

SERIES Four Chairs of Discipleship
 SERMON **Servant's Rolling Chair (Acts 2.42-47)**
 PASTOR Carl S. Sweatman
 LOCATION Church of Christ at Manor Woods (Rockville, MD)
 DATE 09-Oct-2022

—PRAY—

1. "MINISTERS" SCOOTING

For the past few weeks, we've been looking at the process of biblical discipleship. The process of taking the gospel to the world and seeing God radically change lives through Christ's saving redemption and the Spirit's work of holy transformation. And for this process, to help us visualize how it unfolds, we've used various types of chairs to illustrate the various stages. The park bench for the unbeliever, and the recliner for the new believer—i.e., the one who has confessed Christ as Lord and Savior, repented, been baptized, begun the new life in Christ, and committed to being a member of a church family. This week, we're looking at the next stage of discipleship. One that involves our relationships with those who have stopped being comfortable spectators and have moved into active roles of participation.

We could easily describe these people in the way Scripture does: "servants." They are the ones who love to do God's work in the church and who are ready to go and serve wherever they're needed. Or to flesh out what we just mentioned: these are the ones who realize that the Christian life involves more than kicking back in a cozy recliner, watching everyone else do the work. They know and understand the value and purpose (*not to mention expectation*) of actively pursuing the things of God in the service to His kingdom. They also realize that God's salvation in Christ cannot be just about them, and that Christ has commissioned His followers to be active participants in the body of Christ. Thus, "servants" are the ones who have a passion for participation and they want to do something good with that passion.

So now that we know who we're talking about, what's the type of chair that "servants" or "ministers" use? This one is easy (*and appropriate*): the chair associated with this stage is a doctor's rolling chair, because these Christians love to scoot around anywhere and everywhere they can. And because they tend to want to do so much in so many different areas of ministry, it seems fitting that they're associated with a chair that's quick and mobile.

2. IDENTIFYING "MINISTERS"

So with that in mind: how do we recognize someone in this chair—or the person at this stage in the discipleship process? The answer is a bit more fluid than the others, simply because the kind of participation and even the mindset of "servants" varies from person to person. And the variance is often related to one's development or growth through this stage. Thus, "servants" who are just starting out will often have a basic understanding of what it means to serve, while those who have been at it for a while will have a more nuanced understanding. Typically. But not always. So be ready for surprises. It's entirely possible for someone who is new to the faith to have an incredibly mature grasp on what it means to serve in healthy, God-honoring ways. Now, with that said, let's look at some ways of identifying the "servants."

a. *Specific Claims*

One of the easiest ways to identify them is in what they say—or, the specific kind of claims they make.... Now, we didn't do this last week, but it's important to do it now for the sake of understanding the differences. The same principle applies to newbies—i.e., we can typically identify them by the kinds of things they often say. Things like:

- “I think the church needs to be more accommodating to me and my wants”
- “Going to a church is not necessary to be a Christian”
- Or to quote the West Virginian philosopher, Brad Paisley: “**Me and Jesus, got our own thing going. Me and Jesus, got it all worked out**”¹
- “I read my Bible and pray on occasion, so I'm good”
- “The church is getting too big. I wish these people would find their own place”
- “The music today was not to my liking, if only...”
- “The church isn't meeting my exceptions, so...”
- “I'm a good person, and that's what's important, right?”
- Or they only give Sunday School answers to faith-related questions—i.e., God, Jesus, Bible, prayer, love, bring a friend

Notice how the things said tend to revolve around the self and the benefits or perks of being able to sit comfortably in the recliner of new belief. And while we should expect such things early on, we cannot be content with allowing such things to continue in the new believer's heart, mind, and life—not to mention what they say and why they say it. To borrow from the imagery of Paul (in 1 Cor 13): they need to grow up in maturity and move out in service.

So, contrast that with what's often heard by those in the “third chair” of discipleship—the “servants.” Quite often, the things said or claims made announce their passion to serve and even their perspectives on what it means to serve in the church. And there might even be claims that are personal in nature, but they're not self-focused or self-interested. Instead, they're more of an honest admission of limitations or even failures with the desire to make healthy, God-honoring changes. Here are some of the more common phrases:

- “Where would you like for me to volunteer?”
- “This Bible Study is such a blessing. We need more like it”
- “Can you train me in how to lead a Bible Study?”
- “How can I pray for you this week?”
- “I noticed that we don't have _____ ministry in the church, can I help start that?”
- “I'm really struggling with _____, and I don't want it in my life anymore.”
- “I messed up royally. I'm truly sorry and I'll do what I can to fix it (or not repeat it)”

Notice how the things said by “servants” revolve around others and the joys of giving or meeting the needs of those who cannot meet their own. This also means, the kinds of things said often serve as clear indicators for the heart of the one speaking them. As Jesus said: “**the good person—out of the good treasure of his heart—will bring forth what is good**” and “[**the] mouth speaks from that which fills [the] heart**” (Lk 6.44, 45). Thus, their words are not simply words. Instead, the words are signposts for a willingness and readiness to serve others.

