

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon series: THE TIES THAT BIND

Serve One Another

Study #2

Introduction: Good vs. great...

We are nearing the 13th anniversary of the publishing of a book written by Jim Collins that has sold over two and a half million copies, has been translated into thirty two languages, and that remained as a fixture for years on the New York Times bestseller list: Good to Great.¹

The book caught on like wildfire, capturing the imagination of CEO's and Boards of Directors who wanted to lead, not just "good" but "GREAT" companies.²

Over time, lots of leaders have dreamed of greatness. The dreams and dreamers have multiplied since Jim Collins defined and quantified greatness in Good to Great.

So what about us? How do we, as Christians, respond to the call to be "great"? What application does "good to great" have on a Sunday morning? Is there even a place for the pursuit of greatness in Christianity?

I'll admit that something about wanting to be "great" for the Lord appeals to me.

¹ Published by William Collins, October, 2001.

² Collins criteria for "greatness" included industry leading profits, cutting edge technology, unsurpassed employee benefits, double digit growth over a dozen consecutive quarters, among others, not all of which "fit" with a church's goals. To meet the need of churches and other non-profits, Collins followed up with Good to Great in the Social Sectors (2005).

I've long been inspired by the lives of what are sometimes referred to as "great" Christians. The apostles and John Wycliffe and the Wesleys and Spurgeon and Elizabeth Elliott and William and Catherine Booth - and so many others have spurred me on.

You've probably been inspired, too, by the stories of faith-filled, loving, courageous believers.

"Good to Great" sounds like a movement we should want to be a part of. As individuals and as a church, being "great" for Jesus resonates with our hearts' passion to impact our world for God and eternity.

Well, there was, in fact, a time when Jesus spoke with His disciples about being great in God's Kingdom. His "greatness indicators" differ from those Jim Collins used in his book, but the Lord left no doubt as to how to identify a "great" Christian disciple.

This morning, we are continuing to think together about the biblical "one anothers." Last Sunday we considered the foundation for all the other one anothers: LOVE. Today, we add the building block of SERVICE to that foundation.

This year, during the season leading up to Easter, we took time to look at lots of episodes from Jesus' life that fill out our understanding of who He was. On a couple of occasions we watched as Jesus emphasized the value of service.

On one of those occasions He was traveling with His disciples on the road to Jerusalem. While on the road, He told His twelve disciples what lay just ahead for Him.

Jesus, on Servanthood

A "Greatness Indicator" From Jesus (Mark 10:32-45)

Jesus' sober prediction (vv. 33-34)

[33] "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the Gentiles;

[34] and they will mock Him and spit on Him, and scourge Him and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again.”

Jesus knew that to be fore-warned was to be fore-armed. Telling His disciples what was about to happen was a loving thing to do.

By way of response we might have hoped for empathy or sympathy from the disciples over this devastating news. We hear not a word of that.

Instead, and contrary to what any of us would hope WE would do if a good friend gave us this kind of news, the disciples totally missed His message, saw that He was going to Jerusalem, assumed that it was to become a king, and could think of only crowns.

The disciples’ amazing response (vv. 35-37)

[35] James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus, saying, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You.”...[37] They said to Him, “Grant that we may sit in Your glory, one on Your right, and one on Your left.”

Yes, you’re right. That was world-class insensitivity and demandingness from these two disciples. But then it got worse.

After hearing the two brothers’ request, the other ten apostles became indignant (v. 41).

And the reason they became indignant was most likely because THEY wanted the preeminent seats in the coming Kingdom for themselves and were upset that the two brothers had beaten them to the punch and had asked Jesus first!

They all wanted to be great and thought that pushing their way to the front ahead of the others was the way to get there.

Jesus called them all together into a tight huddle to explain to them what greatness is really all about.

Jesus’ LIFE and DEATH shouts SERVANTHOOD! (vv. 42-44)

[42] Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. [43] But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; [44] and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.”³

What I want to be sure that we all notice is that Jesus didn’t condemn the desire for greatness. It is not bad to want to be great in the work of Christ.

Nor does He speak ill of a desire to be first. He simply points out that there is a certain order to be followed in the pursuit of greatness and firstness in His Kingdom.

