

Serving in the Second Half of Life

Let me take you to Bethany, a village that lies just two miles outside Jerusalem and to the home of two sisters, Martha and Mary. Martha was obviously the elder sister and the one in charge, since she was the one who had opened her home to Jesus. This was a special place for Jesus, perhaps the nearest place to a home for him. It was the place where he could kick off his sandals, sit back and really relax with these dear sisters, who were close friends as well as followers. There were no pressures or expectations, no crowds outside the door clamouring for Jesus' attention to heal or to teach them, just the quiet time and space to enjoy a meal with his friends.

But all was not quiet and peaceful within and a scene ensues that could be enacted in many homes, churches and workplaces. Both these sisters loved the Lord Jesus and longed to follow and serve Him. Martha is a practical, hard working woman, who sees what needs to be done and gets on with it. This is a home in a village in a Semitic culture and their visitor is not just a loved friend but an honoured teacher. Much is expected by the village and the culture with regard to hospitality if reputation is not to be lost with the neighbours and shame brought on the family.

Martha genuinely wants to serve the Lord and so she sets to work to prepare a meal for Jesus that she can be proud of. She is so busy that you can almost hear the pots and pans clanking in the kitchen as she scurries from one job to another to prepare this impressive feast. Martha is totally consumed and "distracted" by all that she is *doing* for Jesus.

But there are two sisters in this home, so where is the other sister, Mary? Mary is sitting at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. She is sitting and just enjoying Jesus' company; listening and learning from his words and giving him her full attention. But this is too much for Martha. Inside she is stressed and anxious about the meal – will it turn out alright, will it be good enough to impress her friends and neighbours? Her stress turns into resentment and just a little sibling rivalry as she sees her sister calmly sitting at Jesus' feet. Why doesn't Jesus see what's going on and tell Mary to help her sister, doesn't he care either?

Eventually, when she cannot contain her feelings any longer, Martha comes out of the kitchen and in her frustration pours out her resentment and criticism towards both Mary and Jesus. She addresses him as Lord, but at this point he is no longer her lord and master, since it is now all about what serves her. She does what many of us do with regard to serving, which is to compare our serving with others and to make judgements, or to become anxious, weary and resentful, feeling undervalued or overlooked by others and by God.

Jesus' response is both gentle and understanding as he repeats Martha's name twice, both to get her attention and to help her to see that what he is going to say is really important for her to grasp. He acknowledges her feelings and the busyness of her work for him, he did not say that her service was wrong but that her priorities were wrong. Her service had become people centred rather than God centred. She had chosen to work *for* Jesus rather

than to spend vital time with Him in this unique moment. How often do we do the same and make the same choice in our priorities?

(Linda Pilling based on Luke 10:38-42)

As we come to this topic of serving it is a huge subject which the bible engages with from many different points of view. We each come to the subject with “histories” of past successes and failures, of achievements that we are proud of and disappointments that we would rather forget. In the second half of life we often see service for the Lord as the way to live the rest of our lives with the meaning and significance we are seeking and to leave a legacy that has made it all worth the living. We can spend a lot of time thinking, reading books and talking to friends and counsellors in order to find that elusive thing that God wants us to do. We often ask the “what” question when God is perhaps more interested in the “why” and the “how” questions of our service for Him. So a good place for us to start is to examine the “why” question by looking at our motives for serving.

Motives revealed

Most of us want to serve God, to use our time and energy being effective in His service and for His glory, but over time we can become like Martha weary, stressed, resentful and joyless in serving Christ and others. In his book “Serving without sinking” John Hindley suggests that “When it comes to Christian service, the first place to look is at what is going on in our hearts, not what we are doing with our hands.” He says that we may have a wrong view of God of other people or of ourselves that may result in us serving from a wrong motive, which will lead to discouragement and ultimately to giving up. Let’s examine the potentially wrong views that he suggests may be a problem:-

A wrong view of God

Serving Jesus ...to be good enough for Him. Like the Pharisee in Jesus parable in Luke 18:9-14 we seek to justify ourselves before God by what we do in the hope that He will accept us and love us, rather than acknowledging like the tax collector that we can never be good enough for God. Sounds obvious but this is a very subtle temptation!