¹ B. Paisley, “Me and Jesus” (*Moonshine in the Trunk*, 2014).

b. Personal Characteristics

And that leads us to second way to identify “servants,” which can be described as their personal characteristics—or how they often operate. To keep things simple, let me give you two. *(There are plenty more, but we’ll start with these)*. First, “servants,” especially those in the early stages of their spiritual development, will have tons of energy, but little movement.

This means: they will have loads of big ideas, incredible dreams, or even practical ways of making life in the church more effective. However, while the desire and aspirations are active and encouraging, there will often be little-to-no follow-through in making those ideas, dreams, and ways come to life. “**Why does this happen?**,” we might ask. Well, sometimes it’s due to personal opinions regarding roles in the church. These types of servants think: “**Hey, I come up with the ideas, someone else is meant to make them happen.**” *(This becomes interesting, if not problematic, when such opinions remain unspoken yet are assumed to be known by everyone else)*. Now, if that’s the case, then we need to work with them and help them have a better and healthier—not to mention biblical—grasp of the church and its various roles.

Another possibility for why the follow-through doesn’t happen is due to a lack of experience or knowledge in how to carry it out. For example, I would love to build my own classic muscle car, but my experience and knowledge on how to do that is extremely limited. I can do some basics, but nothing that would result in a complete—not to mention properly functioning—car. Thus, that beast remains elusive. Also hidden behind a mountain of student loans. *(Just so you know: that’s what “PhD” means—i.e., “piled high in debt.” But that’s off topic)*. Now, a final possibility for the lack of follow-through is sometimes tied to a sense of discouragement due to little buy-in from others. Thus, the “servants” identify a worthy need, come up with a plan, pitch it to other church members, and the response from others is a resounding: “**Meh.**”

Not only will that kind of discouragement halt the growth and development of a church in general, it will also stymie *(if not squelch)* the desires of those who are willing and ready to serve in the church. So, while they might have the big, great ideas—many of which having the potential of honoring God and advancing the gospel message in effective ways—the faithful “servants” wind up doing nothing with them. At best, they will become a quiet feature in the life of the church. At worst, they will feel unwanted and leave. Either way, I think that we can admit: as a living, faithful, obedient, and Spirit-equipped body of Christ, we cannot allow that. And that leads us into the second trait of “servants.” Let me introduce it like this....

When our daughter Ashley turned 4, she wanted to do everything, and she was constantly asking to help around the house. And her desire to do things was related not just to typical tasks or chores but especially the things we ordinarily did for her. Thus, she wanted to make her meals *(on the stove)*, microwave her nightly milk, do the laundry, fold clothes, and draw her own bath. Unfortunately, she didn’t show a desire to clean her room, but she’s since gotten better on that one. And in some cases, we gladly walked her through the steps and watched her do them—ready to assist if she ever needed us. And in other cases, we had to figure out ways of letting her know there were some things that she just wasn’t ready to do yet, while, at the same time, not muzzling or deflating her desire to do them. And that’s often a challenging balance to walk.

All of that to say, and to get back to the second trait: believers in this stage of discipleship will often have a seemingly unrelenting desire to serve. They show up early and leave late, ready

to help at a moment's notice, and do whatever is asked. They become excited when a new ministry or outreach idea is pitched and want to get things rolling—even if the idea is still on the drawing table. Related to that: they are the ones whose (*innocent*) idealism about serving in the church motivates others to get involved in the day-to-day tasks of church life. And to put a nice bow on all of this: they have this unrelenting desire to serve because they know that a fundamental part of the Christian life is being others-focused. Unlike the tendency of some me-centered newbies, the servant knows it's not about them, and so they serve others.

