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HOW TO SERVE THE LORD

Romans 12:11

By

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Romans, Lesson 82

How to Serve the Lord Romans 12:11

As most of you know, Marla and I like to hike. So when we started having children, we started them hiking at a young age. Of course when they're toddlers, you have to carry them a lot. But as they grew older and got too heavy to carry, they had to walk by themselves. And sometimes we took them on difficult hikes, climbing to the tops of mountains that required a lot of stamina.

Before you accuse us of child abuse, let me explain that we discovered that the kids had more physical strength than we did. We were not forcing them to do something that their bodies could not endure. The real issue was motivation. If they were motivated, they could literally run on a trail where Marla and I were struggling just to walk. But if they were not motivated, they acted like they could not walk a step farther.

And so it was always a challenge to figure out how to motivate the kids to climb a mountain. I remember when our second daughter, Joy, was about seven and we were climbing Mt. Lassen in Northern California, which is over 10,400 feet high. It requires gaining almost 2,000 feet of elevation in about two and a half miles. I told her that I would beat her to the top. That was all the motivation that Joy needed. She took off going faster than I could ever go. I would see her two or three switchbacks above and call out, "Slow down, Joy, so that I can catch up." She would laugh and move even faster. She beat us all to the summit. The issue was not muscle strength; the issue was motivation. At other times, I might add, we would bribe the kids with Skittles candy. "See that ridge up there? If you get up there, I'll give you some Skittles." Somehow they all grew up reasonably healthy in spite of our sugary bribes!

I tell that story because in Romans 12:11, Paul says that we are to be "not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord." He's talking about people who are motivated to "run up the mountain," passionate in their service for the Lord. So I must ask myself and ask you to ask yourself, "Does that describe me?" Am I (are you) not lagging behind (the word means, "lazy") in diligence?

Am I (are you) fervent in spirit in my service for the Lord? Or, like the church in Laodicea, whom the Lord threatened to spew out of His mouth, could I be lukewarm (Rev. 3:15-16)? Could I be lazy in serving the Lord? Could I be indifferent to the cause of the Lord and Master who bought me with His blood?

Perhaps some of you are thinking, "I used to be diligent and fervent in serving the Lord, but I burned out. Other Christians criticized me. Some spread false rumors about me. No one seemed to appreciate all of the long, hard hours I spent working behind the scenes. So I don't feel like going through that again. I'll attend church and leave, but I don't want to get involved in serving."

If you feel like that, you need to refocus so that you get the proper motivation to serve. And Paul has set forth the motivation that you need in Romans 12:1: "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship." He goes on to tell us not to be conformed to this age, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The supreme motivation to sacrificial, transformed service is "the mercies of God," which Paul lays out in chapters 1-11. And in our text (12:11), Paul shows how to serve the Lord. He's saying:

The mercies of God call us to diligent, fervent service
for the Lord.

I'm proceeding on the assumption that you have personally experienced the abundant mercies of God that are to be found in knowing Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. If you have not trusted in Christ, then nothing else that I say in this message applies to you. Or, if you have trusted in Christ, but your love for Him has grown cold because you have forgotten the many mercies of His love for you on the cross, then you need to park yourself at the foot of the cross. The mercies of God are the motivation for diligent, fervent service for the Lord.

Paul first gives us the negative, then the positive, and then the focus of the command.

1. The mercies of God call out: "Don't be lazy, but be diligent in serving the Lord" (12:11a).

Romans 12:11a: “not lagging behind in diligence.” As I said, “lagging behind” translates a Greek word that means “lazy.” Jesus used the word to describe the lazy servant who didn’t bother to invest his master’s money that had been entrusted to him, but just buried it in the ground until the master returned (Matt. 25:26). That lazy servant put his own convenience above the Master’s purpose. The word is used in Proverbs 6:6, 9 (LXX) to describe the slug-gard, who needs to go to the ant and consider its hard work in storing up food in the summer for the winter.

Although he doesn’t use the same word, Paul describes the same concept in Galatians 6:9, “Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.” Or, after describing at length the truth of Christ’s resurrection and the certainty of our resurrection, Paul concludes (1 Cor. 15:58), “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not *in vain* in the Lord.” Don’t be lazy; be diligent in serving the Lord.

So I ask, “Do you work hard to serve the Lord?” Maybe you’re thinking, “I’ve got to work hard to earn a living. I’m too beat after work to serve the Lord.” I would respond with two comments. First, you should view your work as service to the Lord and therefore do it heartily as unto Him. In Colossians 3:23-24, Paul writes to believing slaves, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.” If those words applied to slaves, who had the most menial jobs imaginable, then they certainly apply to your job. Your mindset should be that you are serving the Lord; therefore, don’t be lazy. Work hard.

Second, God has given you spiritual gifts to be used in serving Him (Rom. 12:3-8) and when you use those gifts to serve His kingdom purposes, He energizes you with His power. As Paul explains (Col. 1:29), “For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.” Of course, we all need to evaluate how much we are able to commit to. We disqualify ourselves from service if we neglect family responsibilities (1 Tim. 3:4-5). And we will not be effective if we take on so much that we neglect our own souls (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 4:16). But when you do

what God has gifted you to do in the power that He supplies, it energizes you. You may be tired, but you'll also be deeply satisfied.