Serving Jesus...to get something from Him. This attitude can be expressed in a hopeful way – if I serve God hard enough He will have to give me success or bless the project. The focus is on the blessing not on the Giver. It may be felt in a fearful way – for example if I have not read my bible today or if I failed to take an opportunity to speak for Jesus today how can I expect Him to accept me let alone to help me, since I’ve let Him down. Ultimately it can result in a “You owe me” reaction to God when He doesn’t fulfil our plans or answer our prayers. We feel He has let us down!

Serving Jesus ...to pay Him back. Most of us hate to be in debt to someone, we like to pay our way. Hindley would say if we apply that to our relationship to God and our service to Him then we get in a mess. A deep sense of gratitude and love for all that Christ has done for us is good and should lead to rightly motivated service for Him. But gratitude that leads

to a wrong sense of indebtedness may lead to service that is focussed on us and somehow tries to contribute to our own forgiveness. God's love and grace and our assurance of salvation become contingent on our service for Him.

A wrong view of people

Serving to impress... In Matthew 6:1-2 Jesus said "Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men. I tell you the truth they have received their reward in full." Jesus does not discourage the act of serving but the heart attitude that seeks the praise of others, which means that our serving has become about us, about being noticed and about serving our reputation rather than serving Jesus.

Serving to belong... We instinctively want to belong, to be one of the inner circle, to be included, we don't want to be left out, so we serve to be like them, to be welcomed by them. But if we serve hard, driven by the need to be accepted by others, then in reality they have become our god.

A wrong view of myself

Serving because Jesus needs me... "You need other people to need you. You want to be the one people turn to. This isn't because you seek the praise, or want others to know; it is because you need to matter and you know you matter because people depend on you. You matter because Jesus needs you." (Hindley p37) This leads to the people-centred not God-centred serving that we observed with Martha in Bethany. This attitude can result in a feeling of being indispensable, to thinking that things would fall apart if I don't serve in this area. It may also lead to possessively holding on to a ministry or a role when it is time to pass it on to someone else. Hindley reminds us that "He (Jesus) is quite capable of doing things without us. He may choose to do things through us; but He does not depend on us."

Serving...but I don't need Jesus. This is the kind of service that does not need to be good enough for God or to gain His acceptance; it is service without dependence on Christ. "Here is a sort of service that is just self-reliant. It is the service of the competent Christian, who is busy and able... and too busy to pray, too able to beg Jesus for help." (Hindley p40) This may seem harsh but most of us, when given the choice, will choose to *do* rather than *pray* especially when time is short.

Hindley comes to this conclusion about these wrong motivations for our service "They are each different, and we struggle with different ones, in different ways, at different times. But there is one thing that unites them all. When we serve for any of these reasons, *we will give up*. These motivations for service are limited. They all lead to the same place: the dull drudgery of cheerless duty. They lead us to be bitter with God; annoyed with others; desperately disappointed with ourselves. And when we reach that place, we are not far from giving up on loving Jesus."

Aspiring to Servanthood

“Many people aspire to leadership, to fame and to success, but very few aspire to servanthood.” (Cosgrove p151)

Why should we aspire to servanthood? What should motivate us to serve? Here are some ideas, you may be able to think of others:-

Servanthood is at the heart of our discipleship- in Romans 1:1 Paul wrote “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel.” Paul was very clear about his calling and mission, but first and foremost he never lost sight of the fact that as a disciple of Christ he was a servant of Christ and this was the driving force of all he did. Cosgrove writes “You cannot be a true disciple of Jesus Christ unless you have a servant heart.” Pete Maiden also describes servanthood as the very heart of our discipleship. It has to be significant that on the last occasion that Jesus was with his disciples he chose both to exemplify and to teach the need to serve “Now that I your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” John 13:14-15.