And that order is this: *GREATNESS comes by service. FIRSTNESS comes by choosing to be a slave to all.*

To show that this is a principle of the first magnitude - that this is not some peripheral, secondary, optional thing - Jesus identified Himself as the ultimate model of servanthood.

Jesus affirmed the priority of servanthood (v. 45)

[45] For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

That statement may be the single best summary of Jesus’ entire earthly life. The One who had every right to be honored and to be served became the One who gave up every right He had to meet our every need.

For Christians and for churches, greatness is all wrapped up in doing what Jesus said, in following His lead.

³ In another passage that records a similar or the same conversation, Jesus likened the “*great ones*” to little children. Paraphrasing, He said, “*If you want to be great, fine, but the way to be great is to ask for the same level of respect and deference that the youngest person in the group might get.*” (Luke 22)

He identified *service* as a core Kingdom value. And we who want to be great in Jesus are called, not to be served, but to serve.

And He didn't just say it. He lived it.

We saw this event, too, just before Easter, so today we'll look at it very briefly.

In this scene, Jesus is with His disciples again. Now, though, He's not on the road. He and they are in an upstairs room of a home in Jerusalem. Now it is the night before Jesus dies.

A Foot-Washing Lord (John 13:1-17)

Jesus with the basin and towel (vv. 1-5)

The disciples had spent most of that Thursday preparing for the meal they would be eating with Jesus that night.

They would have gone to the market to get supplies and to buy food. That buying and selling would have meant lots of walking on urban streets in open sandals. That would have meant lots of dirt between toes.⁴

We don't really even want to imagine the state of the men's feet in that room after hours of walking through the filth of a Middle Eastern city.

These guys needed their feet washed!

But in that upper room on that night, no servant was available to wash the dirt and grime off of the feet of these men.

So, at a certain point, in the middle of supper, Jesus...

[4] got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. [5] Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

A few minutes later, with all the disciples' feet washed, Jesus spoke to His men.

The basin and towel - and us! (vv. 12-17)

[12] So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? [13] You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. [14] If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. [15] For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you."

Here is Jesus Christ, the Savior, the Lord of history, God incarnate - washing the smelly feet of 12 men who have been traipsing through garbage the better part of the day.

We wonder...

Did He wash their feet with a smile on His face? Was He careful to not get dirty Himself as He washed their feet? Did He have to empty the wash water after every couple of feet? How many towels did He dirty in the process?

We wonder about the details of this extraordinary event, knowing that it would not have been a neat and clean, sanitary process.

We understand that Jesus would have been just as tired as the other men present. We also know that He was looking ahead to His own death by crucifixion. Yet He willingly washed their feet.

And He called the apostles and He's calling you and me - His followers today - to do the same for each other. It's pretty logical, really.

- Jesus is the Teacher and Lord - check.
- We are the followers - check.

⁴ The city streets of the ancient world were the garbage dumps. While we might assume that Jerusalem was somewhat more sanitary than many large ancient cities, this was Passover season, when upwards of a million visitors crammed into the surrounding area for the great holiday. There would have been waste everywhere. Trash and filth of all kinds would have littered the streets.

- A Teacher will always set an example for His followers to follow - check.
- Our Teacher served as a common slave would have served - check.
- Now, we are to serve each other as a common slave would serve - check.

When we wash each other's feet (SERVE each other!) we are imitating our Leader and we are following Him into true GREATNESS. Jesus calls you and me – and us, as a church – into servanthood.

Now, what kinds of “foot-washing” does the Lord have in mind? In what ways might we serve each other?

To get a handle on what I believe He is talking about I'll make a distinction between two different ways to think about “service” from the Bible.

The first way is what I'll call “stained glass” service. It is service in a religious setting.

Following Jesus into GREATNESS

Two Images of Service

Stained glass service

The Greek word that is used in the New Testament to describe this kind of service is *leitourgia*.

Leitourgia is the word from which we derive our English word “liturgy.” It speaks of priestly service. It is what priests and Levites did when they served God in the temple. Leitourgia was formalized, regular, routine, and scheduled. It involved sacrifices and offerings.⁵

I'm calling it “stained glass” service because it took place within the religious arena.

⁵ I don't want to imply that it was sanitized, because sacrifices and offerings were bloody, messy affairs.

