

## RED LETTER CHALLENGE ~ Week 4

**SERVING**

Today is Mothers' Day. That means all over the world ladies will be receiving gifts of flowers, plants, cards, chocolates, and other stuff. Some of the gifts will be expensive and very nice. Maybe jewelry. Over the years, however, most of them get forgotten. No one remembers who gave what gift. Some of the things we give to Mom's are going to end up in a garage sale. The Mothers' Day gifts that remain remembered, however, are not very nice. They are kind of crude and unrefined.

Like this one. Take a look at the screens. When I was a boy, my 1<sup>st</sup> Grade class made ceramic flower pots as Mothers' Day gifts. This is one I made for my mother. Notice the beauty of it. (Or not! It's really pretty ugly, isn't it?) Notice the refined shape. (It's really lumpy and goofy looking.) Notice the size of this pot. There is a penny in the picture to compare it to. It once had dirt and a flower in it, but it's way too small for any plant to survive in it. It's really good for nothing but collecting dust. Still, for years it sat on my Mom's dresser.

Maybe you once made a gift for your mother that really wasn't very nice, but you did the best you could at that age, and gave it to her. Maybe you drew a picture, or picked a fist-full of dandelions and gave her that bouquet of flowers. Ladies, you probably received a gift like that at some point, and maybe you put it on the refrigerator, or have it framed and on the wall. Maybe it sits on a shelf in your home and you can't bring yourself to toss it in the garbage.

WHY? Why keep those things? Because its not the quality of the gift itself, but the intention of the one who gave it that matters to you. It's not the gift, but the love behind the gift, that is the most important. Isn't that true? Especially on Mother's Day.

The same is true with God. When it comes to serving God: **The motivation behind what you do to serve God is more important than what you do.** Jesus is more interested in us

fulfilling the spirit of the Law than the letter of the Law. He loves it when you serve Him, when you do it out of love for Him.

That's a key thought for today. In addition to this being Mothers' Day we are entering the 4<sup>th</sup> week of The Red Letter Challenge, here at St. Paul. The Red Letter Challenge is about putting Jesus' words into practice in our lives. We call it the Red Letter Challenge because in many Bibles, the words of Jesus are printed in ... (you guessed it) RED Letters.

After all that Jesus has done for us, and the ways in which He's served us, and given His life for us, we are extremely motivated to represent Him well and do what He asks us to do. We aren't doing this challenge out of guilt or obligation, we aren't doing this challenge gritting our teeth. We are doing this challenge because really at the heart of it, we love Jesus and we want to be the best followers of Jesus that we can be.

So we've categorized the things that Jesus invites us, His followers, to put into practice into 5 main principles: **Being/ Forgiving/ Serving/ Giving/ Going**

We've looked at being and forgiving. And today we are focusing on serving.

And here's the flow to it. When we "be" with Christ, when we spend time with Him, we see how much He loves us. We see that God has been gracious to us and He forgives us. After being with Him and receiving His forgiveness, now I'm ready and motivated to put His words into practice. In other words, after Jesus has done *everything* for me, I'll now respond in love, in thanks and gratitude by doing my best to represent Him. My response to Jesus is **forgiving, serving, giving, and going**.

When it comes to serving, which we are focusing on today, we want to serve Jesus because He has served us.

Inside of all of us, we like the idea of serving. But sometimes we don't really want to.

Before the pandemic came along, people from St. Paul would routinely go over to the Second Harvest Food Bank in Vermillion to sort food and package things together. If I wasn't already committed

to something else I would sign up for those service projects. And it always seemed like they came around at the end of a day, after supper, and I would always think to myself, “Man, why did I sign up?” I’m tired after a long day. I’d much rather sit and veg in front of the TV.” I’m sure *you’ve* would never think something like that. I’m a broken sinner, I admit it. But I’d force myself to go, and I would serve. And you know what? I always had fun! I always enjoyed the time with the people. The few hours just flew by fast, and it was rewarding. Serving does not come naturally to us, but its more important than you know.