Recognising that Christ serves us – “...the only way to get our service for Jesus right is to realise that supremely we don’t serve Him. He serves us.” (Hindley p45) In Mark 10:45 Jesus says “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.” What an amazing mission statement!

Hindley puts it this way “The Son of Man comes to His subjects... and He does not expect to be served! This is bizarrely different to what we expect from such a mighty King. He is God! He is the one who made all things. He is the One who is in charge of everyone and everything. He could rightly expect us to serve Him.”

Wilkins writes about this staggering statement of Jesus –

“In the Kingdom of God humble service is the rule, and Jesus is the perfect example of it, especially in His redemptive mission. The phrase “did not come to be served but to serve” describes Jesus incarnate life. He did not come as a potentate whose every personal whim was to be catered to by grovelling servants; instead He came as a servant Himself. And His coming issued in His giving His life as a “ransom for many.”

Grasping our identity in Christ – Just prior to Jesus serving His disciples by washing their feet, the scriptures give us a glimpse into Jesus sense of identity. This sense of security in relationship to His Father and His Father’s purposes for Him, released Him to take the place of a servant and to do the task, which the disciple’s pride and embarrassment held them back from.

“...Jesus knew that the time had come for Him to leave this world and to go to the Father.....Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God; so He got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing and put a towel around His waist.....and began to wash the disciples feet” John 13:1 and 3

A true sense of our identity, of who we are “in Christ”, will help us to be willing to serve and to serve with the right motivation. There are many aspects of our identity that we could look at, John Hindley suggests three:-

1. Jesus’ calls us his friends from John 15:13-15 where Jesus defines a friend as someone He would die for “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” He no longer calls us servants but friends.
2. Jesus loves us, his undeserving bride, sacrificially. Ephesians 5:25 “Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Jesus gave himself up for us, He died on a cross to make us his bride.
3. We are sons and daughters of God, adopted into His family, 1 John 3:1 “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are!” It is this Fatherly love that, just as a human father loves to have his child working with him, causes God to allow us to work with Him and to serve Him, even when He doesn’t really need us.

“Lots of people do lots of things in the service of God, but the Sustainer of the universe is not powerless without them. God does not need our service. So why does He have us work with Him? Because of the relationship we have with Him. Because we are His children.” (Hindley p76)

Gratitude for all that Christ has done for us –We have thought about the fact that Christ calls us his friends, but the more staggering truth is that Christ died for us when we were his enemies.

“You see at just the right time, when were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:6-8

“Jesus did not go to the cross for His own glory. He went to the cross so that you and I can sit here with our sins forgiven and eternal life now ours. A higher motivation for Jesus’ life was “My pain, others gain.”” (Wilkins p201)

Following Christ’s example – We thought earlier of that upper room where Jesus washed the disciple’s feet. So that they aren’t in any doubt, Jesus goes on to explain that what they have just witnessed is to be a model for their own service to one another.

“Do you understand what I have done for you? He asked them. You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” John 13:12-15

“Jesus was saying to them, and He says to us “This is how I want you to live, I want you to be towel grabbers – constantly looking for opportunities to take the towel of service”” (Maiden p49)

Motivated by obedience- This is not the obedience of trying to prove ourselves or to pay God back for what He has done for us; it is the obedience that is inspired by love for God and a genuine desire to please Him and to do His will. Again we need look no further than the example of Christ:-

“..taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to death-even death on a cross.” Philippians 2:8

“Jesus is not telling us to be obedient. He is telling us to love Him - and then rightly motivated obedience will flow inevitably and naturally out of us. The origin of that love is the gift of a new heart, given to us by the Holy Spirit.” (Hindley p101)

Motivated by the needs of others – Matthew 25:37-40 recounts “Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

Mark Greene comments on these verses with regard to serving others:-

“But at root ministry just means serving others. Ministry is love in action: taking a moment to engage with the checkout person, noticing the ‘invisible’ people, saying thank you to the caretaker of your kid’s school or the cleaner of the changing room at the gym, or getting up once in a while to say thank you to the people who empty your bins, calling a carer to ask if there is anything you can pick up from the shops when you go..”

