

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Service

Fifth in a Series of Ten Sermons

July 12, 2020

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 1 of 5

To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us. Psalm 123: 1-2

Dear Friends in Christ,

- Five weeks ago: Discipleship: Living as a pilgrim in it for the long haul vs. as a tourist looking for instant gratification
- Four weeks ago: Repentance of sin vs. explaining or defending sin
- Three weeks ago: Trusting in providence of God vs. seeing life as playing the deck of cards you've been dealt
- Last week: Worship giving a 1)workable structure for life, 2)nurturing our relationship with God, 3) place to focus on decisions of God
- Today: Servanthood focused on Christ

There are two kinds of basketball players in the huddle, those who are distracted and looking into the crowd and only half way paying attention and those whose eyes are fixed on their coach and listening closely to every word.

There are at least two kinds of teachers, those who are just sort of going through the motions and surviving the day and those who have this grand vision of students learning and growing and becoming all that God is calling them to be.

There are at least two kinds of volunteers in the church, those who are just sort of doing their duties with no particular enthusiasm, and those who are compelled by the love of Jesus Christ to respond in generous and cheerful fashion.

There are at least two kinds of New Testament Christians, those who have stumbled into a lukewarm and ho-hum kind of a discipleship and those whose eyes are fixed on their Savior, their hearts are delighted to be receiving the good gifts of their God, and their attitudes are inspiring to those around.

In our sermon today, we will be exploring three different truths of what it means to be a servant following in the footsteps of our Suffering Servant, our Savior Jesus Christ. First will be the posture, and secondly the expectations, and third, the attitude of a faithful Christian.

Truth #1 is that the posture of a faithful servant is one of attentive responsiveness.

God has presented Himself to us in the history of Jesus Christ as a servant. One of the dangers of knowing that is that we begin to pray as if God is some sort of a celestial vending

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Service

Fifth in a Series of Ten Sermons

July 12, 2020

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 2 of 5

machine. Insert your prayer, and out comes a gift you have selected. Isn't it true that Jesus Himself declares, "***Ask and you shall receive, seek, and you shall find, knock, and the door will be opened to you.***"

But God didn't sacrifice His only Son only so that we could have a guilt free and pleasant life here on earth, He redeemed us so that we could join Him on a redemptive mission. Jesus Christ didn't wash the feet of His disciples just to prove He was a humble and nice person, He performed that lowly task as a way of motivating us to stay down low in life, as a way of impressing upon us that before we can do the tasks of a servant, we need to take the posture of a servant.

Eugene Peterson translates verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 123, "***I look to you, heaven-dwelling God, look up to you for help. Like servants, alert to their master's commands, like a maiden attending her lady, we're watching and waiting, holding our breath, awaiting your word of mercy.***

True religion isn't this far off mysteriously run bureaucracy to which we apply for assistance when we feel the need, it's to spend our days looking into the eyes of folks who are feeling beaten down and ignored and treated unfairly. True religion isn't sitting with our arms crossed and huffing and puffing about the terrible things going on in our world today, it's taking on the posture and the facial expressions of a friend who is listening well and concerned and wondering how to be helpful. True religion isn't thinking of God as some sort of functional god who will help us out of jams or of a kindly grandpa who gives us unlimited ice cream, it is to think of God as the God of Mt. Sinai and Mt. Calvary, it is to think of God as He really is - His primary will being that those who are baptized and believing will be saved, with a corresponding will that those who believe not shall be damned.

The kingdom of God is like a husband who regularly looks into the eyes of his wife as she breathes and moves and talks, he often asks her to tell her more about what she is thinking and feeling, many days he asks her outright, "how may I serve you today."

Truth #1 is that the posture of a servant will be one of attentive responsiveness.

Truth #2 is that the expectation of a faithful servant is that the hand of the Master will deliver mercy.

Many of you know that I love to sing, and one of my secret ambitions over the years has been to be part of a choir that produces beautiful music. And I have tried being in the choir for a few special occasions over the years, but I have at least two problems with being a successful choir person. Problem #1 is that I can only read the top line of music, the melody, and most often that seems to belong to the sopranos. Problem #2 is that I can't look

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Service

Fifth in a Series of Ten Sermons

July 12, 2020

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 3 of 5

at my music and the director at the same time. I've told my good friend Irene, the choir director, for many years, "I can either look at my music or I can look at you, can't do both." In her kind way, she says, "that's a problem."

As Pastor Muther would say, I tell you that to tell you this, the expectation of a good and skilled choir member is that the director will be delivering really good music out into the airwaves. And so the successful choir members develop this skill of being absolutely attentive to the director and their line of music at the same time. So also with the faithful servant of Jesus Christ. Peterson writes that "the basic conviction of a Christian is that God intends good for us and that He will get his way in us." (let me repeat that)

Peterson translates v. 2 this way, "***We're watching and waiting, holding our breath, awaiting your word of mercy. Mercy, God, mercy!***" God isn't that doting dad who gives his children all that they want, He is that Father who gives to his children according to His plan. He isn't that police officer out on patrol ready to give us a ticket if we get out of hand, He is that potter working with the clay of our lives. He isn't some disinterested King paying little attention to His subjects, He is like that architect watching over a huge building project, paying attention to detail on the one hand and eyes glued on the blueprint on the other hand.