Now, we need to include one brief word of necessary caution at this point. We must be careful with this particular trait, because it often gets muddled and thus inappropriately applied. Here's what I mean: there is a huge difference between having an unrelenting desire to serve in the church and having an unhealthy desire to be active—or just to be busy. Simply being active or busy, especially if done for the sake of keeping up appearances (*which is a great British sitcom, by the way*) is neither an effective nor others-focused way of doing ministry or service. That mindset operates on a false assumption—i.e., if we're going to claim to be active church, then we have to be doing something all of the time to prove it.

In a similar vein, personally taking on or heading up so many various ministry opportunities, programs, groups, or whatever—either because people think busyness equals healthy activity or because they inappropriately think they're the best candidate or make claims of being the most qualified (*even when, in reality, they're not*)—all of that not only distracts attention away from the true nature of meaningful service in the church, but it also places the attention on the individual doing it. This is the person about whom it could be said: **“What they're doing is a lot about them and not enough about Jesus.”** Think back to **Lk 10.38-42**, which shows Mary sitting with Jesus, while Martha is distracted with busyness and complaining that Mary is not helping serve. Yet Jesus praises Mary. So, sometimes it's best to be still and sit in the presence of the holy God. And sometimes, when we do engage in active service, it's best not to over-extend ourselves by seeing how much we can accomplish, but to do focused works of ministry and service in effectual and lasting ways.

c. Two Examples

Let me come at this with two basic examples. First, a number of years ago, Southland Christian Church (in Lexington, KY) had a handful of car-buffs—all having plenty of talent and experience with repairing just about anything. These guys got together and started a ministry for families who were not able to afford a car. They began asking others if they would simply donate an otherwise useless car, which these guys would then repair to full working condition, and then give away to those in need. Everything done for free. That's a servant's that sees a real need, has the ability to do something about it, and does it in healthy, God-honoring, and others-focused ways.

The second example is one that people don't always consider—either because they haven't thought in these terms or something about it makes them uncomfortable. Let me explain. A few years ago, my brother did a sermon series on prayer. The series was not simply about how or what to pray (*although such things were a part of it*). The focus was primarily on how we understand what it means to pray and how prayers affect who we are and what we do as Christians. And one of the affects is that, through spiritual discernment, we come to realize that we might be the answer to certain prayers. Thus, when we hear someone request prayers

for a financial struggle, or personal dilemma, or some material need—like a car or some groceries; we hear that and we say: “I can take care of that for you.”

Now, please understand: this is not taking God out of the equation, or thinking He doesn’t have the ability to answer prayers. And it’s certainly not us saying to God: “I got this one. You take a break.” Rather, the willingness and readiness to meet the needs of others we hear in their prayers is, I would say, evidence that we’re aware of God’s active work in our own lives and how He sometimes uses us to work in the lives of others. Thus, and to build on the truth of **Ps 37.4** (i.e., “*Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart*”), our desire to respond and help is not only a reflection of God’s desire but also a faithful submission to God, who is working powerfully in and through us to bring about restoration, and ultimately glory to His name.

d. Biblical Support

All of this illustrates a core reality found in our passage for this morning: the willing, sacrificial service to others. Look with me at the text: “They were devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Reverential awe came over everyone, and many wonders and miraculous signs came about by the apostles. All who believed were together and held everything in common, and they began selling their property and possessions and distributing the proceeds to everyone, as anyone had need. Every day they continued to gather together by common consent in the temple courts, breaking bread from house to house, sharing their food with glad and humble hearts, praising God and having the good will of all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number every day those who were being saved” (Acts 2.42–47).

In general, and if we recall from our Acts series, this passage deals with the state of the very early church in Jerusalem. I say “very early church” because, just by basic facts, what we typically call the NT church effectively began on the day of Pentecost—roughly 40 days after Jesus resurrected and ascended. And from what we read in Acts 2, we discover one amazing detail: on that day, because of Peter’s unashamedly bold, Christ-centered sermon, there was a massive influx of what we would call “new members.” And influx that caused the “original church” of about 120 to grow to the astounding figure of more than 3000 (cf. 2.41). To which all preachers everywhere say: “Hey, Peter: can I get your sermon notes, please?” Jokes aside: what we see happen on the Day of Pentecost is not a sales-pitch for how to become a celebrity pastor. Instead, it’s a revelation of who God is and the fulfillment of His promises, as well as a picture of His people living in complete submission to Him alone and His calling.