But God may ask us to be involved in the lives of others in a way that can be more costly:-

“God’s love always gives; it is marked by sacrificial service. We must open our lives to the love of God, and open our hearts to one another. Such vulnerability will lead to pain, but also to a living hope and to the possibility to God’s love reaching those who are harassed and helpless.....God may take us through many painful experiences in order to make us tender hearted and compassionate, like His Son. When our hearts are made tender through suffering we may find an enriched ministry towards those who suffer.” (Watson p232)

Serving others witnesses to our serving Saviour – As Mark Greene says “Serving others lovingly and graciously makes the message of a loving, gracious Servant-King much more compelling.”

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said “Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father who is in heaven.” The tricky bit is that at some point they need to know who we are serving to be an effective witness and so they don’t just praise us.

Graham Cray also writes about presenting Christ by serving our neighbours:-

“If we love our neighbours, we will bear witness to them. But witness to Christ involves being an example, embodying what he did and taught into our daily lives. He fed the hungry

and healed the sick. He included excluded people. He had a special concern for the poor, and contrary to the culture treated women and children with the same dignity as men. He challenged unjust leaders and religious hypocrites. This is the Jesus our neighbours need to know and follow.”

Having thought about the ‘why’ of serving let’s think about the ‘how’:-

The Marks of a servant of Christ

“Servanthood deals with people, and at heart is our willingness to go out of our way to meet a need in someone’s life, to do something that needs to be done.” (Cosgrove p153)

Humility – In this as in every aspect of service Christ is our supreme example:-

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus; Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-even death on a cross.”
Philippians 2:5-8

Peter Maiden comments on these verses that as Jesus approached the cross his mind was not of power and position but the opportunity to serve the Father and humanity.

“If you want to be great, don’t request an esteemed position. Instead go to the end of the line and serve. Jesus existed for others. Likewise his disciples should exist for others, and our ministry should be for others too” (Hull p159)

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:5 “For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus sake.” The servant of Christ does not draw attention to himself but seeks to bring glory and honour to Christ.

David Watson, in his book “Discipleship” describes two opposite temptations that can hinder our service for Christ – the first is ambition, seeking status instead of service, and the second is self- pity concerning the cost of discipleship. He goes on to say:-

“It is only when we accept our human frailty, knowing God’s grace to be always sufficient and only when we are ambitious for God’s kingdom alone, that we shall be able to serve others with the loving, gracious and humble spirit of Jesus Christ.” (Watson p25)

Willing to sacrifice our own interests for others –We have thought much already about the amazing sacrifice of our Saviour for us and in following Him another mark of servanthood is the willingness to put aside our own interests for the interests of others.

“If our sacrifice in this life is directed only toward our own gain, our own future comfort, it is a gain that becomes increasingly self - centred, and increasingly empty of meaning.....Greatness involves taking the place of a servant and seeking the best of those around us. Our own personal sacrifice has meaning and purpose if it is directed toward the gain of others.” (Wilkins p201)

But this spirit of self- sacrificial service does not come easily or naturally to any of us:-

“Love, after all, means action directed towards the benefit of others.....The act of loving others sacrificially is unnatural. Most of us also avoid moving ahead into anything that looks like failure or that might include suffering.....But Jesus led with weakness, failure and rejection. He moved straight into everything that the human spirit naturally abhors. An attitude of willingness is the rite of passage to ministering as Jesus ministered, to follow in His footsteps, to giving ourselves for others.” (Hull p146)

Peter Maiden points out that it is comparatively easy to serve those who appreciate our service and may serve us in return. But the scriptural standard is much higher than that, since like Jesus, who washed Judas, His betrayer’s feet, we must be prepared to serve our enemies not just our friends.