2. The mercies of God call out: "Be fervent in spirit as you serve the Lord" (12:11b).

Romans 12:11b: "fervent in spirit." Commentators argue over whether "spirit" refers to the human spirit or to the Holy Spirit (in the original Greek there were no capitals for proper names). But perhaps, as several scholars suggest, we do not need to take an either-or position. Paul may be referring to the human spirit as motivated and energized by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Thomas Schreiner puts it (*Romans* [Baker], p. 665), "Believers are to burn and seethe in their spirits, but the means by which this is done is the power of the Holy Spirit."

The word translated "fervent" literally means, "to boil." So Paul is describing a holy zeal or passion for God and His kingdom purposes. J. C. Ryle describes this godly zeal (*A New Birth* [Old Paths Gospel Press], p. 235), "Zeal in religion is a burning desire to please God, to do His will, and to advance His glory in the world in every possible way."

So Paul isn't describing someone who needs to be arm-twisted into "volunteering" for some ministry until finally he feels guilty and can't figure a way out, so he grudgingly says, "Okay." Rather, he's describing those who are boiling over with zeal to the point that they probably need to be counseled to focus their efforts, because their tendency would be to get involved in just about every opportunity to serve the Lord that comes along.

Jim Elliot, who was martyred in Ecuador at age 28 in his attempt to take the gospel to the fierce Auca Indians, was a man who embodied true godly zeal. If you haven't read his story, you're missing a great blessing. His widow, Elisabeth Elliot, wrote *Through Gates of Splendor* [Spire Books], which tells the story of all five men who were murdered. Her book, *Shadow of the Almighty* [Zondervan] focuses more on Elliot's life alone. Jim wrote in his diary (*Through Gates of Splendor*, pp. 19-20, italics in original), "Wherever you are, *be all there*. Live to the hilt every situation you believe to be the will of God." Or, as Jonathan Edwards wrote as a young man in his 70 resolutions (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 1:xx,

6): "*Resolved*, To live with all my might, while I do live." Both men are saying, "Don't be indifferent about the Lord and His cause. Be fervent in spirit!"

Perhaps you're thinking, "That's fine for all the Type A, naturally zealous people. But I'm just not that type. I'm too laid back to be fervent in spirit as you're describing." But this isn't a matter of personality types. Paul writes this to the whole church in Rome. It applies to every personality type. It applies both to young people, but also to the old. It's a matter of passion, of what gets you excited. No matter what your personality type, some things get you excited. Whether it's politics or sports or music or nature or your job or your family, you are passionate about something.

If you've been tracking with Romans 1-11, then you know that Paul is shouting, "Jesus Christ and the gospel should make your spirit boil! The good news that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners should excite you! The glorious fact that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord should stir your heart! Let the many mercies of God that rescued you from condemnation fuel the fires of passion for Christ and His kingdom! Don't be lukewarm about such wonderful truths. Be fervent in spirit as you serve the Lord."

3. The mercies of God call out: "Serve the Lord" (12:11c).

Romans 12:11c: "serving the Lord." These three simple words are packed with some important practical truths.

A. All believers are called on to serve the Lord.

Paul wrote this to the entire church at Rome, not just to the pastors or church leaders. All Christians, not just so-called "full time Christian workers," are to be serving the Lord in some capacity. We saw this in 12:4-8, where Paul develops the analogy of the church as the body of Christ. Every part of the body is valuable and useful to the overall functioning of the body. Even so, every believer has been given spiritual gifts to use for the building up of the body of Christ. There is no such thing as a non-serving member of the body. If you're not serving, you need to ask the Lord how He wants you to serve and begin doing it.

B. We serve the Lord as His slaves, not as His volunteers.

The Greek word for “serve” means to be enslaved. Since the Lord bought us with His blood out of the slave market of sin, we are not our own. We belong to Him as His slaves. Thus all that we are and have is not ours, but His. Our time is not ours to use as we please. Our money is not ours to spend as we please. Our families are not ours, to take priority over allegiance to the Lord. Our careers are not ours, to pursue as we wish. Everything we are and have belongs to the Lord, to be used for His glory and purpose.

There is a fundamental difference between slaves and volunteers. Volunteers choose when and how they serve; slaves are on call day and night, whether they feel like serving or not. Volunteers can quit serving if they get tired; slaves are slaves for life. The master may change their duties, but they aren't free to quit. Volunteers have certain expectations. They expect to be treated with respect. They expect proper working conditions and consideration of their needs. They expect to be honored for their service. But slaves don't have any such expectations. Jesus illustrated this in Luke 17:7-10:

“Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come immediately and sit down to eat’? But will he not say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat, and *properly* clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink’? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done *only* that which we ought to have done.’”