At the same time, the picture of the very early church in Acts admittedly comes off like a rather idealistic image. Why do I say that? Nowhere in this chapter (*and even the next couple*) do we hear any grumblings, no disputes over styles of worship, no complaints about parking, no strong words because someone who sat in the wrong pew, and no gripes because Peter got long-winded with the gospel message. Instead, what we see, especially in Acts 2.42–47, is everyone coming together as one community, one body, united in one name—the only name that matters—because it’s the only name that saves and provides true, everlasting life. And when they come together because of that, there is an unrelenting desire to worship, learn, pray, and serve. And that desire to serve in a willing, sacrificial way proves itself by their choice to sell their stuff so that everyone’s needs are met.

Now, cynics might look at this and say: “Oh, just wait...that honeymoon period will end soon enough and then real life will set in and hit'em hard.” Sure, it's true that Christians (*and churches*) go through a type of honeymoon period, where everything is seen through rose-tinted glasses. And it's true that things don't always stay nice and clean, and the struggles that go with doing the day-to-day tasks become messy. And it's also true that the quirks and habits that were once concealed begin to reveal themselves. But that does not mean that either the honeymoon is over, or that it has to end. And it certainly does not mean that the true nature of the relationship has dramatically changed. And this is the case in the very early church, especially when there is one trait that continually exists among the believers. A trait that enables the church to navigate all such challenges—graciously and lovingly.

And it is a trait that, strangely enough, most translations leave out. In the original Greek, the text says: “Daily in the Temple, steadfastly devoted in *one mind*...” (2.46). The term for “one mind” is *ὁμοθυμαδόν*, which can also mean, “one passion” or “one purpose.” And for what it's worth: apart from one instance near the start of **Rom 15**, this term only appears in the book of Acts, often in a contrasting way—i.e., on the one hand, it refers to the believers who, with one mind, are committed to the gospel, while on the other hand, it refers to the opposition who, with one mind, want to silence the gospel. And if we remember the Acts series (*and if we know anything about the NT*), we know which one mind God blesses. Hence Paul's prayer in Rom 15: “Now may the God of endurance and comfort give you unity with one another in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together [*ὁμοθυμαδόν*] you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom 15.6).

And it's that sense of oneness in the community of believers—a reality made possible only by the saving work of Christ and the seal of the Holy Spirit—that drives all the early believers did as Christ's body for His kingdom. It's who they were and what they did. Identity and mission. And from what we see in the rest of the NT, tensions often arise for one reason: the church forgets its identity, its mission, its purpose; and instead of operating with “one mind”, it becomes fractured in thought and focus, which then affects its ability to know (*communally*) the needs of others and how to meet them. It becomes a whole lot about individuals and not enough about Jesus.

But when the church operates with “one mind”—the mind of Christ as given to them by the Spirit—then it becomes the effectual and living body of Christ it was designed to be. A body that sacrificially gives of itself to meet the needs of others, and does so because it ultimately desires to glorify God. No matter the cost. This is where the faithful “servants” in the church live and breathe. Or to stick with our imagery: this is where they scoot around on their rolling-chair, because they know that such is the life to which God has called them. And we as a church body—unified in purpose and identity—must be aware of this, and we must be ready to help the “servants” not only learn their calling but also how to exercise it and fulfill it in healthy, God-honoring ways. And to be able to do the latter, we need to be aware of the needs of “servants.”

3. EQUIPPING TO MEET NEEDS

So, what are the needs of “servants”? How do we approach and engage with this group of believers in a meaningful way? Or to use the terminology of our topic: how do we effectively relate to people in this stage of discipleship? Let me give you four basic things to keep in mind. (*All of these will sound familiar*).

a. They need to learn to trust the Spirit

This first need has two key parts. On the one hand, learning to trust the Spirit means “servants” need to understand how the Spirit is at work in their lives—molding and shaping them into the image of Christ, and therefore making servants ready and equipped to do God’s work. Thus, “servants” need to know that they are constantly in the process of being transformed by the Spirit into faithful laborers in God’s vineyard or harvest-fields. On the other hand, learning to trust the Spirit means “servants” need to be attentive to how and where the Spirit is leading them so that they can do God’s work effectively. This also relates to having an awareness of how the Spirit has equipped them—e.g., pastor, teacher, evangelist, etc. And it is the role of the “mature” believers to help them in this discernment process.

b. They need build endurance

For those who have done anything with athletics, you know there is a huge difference between strength and endurance. Strength can be seen as explosive power in a given moment for a short duration of time. Endurance, on the other hand, can be seen as disciplined strength that is metered out over a longer period of time. Now, what does this have to do with ministry, or serving God’s kingdom? Everything. One tragedy that affects most churches today is burnout. And burnout is something that can happen across the board—i.e., it doesn’t just affect the pastor, it can affect the leadership team, volunteers, etc.