Diligent and faithful – Paul wrote in Colossians 3:23-24 “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” These verses speak to many aspects of our service – the motivation for our serving, the quality of our serving and the importance of how we serve to the Lord. Mark Greene comments on these verses:-

“Whatever you do. Not some things you do, not 47% of the things you do, not the things you do in the church, but ‘*whatever* you do’. And God would hardly ask us to do whatever we do with all our hearts, if it were not of some significance to him, even if we ourselves may not think it significant at all.” (Greene p81)

This helps us to see the value of every opportunity to serve both in the most menial tasks, in the unseen and unnoticed, as well as the apparently ‘important’ roles, and to perform them with diligence and faithfulness.

When Paul commended Epaphras, his fellow worker in the gospel, to the Colossian church he wrote “Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf,” without this dear brother’s faithfulness, the Colossian believers would never have heard the gospel and been given the opportunity to turn to Christ. The world is changed by individual acts of faithfulness.

Observant of need and how best to meet it – in the epistles the writers often use words like ‘be alert, be aware or be ready’ probably because they knew that we can get so involved in what we are doing that although we may ‘see’ we do not ‘observe’ the needs of those around us. On some occasions we may observe a need but like the disciples in the upper room we are held back from serving by our pride or embarrassment. Perhaps we observe a need but fail to act out of fear of rejection or fear of failure or that we might not have the right gifts.

But observing the need is only the beginning, it takes real humility and sensitivity to serve in a way that meets the need of the one we are serving and not just to serve as we would like to be served.

I had an experience of this when, in the early days of our time in the student ministry in Cardiff, the couple who were our supervisors came to our home for an evening meal before

the students arrived for the weekly meeting. I was in the kitchen cooking the meal, knowing that we had to eat, wash up, get two young children to bed and be ready to receive fifty plus students in a very short time. The wife of the couple came into the kitchen and graciously asked if she could help, but then checked in detail how I wanted her to do the job I had given her to do. I remember this incident for two reasons, one was her gentle sensitivity to serve in the way that served me, not herself. The other was that she was trained to cook at the Cordon Bleu school in London and knew far better than I did how to do what I had asked of her!

Serving with dependence on God – “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.” 2 Corinthians 4:7. The NIV study bible note on this verse says “It was customary to conceal treasure in clay jars, which had little value or beauty and did not attract attention to themselves and their precious contents. Here they represent Paul’s human frailty and unworthiness. The idea that the absolute insufficiency of man reveals the total sufficiency of God...” In the context the verse refers to the power of the gospel but the principle applies to our service also. Warren W. Wiersbe in his book “On being a servant of God” coins his own definition of serving:-

“Ministry takes place when divine resources meet human needs through loving channels to the glory of God.”

This helps us to remember that although God chooses to use us as His channels to serve others, the real resources that meet human needs are divine and come from Him.

Serving in leadership

For many years the British Army have been training their officers with the motto of ‘serve to lead’. Later in 1970 Robert Greenleaf published a series of essays on ‘The Servant as Leader’. This concept of the servant-leader emphasised the choice to serve first and to aspire to leadership as a way of serving others not as a demonstration of power and authority. But this was not a new concept since 2000 years earlier the Lord Jesus exemplified servant-leadership through his life and teaching.

“We have a God who is Lord of all, and yet chooses to be a servant. We, on the other hand, are servants who like to think we are lords. We love to rule; we love to lord it over each other. We love to gain respect, obedience and even fear.” (Hindley p50)

In Mark chapter 10:35-45 James and John display this ambition for greatness when, immediately after Jesus has predicted his own sufferings and death, they come to Jesus requesting that they occupy places of honour on Jesus right and left, when Jesus comes into his glory. They were motivated by the ambition for greatness, position and power, even if that greatness had to come through pain and suffering. But Jesus overturns the value system and structures of the world that they could see around them. “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.” The life of discipleship is to be characterised by humble and loving service.