The New Testament uses a whole different set of Greek words when speaking to the kind of service that Jesus wants us to provide to one another.

Storm glass service

The Greek words used to describe the “service” that we are to provide to each other are words that are also used to describe menial service.

The words are *diakonos* and *doulos*. They refer to slaves and servants and the service spoken of is the kind of things that servants and slaves do.

This is not service in the religious setting, but in the normal settings of life's ups and downs. It's not necessarily scheduled, routine, or formalized. It is crisis oriented, chaos-based and on-the-go, at-the-spur-of-the-moment service.

The apostle Paul gives a picture of this kind of service when he writes to his friend, Titus. He is giving instruction as to how Christians should live.

Service When the Storms Hit

Serving by good deeds (Titus 3:14)

He writes, ***[Titus 3:14] Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, that they may not be unfruitful.***

- Your neighbor's house is on fire and you jump into action.
- There is a medical emergency and you get to the hospital as soon as you can to visit your friend.
- You become aware of a family where there are significant tensions - and you pray and engage.
- A death occurs or a child is born and you arrange for a meal.
- A job is lost and you help your friend network.

Life's storms hit - and you're there. You pull out the basin and drag out the towel and you wash feet.

The apostle Peter was actually there when Jesus got out the basin and towel. For the rest of his life he would have remembered the night that Jesus washed his feet.

Foot-washing is the back-story to the following words from Peter's first letter.

Serving by good stewardship (1 Peter 4:10)

[1 Peter 4:10] As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

Again, this is not leitourgia. This is diakonia. It is menial service.

It's right that when we come to this verse we think of spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are special graces each Christian has received from God to bless others.

More broadly, Peter says here that God has resourced every Christian with a talent or a skill, with possessions, or with a temperament that will speak "God" into the life of someone else.

He has resourced you with just these kinds of riches and you are a steward of those riches. You are to use those riches to enrich others.

The first step on the road to applying Peter's words will be to voluntarily adopt the mindset of a servant.

It is to say, "*My resources are not mine to do with as I wish. I am a servant; a slave of God. How would God have me use my time? My money? My energy? My possessions?*"

Of course, my resources will normally be what God wants me to use to meet my own needs. But He will also, often direct me to use what I have to help others.

The Bible includes plenty of stories of the people of God using their various resources to bless others.

Church history records the same through the centuries.

And so does our church's story. Over the past thirty+ years, people like you have furthered the purposes of God by generously stewarding your riches to enrich others.

It is a great "foot washing" service to come alongside someone who is in need with the resources with which God has blessed you.⁶ And it starts by adopting the perspective, "*I am God's servant. My 'things' are not my own.*"

Specifically, the principal thrust of the New Testament with regard to how you and I are to engage in "***serv***ing one other" is in the run-of-the-mill and down-in-the-trenches every day routine of our lives.

Serving in life's trenches

Jesus served His followers by washing their feet (John 13). The early church served its widows by providing food (Acts 6). John Mark helped the apostle Paul in his missionary work by being a "go-fer" (2 Timothy 4).

New Testament service can be anything. The sky's the limit when it comes to how or in what way you might serve someone to the glory of God.

Here is a verse that highlights that "anything goes" spirit. It's one of my personal favorites in all the New Testament.

When Paul wrote to the church located in the ancient city of Colossae, one of his closing remarks was a personal challenge to a Christian there named Archippus.

[4:17] Say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry (i.e. - diakonia) which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."

That verse doesn't give us a clue as to what Archippus' service/ministry was.

⁶ See Acts 11:29; Romans 15:25-27.

It might have been preaching sermons, teaching home Bible studies, visiting people in their homes, street witnessing, chariot repair - whatever.

And, by not being specific, Paul has opened the door of possibilities for service to anything and everything we could imagine that would be helpful to another person.

The pastor of the church Kathy and I attended when we lived in Dallas, Bob Deffinbaugh of Community Bible Chapel, was a brilliant and clear Bible teacher and a mechanical genius.

He often helped single moms with car repairs. Tuning up the car of a single mom in the Name of Jesus is spiritual ministry.