Burnout is what happens when people try to rely on strength when they lack endurance. I’ve seen many gung-ho new Christians ready to serve anywhere and everywhere they can, only to see them bow out of serving because they’ve exhausted their emotions, their minds, and even their spirituality to the point where they were no longer effective. We need to make sure this does not happen. We need to make sure believers are pacing and not over-extending themselves. Think back to Luke 10.38-42.

c. They need ministry experience

Alongside endurance-training, “servants” need a chance to observe or experience ministry in action. In many cases, this means letting them “shadow” a fellow servant, minister, elder, or deacon in a particular area of ministry. It is here that the idea of “apprenticeship” comes into play, for in shadowing someone else in ministry, “servants” can see first-hand all that goes into a specific ministry. They get to learn about the kinds of necessary skills they’ll need, and they’ll discover the level of time-commitment required to carry out that ministry effectively and honorably. But more importantly, in this apprenticeship-like setting, they’ll be able to discern whether or not this is the area of ministry for which the Spirit has equipped them. And once they discern that, they’ll be able to know how to get the training or preparation they need.

d. They need service opportunities

Finally, they need service opportunities. Said another way: they need to be released to do God’s work. It’s one thing to focus our attention and energies on instructing and training new believers to say and do the right things; and it’s one thing to encourage believers to “shadow” others in various ministry areas; but it’s something completely different to step back and let them do what they’ve learned—to use the knowledge and skills they developed in the process. But that is exactly what needs to happen. We, as a church family, need to be willing and ready to let servants serve. We need to be willing and ready to point them in the direction of those areas of ministry best suited for their abilities and giftedness. (*That means: we need to know them personally so that we know how they are personally gifted*). And we need to be

willing and ready to support and encourage them every step of the way, especially when they have slip-ups of their own.

4. REMEMBERING THE BIG PICTURE

To close things out for this morning: as a church body, we need to be aware of two final things. And both of these need to be a part of our training, instruction, and wise counsel when we disciple “servants” in the church. Both of these points revolve around a single idea—or remind us all of the much bigger picture of what it means to be the church: service in the church is neither the end nor the sole property of the church. Let me explain what I mean.

a. The Journey is Not Over

We need to ensure that “servants” realize that reaching their role in the church is not the conclusion of their spiritual development. They (*like everyone else*) need to continue growing. And a vital part of that growth is leaving the rolling-chair and moving on to the next one. Now, the process of transitioning out of the rolling chair and into the next one can be admittedly tricky. I say that because Christians who have been in the “servants” role for a long time often see such a tenure as the height of their spiritual journey or even the end of the discipleship process. Or: these people often view their time and breadth of service in the church as a mark of maturity and seniority, and therefore deserve a bit of respite, so that the “younger folk” can take over for a while—or so that they can be served.

As hard-hitting as this is going to sound: I think we can all recognize that such a mentality is not an indication of progress in discipleship but one of regression. That’s the way of thinking and speaking we’d expect to hear from someone in the recliner—where the focus is on the self and the comforts (*or perks*) to be enjoyed. Instead, if we have done the discipleship process correctly, and if we’ve properly trained, instructed, and guided those who serve in the church, then they will gladly accept the reality that their journey is not yet complete. In fact, they’ll know it can never be completed. They’ll know there’s always more to learn, more areas for personal growth, and especially more work to be done in God’s kingdom. And one of the things that they will know from this, is our next point...

b. Discipling Happens Inside and Outside

The servants need to know: discipling happens inside and outside. This means there’s more to discipleship than years of service in various capacities *inside* the church. Discipleship also involves service *outside* of the church. Servants understand: sure, there are needs and tasks to be fulfilled among those who share in the identity and mission of the church, and we must do all that we can to meet those needs. But true servants also understand: Christ has called us to make more disciples, which means taking the truth of the gospel to who do not yet know it’s life-changing message. And that can only happen when servants leave the walls of the church building, go out into the world, and seek to meet the needs of others. Thus, we as a church must be ready and willing to reveal that reality about discipleship and service, to encourage each other to accept that reality, and ultimately to choose to live out that reality with faithful devotion and allegiance to the One who commissioned and empowered us.