But still we can struggle with putting the two roles of servant and leader together in practice. The following quote from “Leadership by the book” (Blanchard, Hybels and Hodges) and quoted in “Servant Leadership for slow learners” (Lundy p230)

“I believe there are two kinds of leaders: those who are *leaders first* and those who are *servants first*....People who are leaders first are often those who naturally try to control, to make decisions, to give orders. They are driven to lead – they want to be in charge. And they are possessive about their leadership position – they think they own it. They don’t like feedback because they see it as threatening their position, the one thing they most want to hold on to...

Leaders who are *servants first* will assume leadership only if they see it as the best way they can serve. They are ‘called’ to lead, rather than driven, because they naturally want to be helpful. They are not possessive about their leadership position – they view it as an act of stewardship rather than ownership. If someone else on the scene is a better leader, they are willing to partner with that person or even step aside to find another role for themselves where they can better serve.”

In their book “Spiritual leadership” Henry and Richard Blackaby write about some of the keys to servant leadership referring to Jesus’ washing the disciple’s feet in John chapter 13:-

- Servant leadership flows from the love leaders have for their people. Leaders cannot serve people they do not love. They may perform acts of service but their followers will perceive their actions as insincere and manipulative, unless they are done out of genuine concern.
- Servant leadership requires self-knowledge, knowing and accepting who they are so that, secure in their identity, they are not enslaved by the opinions or affirmation of others. They are free to serve without worry or fear.
- Christlike servant leaders must understand whom they serve. Spiritual leaders are not their people’s servant but God’s servant. When Jesus washed his disciples’ feet he was serving the Father and doing His will. Jesus served the twelve because that was what the Father wanted him to do. The disciples did not set the agenda for Jesus, the Father did. Jesus was the Father’s servant not theirs. This may help us when we become overwhelmed by the needs and have to be able to discern which needs are actually a call from God.

Boundaries in serving

The needs around us are many, constant and unrelenting. There are needs within the family, church, community and the world. We are bombarded by those needs on a daily basis and with greater immediacy and impact through all our visual and digital devices. This can work in two ways either to harden our hearts to the needs of others or to overwhelm and confuse us as to our responsibility to meet those needs.

As well as the needs themselves, we can come under pressure from the expectations of others to meet their needs or to fulfil their agendas. This happened constantly to Jesus, in his earthly ministry. For example, in Mark 1:35-39, after an immensely busy day of teaching

and healing, and constantly being surrounded by the crowds, Jesus had gone to a solitary place early in the morning to pray. But the disciples even disturbed his prayer time to pressurise him by exclaiming “Everyone is looking for you”. Probably as a result of his communing with his Father, Jesus was secure enough in the knowledge of his Father’s will to resist the pressure and said “Let us go somewhere else - to nearby villages - so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”

We will have to resist the temptation to say ‘yes’ immediately to a request but to delay, to give time to get perspective, to think and pray before agreeing to something or to saying ‘no’ when it is not right for us at the time. Not an easy thing to do, but necessary if we are not just going to dissipate our energy through the expectations of others rather than to do God’s will for us.

Another boundary to serving is the avoidance of developing co-dependency relationships. In their book “Boundaries” Cloud and Townsend use the passage in Galatians 6:1-5 to help us understand the difference of being responsible *to* others and *for* ourselves. In verse 2 it says “Carry each other’s burdens and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.” This shows our responsibility to one another when we have “burdens” that are too big for us to bear due to an unexpected crisis, or as a result of some incapacity or lack of resources to carry the load. In other words we do something for someone that they cannot do for themselves out of self - sacrificial service.

In verse 5 it says “each one should carry his own load.” These are the responsibilities that God has given each one of us to carry for ourselves, our own particular “load” that we must own and look after.