Philip Yancy was a journalist, and he wrote a book called, *The Jesus I Never Knew*. In it he wrote about how his career as a journalist would bring him to meet the people we idolize in America – people like movie stars, recording artists, and sports stars. These are the people we fawn over. These are the people who set the trends we follow. And as he met them, he discovered that they were so unhappy. Many were addicted to drugs. Many were in life-long therapy. Their family lives were a shambles – filled with divorces and highly publicized conflicts. He thought he would envy these stars, but instead he took pity on them.

Philip Yancy also said his career as a journalist let him meet people he called “servants.” These were relief workers bringing food and supplies to refugees; doctors and nurses serving overseas to heal the sick poor. People who gave up high paying careers to open a homeless shelter in the inner city.

When he compared the stars and the servants side by side, he found that actually the servants are the graced ones, the joyful ones, the happy ones. The servants possessed depth of character, and contentment, a sense of purpose, and peace that he not only admired, but he envied. Stars and servants side-by-side: the Servants are the blessed ones!

Friends, when you serve and help someone else, you receive the greatest fulfillment in this world. **Nothing fulfills you more than serving others.** Serving others invites you into a life that is bigger than yourself.

Jesus was a servant. He actually said to His disciples that He did not come to this world to be served but rather He came to serve us.

We were made in His image and so if He is a servant, then when we represent Him best in this world, so too, are we.

Just think: Why did God create the world and the universe in the first place? Was it because God was lonely and He wanted lots of pets and people to break His loneliness? No. God is perfect. He's never lonely.

Was it because God is an egomaniac and He needed people like us to tell Him how great He is? No. Not that one either.

Did God create everything because God is poor and He needs us to give Him our money? Or God is weak and He needs us to do things for Him? No. and No.

So why did God create the universe – the stars, the animals, fish, birds, plants, and us humans? Why?

Why? Because God is love, and He made us to be recipients of His love. He made everything to nurture, and to care, and to serve us all in His amazing love. That is God's character. That is who He is.

And God has made you "in His image." He made you to have a character like His character. God designed you to love, and to give, and to serve. And you will be the most human, the most fully alive, when you live according to His design.

The reason we get joy out of serving others is because that's how God made you. You are made in the image of God. Being a servant is part of your identity in Christ. When we serve people we are not just thanking Jesus for what He did for us but we are actually stepping into our God given identity. Serving others brings us Joy because, as we serve others out of our new Identity in Christ, we fulfill our God Given purpose. You become the real you that God intended you to become when He created you.

We see this so clearly in the Gospels when Jesus first calls the disciples to leave what they are doing and follow Him. Jesus said ***"If you follow Me, I will make you fishers of men."***

Look very carefully at this promise Jesus makes to these disciples. He says that He would transform their identities and that out of that new identity would come the ability to change people's lives. They would bring people into a relationship with Jesus.

One of the reasons we struggle with living in this new identity is the culture that we are in. Our culture leads us to be only consumers and not contributors. We live in a culture that certainly understands consumption, but struggles with contribution.

The American mindset is that "The customer is always right." And businesses and restaurants try to make it as easy as possible for the consumer to have it just the way they want it. A fast-food restaurant has had the slogan, "Have it your way." We have turned into a nation of consumers.

We've even turned into consumer minded churches. Consumer minded Christians. This consumer mindset has made its way right into the church. I am not saying that you should not go and find the church that God has called you to be in. But some people are constantly changing churches, never happy with the preaching, or the worship, or the home groups, or the youth ministry. They change churches every six months because they never find what they are looking for.

This is destructive because you have not been made by God to receive, but to give. The Church is the Body of Christ. Christ came to serve, not to be served, but to give His own life for all people everywhere. So, as Christ's Body, shouldn't we be like Christ?