One of the men in our church (Barry Miller) had quite a knack for fixing clothes dryers and for years kept some dryers running that probably would have been (should have been?) retired without his healing hands.

One time, a bunch of us hosted a “car clinic” in the parking lot. People with minor repairs could bring their cars and parts to the parking lot and guys from the church would fix ‘em up for free.

There have been seasons when I’ve been tempted to rename our church “The Northwest Moving Company” for the number of times loving friends have helped load moving trucks to relocate friends to a new home.

Add to that tutoring lessons, financial counseling, appliance repair, baby-sitting, computer repair and tech help, grocery purchases, gifts of vehicles (!), gifts to the Benevolence Fund or the Food Pantry, plumbing fixes, the gift of a listening ear, medical assistance AND SO MUCH MORE and we begin to see how broad is the command to “*serve one another.*”

Over the years I have seen countless examples of these kinds of service being offered. It has been one of the hallmarks of our church that we serve. Not perfectly, but meaningfully.

These are all the kinds of things Jesus had in mind when He told us to wash each others’ feet.

When we are a healthy church, we will pitch in and help where help is needed. That’s what “*servng one another*” service is all about. And you and I are called to that, today.

The exciting thing about service is that this is what we were redeemed for. Service is what love looks like, in shoe leather.

And service - down in the trenches, rubber meeting the road, storm glass window, foot washing service - is the path to travel if we want to grow in Christ.

Conclusion:

Some of you here may remember that my younger son, Zach, had a 1985 Mustang for a while. He bought it not long after he got his drivers’ license.

It was a pretty quick vehicle and was fun to drive. He even let me drive it from time to time. That car gave both of us opportunities to get our hands dirty and to learn patience as we turned wrenches together.

One of the chief drawbacks to the car was its fuel mileage. As his grandfather was fond of saying, “*That car will pass anything on the road - except a gas station.*”

We tried all kinds of tricks to remedy the problem. Driving it really slow, adjusting the carburetor and the timing, putting more air in the tires. You name it, we tried it.

One day Zach mentioned that the temperature gauge on the car must not be working because the needle never rose to the “normal” part of the gauge. It always stayed near 150 degrees. I wondered...

We decided to check things out. Zach drained the radiator, pulled the thermostat housing away from the engine block - and sure enough, there was no thermostat in the engine.

The previous owner had removed the thermostat from the car, probably wanting to make sure that it never overheated. Well, it never overheated all right - and it never warmed up, either. And that’s a problem.

Cars need to run hot!

See, in an internal combustion engine, a thermostat opens and closes, allowing water to flow through the block or not, based on the temperature in the block.

The thermostat keeps water flowing through at just the right intervals so that the engine stays hot enough, but not too hot.

With the thermostat removed, water was always flowing through the block, keeping the block too cool for maximum efficiency or performance.

(Now, of course, it is true that an engine shouldn't be allowed to get too hot. Having owned a car that overheated once and cracked a block, I'm especially sensitive to that fact!)

If the engine doesn't get pretty hot it won't run right. When Zach put the 185 degree thermostat in his engine, his fuel economy jumped about five miles per gallon - just like that.

Christians need to run hot

I suspect that many of us who have believed in Jesus don't run at peak performance because we are afraid of overheating. We are afraid to get too involved in serving, so we don't serve.

We sit on the sidelines. We are cautious. We conserve our energy, our time, and our resources.

Sure, we've got to watch out for overcommitment. Burnout is a real possibility. We've got to balance time with our family, and personal down time is important.

But if we are not involved in serving the people we know, we're not running at peak performance or efficiency for Jesus.

Are there potential downsides to service? Yep. Paul knew something about those downside risks. In 2 Corinthians he listed afflictions, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, sleeplessness, and hunger.

And if you commit to service, people may misunderstand you, or take you the wrong way, take you for granted, or even reject you.

You'll get tired and you'll wonder who is ever going to look out for your own needs. You might even get aggravated at somebody from time to time for expecting too much from you.

Here's the deal, though. Give yourself to:

- washing the feet of the people around you;
- following Jesus' instruction for becoming GREAT (be a servant);
- engaging in good deeds to meet pressing needs...

and you'll discover the abundance Jesus promised for those who follow Him.

[Galatians 5:13] For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.