Do you view yourself as a slave of Jesus Christ? If that sounds harsh, remember the alternative. As Bob Dylan sang, “You gotta serve somebody.” If you're not a slave of Christ, then you're a slave of the devil and sin. Christ is a loving, caring Master, who never abuses His slaves. The devil is a conniving, self-serving tyrant, who has no concern for his slaves. It is far better to be Christ's slave than to be enslaved to Satan and to sin.

C. Serving the Lord means that we are not serving ourselves.

Paul warns the Roman believers about those who serve themselves, not Christ (16:17-18):

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.

These men were manipulators, using the ministry to satisfy their own lusts. Some are in the ministry because they love to be in power over people, not to build them in Christ. Some use the ministry for financial gain, using false promises of healing to milk people of donations so that they can support a lavish lifestyle. Others despicably use their position in ministry to prey on vulnerable women, using them to gratify their sexual lusts. All such men are serving themselves, not Christ as Lord.

While I hope that none of us are so crass, we can fall into the more subtle snare of using our service for Christ to serve our own needs. I've read secular articles that urge people to volunteer in some sort of community service, where the pitch is, "You will benefit from serving." So people serve for what it can do for them.

But it's easy for Christians to fall into this mindset, where it becomes "*my* ministry." It brings *me* fulfillment. My whole identity gets tied up with "*my* ministry." I love the feeling of significance that I get when I help out. I love the praise that people give me when I serve them. While there is great joy in serving the Lord and there is a legitimate sense of fulfillment when God uses you to serve others, we need to beware of serving ourselves rather than serving the Lord. It sets you up for getting hurt when others do not give you the praise and affirmation that you're seeking. Serving the Lord means that we're not serving ourselves.

D. Serving the Lord means that we are not primarily serving others.

True, there is a sense in which through love we serve one another (Gal. 5:13). We are to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2). We are to lay down our lives for one another (1 John 3:16).

But there is another sense in which we serve the Lord, not people. In Galatians 1:10, Paul writes, "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were

still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ." "Bond-servant" is the Greek word for "slave." If our focus in serving people is to gain their favor, then we're not serving Christ. If we care more about what people think of us than about what the Lord thinks about us, then we're serving them, but not Christ. We need to aim at pleasing God, who examines our hearts. We need to be faithful to His truth, even if people despise us for it. We only serve people secondarily. It is the Lord Christ whom we serve.

Of course, when we serve Christ by aiming to please Him above all, we truly serve people. If you're a people pleaser, craving popularity, you won't confront those in sin, because they might not like you. But to let people go on in sin is not to love and serve them, because their sin will destroy them. But if you're a servant of Christ, then you aren't dependent on the praise of people. If you need to confront, you do it in obedience to Christ and out of love for the sinner. But you're not worried about what people think of you. You're only concerned that you please your Master.

So we're all called to serve Christ. We serve as His slaves, not as volunteers. Serving the Lord means that we are not serving ourselves and we're not primarily serving others. Finally,

E. Serving the Lord means that we serve the One who loved us and gave Himself for us while we were yet sinners.

He is the Lord of glory, who gave up the splendor of heaven to endure the abuse of sinners in order to bring us to glory. It's a great privilege to serve this gracious, loving Lord! It's not a burdensome duty, but a joy to serve the King of kings, who sacrificed Himself to rescue me from condemnation.

William Carey, the pioneer missionary to India, had a son named Felix, who resigned from the mission to accept a position as Burma's ambassador to the British government in India. William deeply lamented this and wrote to Andrew Fuller (Pearce Carey, *William Carey* [The Wakeman Trust], p. 317, italics in original), "*Felix is shriveled* from a missionary into an ambassador." William Carey knew what a privilege it is to serve the King of kings.

Conclusion

So how should we serve the Lord? First, make sure that your motivation is right. You serve Him because of His great mercies

toward you in the gospel. That motivation moves you not to be lazy, but diligent in serving Him. Serving Christ becomes your passion, so that you do it fervently. And, remember that you're serving none other than the Lord Himself.

Years ago, I heard about a successful Southern California doctor who met Jesus Christ. He left his lucrative practice to serve in a primitive country. His non-Christian partner couldn't believe that he would do this. On one of his trips around the world, he stopped in to see his former partner.

The Christian doctor was performing surgery on a poor woman in very primitive circumstances. The non-Christian doctor asked, "Don't you remember how much you would have made doing this surgery in Southern California?" "Yes, many thousands," replied the Christian. "Then why are you doing it?"

"Several reasons. See her clenched fist? In it there are several coins which she will give to our mission. See those kids in the other room? They will be forever grateful if I can save their mother's life. But there's one more thing—I hope to receive from my Lord some day the words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'" The mercies of God call us to diligent, fervent service for the Lord.

Application Questions

1. Why is the proper motivation essential in serving the Lord? What can happen when our motivation is skewed?
2. Why are so many Christians lazy about serving the Lord?
3. Why is it crucial to keep in mind the distinctions between volunteers and slaves?
4. What kinds of problems can develop when people think that they're serving the Lord, but are actually serving themselves?

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