The church is not a business that caters to consumers to meet your every need. The church is a movement of people who have been called to serve. And guess what? You are one of those people that form the church! The Church is not about consuming, but contributing to Jesus' saving cause in the world. Its so hard to see when my eyes are on me! Lift your eyes up to Jesus and out to the people He wants saved. You have been made by God to serve and to live for something bigger than yourself.

If you have been unhappy with church for the last ten years or so, it's because you have completely missed the purpose of the

church and your role in it. Get plugged in and start serving. Then those other things that have been bothering you, will start to fade away.

There's a well-known story in John, chapter 4, where Jesus stops at a well to talk to a Samaritan woman. That in itself broke several cultural barriers. But there's a little known scene in this well-known story. After the woman goes away the disciples come back. They had gone into town to grab food for themselves. And John records the conversation:

***“His disciples were saying to him, “Rabbi, eat something!” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”***

The disciples were thinking, “How is this possible? It's a Sunday, how do you have a Chick Fil A? I thought they are always closed on Sunday. This is why what happened next is: ***“Then his disciples asked each other, “Did someone bring him food?” Jesus said, “My food is to do what my Father sent me to do. My food is to finish his work.” John 4: 31-34***

Essentially Jesus says, “When others are consumers and think fill me fill me fill me, what nourishes Me, Jesus says, is when I pour into the lives of others. The disciples were focused on consuming, but Jesus was focused on contributing. He looked out and saw that a crowd of people from the village was coming out to Him. He felt more revitalized, more rejuvenated, more filled when He was serving others and leading them to faith in Him.

There's a time to consume. There's a time to be. We've talked about that already. Receiving Jesus in you is vital in your relationship with God. But there's also a time to do. And I would argue that we have greater fulfillment in contribution than we do consumption.

Today is Mothers' Day in addition to today being Sunday. Moms are known to be servants, to be contributors into the lives of their family.

Some children were asked why God gave them a mother. One kid said, “She's the only one who knows where the scotch tape is.”

Another child said God gave us moms “To help us out of there when we were getting born.”

Someone else said, Mothers carry us in themselves for 9 months, in their arms for 3 years, and in their hearts for a lifetime.

Moms are: cooks, dish washers, taxi drivers, coaches, our greatest cheer leaders in the stands, counselors, nurses, bill-payers and bread-winners, and so much more.

The reason we honor Mothers today is because they are servants. They are contributors. There is meaning, and joy, and dignity in a life that is focused not on self, but on others.

Jesus said, ***“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Also people do not light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand. Then it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.***

*Matthew 5:14-16*

Jesus is saying that from the beginning, you are God’s plan. If we are honest, we would say, we probably wouldn’t have come up with a plan to use broken, fickle people like us. But it is God’s plan. You are God’s representation. And we represent Him best when we serve well.

Jesus said that when you serve, people might see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. We have the opportunity to point people back to Christ through what we do. Through how we serve.

Which means, (-- hear this right now --) You can’t save yourself. There is no amount of good deeds you can do to save yourself. We don’t serve Jesus to gain forgiveness or entrance to heaven. Jesus has already won all that for us.

And you are not serving in order to make your name great. No Prima donnas. You can, however, really help point people back to what Christ has done in their lives. We can really live such good lives, and serve so well, that people see God’s work in your life, they thank God for what you do, and they turn to Him in faith. You cannot

save yourself but you can help save someone else. Wow. What an opportunity we have. We can point people back to Jesus.

Maybe you are struggling with knowing where to serve. If, for whatever reason, you are struggling to find what to do, here's my advice. Find a group of people that you feel is living a life of service, that is living life on purpose, and join them.

Here, in this church, we'd love to have you jump in with us. Here, at St. Paul, we are excited and grateful that God would not only die for our sins and welcome us into eternal life with Him, but also that He would invite us to live lives of purpose and meaning as we serve Him.

And we do it all because Jesus did it for us.

The Bible puts it this way: ***In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; <sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!***

***<sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. *Philippians 2: 5-11****

AMEN.