. Because it's a life of worship that will move us to serve others.

It's a life of worship that reminds us that we are not the end. That this is not all just about our personal fulfillment. But we are about glorifying God. That he's the end of all things.

[30 : 37] It helps us shift every day from a world where everything's focused on us and our concerns and our ideas. And our fulfillment. It helps us shift from that to a world where everything's focused on God and his glory.

So to be a follower of Jesus, let me be clear. To be a follower of Jesus is not just about believing in God. But it's about developing a movement of worship in your life.

It's about moving towards God so you are shaped by him and his presence. His glory weighs on you, marks you, impresses itself upon you.

So that you are a different kind of person in this world. A different kind of presence. And as God shapes you in this way, you will then take a different shape with others.

It will shape the way that you are with your family, with your friends, with your colleagues, with your neighbors. So please take simple steps of worship.

[31 : 41] Stop to say thank you for the good things that God has given you. Stop to say thank you for the beauty in the world around you. Pray with a person when they talk to you about their needs.

And at different times in the day, just stop and invite God into the moment. Lord, I've got this bit of work to do now. Help me with it. May I do it in a way that glorifies you. May I do it in a way that gives me pleasure and you glory.

Acknowledge God's presence with you in the ordinary moments of life. Let his glory, his being, his goodness weigh in to the very ordinary, normal, pedestrian moments of your life.

So that those moments are shaped not by mundaneness or worry or fear. But so that those moments are shaped by glory.

And that lifts you out of yourself and frees you to be a servant of others. That's what a great life looks like.

[32 : 45] That is also a long sermon. So let me just pray and we'll finish. God, we want to be different from the way we are. God, we want to be different from the world. So often we're too wrapped up in our fears, worries, concerns, our own fulfillment and selfishness.

Take us away from that to a life lived in your presence. A life shaped by what is ultimately good and beautiful and wonderful, your glory.

And may the way that we are with you shape the way that we are with others. Amen.