When the Psalmist cries out, "mercy, God, mercy," he's not attempting to get God to do what he is reluctant to do, he's longing for what God wants to do, which is to have mercy on sinners. To ask for mercy isn't to expect God to give us what we want, it is to expect God's Word to accomplish what He has sent it to do. As the ultimate purpose of rain and snow is to provide seed for the sower and bread for the hungry, so is the ultimate purpose of God's Word to make us wise unto salvation and train us for holy living.

For God's people to cry out for mercy is to expect that the Master would not stay in the heavens above, but that He would come down, He would stoop down into our condition, He would take on the nature of a servant, He would empty Himself of divine power and knowledge for a time, He would suffer all that was necessary to suffer, He would be crucified until he was stone cold dead and buried, He would do all of that so that His Father in heaven would not give sinners what they deserved. He would have mercy.

The kingdom of God is like a medium sized church in a medium sized city full of folks who pray often that God's Law would stop sinners in their tracks and that the Gospel would renew and refresh and revitalize their congregation. They expect God's Word to do exactly what it promises, they expect their God to keep every one of His promises without exception, they expect the grace and the mercy of their God to be ruling hearts and minds as often as that word is preached and taught and witnessed to in faithful fashion.

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Service

Fifth in a Series of Ten Sermons

July 12, 2020

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 4 of 5

Truth #1 was that the posture of a servant is one of attentive responsiveness, and truth #2 was that the expectation of a servant is that the hand of the Master will deliver mercy.

Truth #3 is that the attitude of a faithful servant is one of urgency.

The final verse of Psalm 123 reads, “*Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.*” Peterson translates with stronger yet words, “We’ve been kicked around long enough, Kicked in the teeth by complacent rich men, kicked when we’re down by arrogant brutes.”

The Psalmist lived in a time when the word servant was just a nice word for slave. Slavery is much in the news these days, as we debate the Civil War years and what it means for today. Peterson writes this about slavery, “As far as we can tell, it has never worked very well. Power breeds oppression. Masters get lazy and become scornful of those under them. The cry “we’ve been kicked around long enough, kicked in the teeth, kicked when we’re down,” is believable. The Psalm is part of a vast literature of outcry, a longing for deliverance from oppression.”

The cry of slavery is that enough is enough. In their years of bondage to Egypt, Israelites were sick and tired of being oppressed. In the days of Jesus, Jews were sick and tired of being brutalized by Romans. These days, black lives matter protesters are sick and tired of police racism. Police are sick and tired of being stereotyped. Inner city residents are sick and tired of crime rates going through the roof. People of color are sick and tired of not being listened to. Many whites are sick and tired of being painted with a broadbrush labels.

Jesus responds by getting down on His knees, voluntarily doing the dirty work of a slave, and then teaching, Peterson paraphrases, “*If I the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other’s feet. I’ve laid down a pattern for you, that you also should do just as I have done to you. I’m only pointing out the obvious. A servant is not ranked above his master, an employee doesn’t give orders to the employer. If you understand what I’m telling you, act like it, and live a blessed life.*”

Christianity isn’t so much about being free to do what we please, it’s about learning as an apprentice to the perfect master. We would recognize today that every relationship that excludes Christ becomes oppressive. (Let me repeat that.)

And so we would recognize the urgency of taking the posture of a servant and living with the expectations of a servant. To use Romans 12 language, to take our every day ordinary lives and offer them up as a living sacrifice.

Whatever gifts of grace you have been given, use them for the glory of God. If you have the gift of hospitality, go ahead and invite hurting people into your homes and into your circle of

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Service

Fifth in a Series of Ten Sermons

July 12, 2020

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 5 of 5

friends, as a way of lifting high the cross of Christ.. If you have the gift of teaching, teach to the best of your ability, as a way of keeping holy the Name of God. If you have the gift of encouragement, use it on a daily basis as a way of extending the kingdom of God. If you have the gift of generosity, open up your checkbook and become that hilarious giver for the glory of God. If you have the gift of leadership, be zealous about it, and if you have opportunities to relieve suffering, do so cheerfully and with the attitude that today could be your last day, every conversation could be your final one, today is the day of salvation.

As I was writing this sermon, a former confirmand of mine reached out to me with tragic news, her brother had died suddenly, she was looking for the familiar voice of a pastor, she didn't know what else to do. We talked, we listened, we prayed, we were quiet, and in closing I invited her to know that her assignment that day was two-fold, it was to cry and it was to trust in God. Or to say it another way, her assignment was to take the posture of a servant of God with her eyes focused on her Master, it was to be expecting that God would be having mercy on her family, and it was one more time to learn the urgency of practicing a long obedience in the same direction. In Jesus' Name. Amen.