The Greek word for “burden” means excess burdens that we should not be expected to carry by ourselves. Whereas the Greek word for “load” means cargo or the burden of daily toil. Problems arise when people act as if their daily “load” is in fact an excess “burden” and expect others to carry it for them. If we comply with this we allow the person to be irresponsible, not to grow in independence and reliance on God. Sometimes we can get drawn into this kind of situation because of our own needs and thus it becomes a co-dependency relationship.

Having thought at length about the “Why” and “How” of serving we need to turn to the “What”:-

Opportunities to Serve

As we look at the ‘doing’ of serving we need to keep the motives and the ‘being’ element of serving as the foundation for our serving in whatever situation we are called to serve.

The scope of the possibilities for serving God is huge. For those who are still in full time employment the main arena for those opportunities will probably be in the workplace. As we thought about in our discussions concerning work, there are no sacred/secular divides with God and we are His servant just as much in the workplace as in the church.

We also need to keep our vision for serving God wider than the regular activity we have signed up to help with at church or the rota duty that we fulfil. Peter Maiden suggests five major areas of service that we need to consider for ourselves:-

1. Family commitments - e.g. looking after our children and grandchildren, managing the home, caring for aging parents etc.
2. Church commitments - e.g. serving with the Sunday school or youth, being involved with the music or administration, leading a home group or helping with the catering or crèche etc.
3. Local opportunities – e.g. serving as a parent governor at your children’s school, visiting the elderly in a care home, volunteering in a food bank or as a street pastor etc.
4. National opportunities – e.g. being informed on current issues, voting in elections or getting more involved in the political system, praying for national leaders, serving in a national charity, working with asylum seekers, or those in poverty etc.
5. International opportunities – e.g. supporting an international charity such as Tear Fund, keeping informed and praying for the persecuted church worldwide or supporting a specific mission partner, considering giving some years of retirement to using professional expertise on the mission field etc.

Peter Maiden suggests looking at these five areas and thinking through what God may be calling us to at this stage in our lives and with the availability we have to choose how to use our time.

As Mark Greene wrote in his book “The Great Divide”, “...many retired Christians think prayerfully and creatively about how they can use some of their time in church related activities, but are much less likely to think about how they might continue to use their skills and relationships to make an impact on the world beyond the church buildings and programmes.”

These arenas of service are of course valuable in and of themselves, but they also open up to us the opportunity to be a culture maker, to extend love and grace to others and to be the aroma of Christ where He is not yet known.

In their book “The Insider”, Jim Petersen and Mike Shamy write “As a citizen of God’s kingdom you are already uniquely positioned to live out your kingdom citizenship among the people you relate to every day. God has called you to be an ‘insider’ in your family, neighbourhood and workplace.” They would suggest that every believer has a unique network of relationships, some closer than others, but all of them providing the possibility of influencing others for Christ by our life and words.

In order to help you to identify the unique network of relationships that you have it would be helpful to fill in the “Your relational circle” illustration at the end of the notes. Don’t be limited by the titles of the quadrants, include those you would regularly meet to play sport or at the gym or an adult learning class. It is surprising how many people and opportunities there are if we are alert to them.

Serving within the Body of Christ

As believers we are called to be part of the body of Christ and to live in community with one another. A good place to start would be to reflect on the 'one anothers' of scripture that are an integral part of our relating and serving each other:-

- Love one another, as I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. John 13:34-35
- Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. Romans 12:10
- Live in harmony with one another. Romans 12:16, 1 Peter 3:8
- Therefore let us stop passing judgement on one another. Romans 14:13
- Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you. Romans 15:7
- Serve one another in love. Galatians 5:13
- Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Ephesians 4:2
- Be kind and compassionate to one another. Ephesians 4:32
- Speak to one another with Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Ephesians 5:19
- Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Ephesians 5:21
- Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Colossians 3:13
- Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom. Colossians 3:16
- Therefore encourage one another and build each other up. 1 Thessalonians 5:11
- Encourage one another daily. Hebrews 3:13
- Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Hebrews 10:24
- Offer hospitality to one another. 1 Peter 4:9
- Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another. 1 Peter 5:5
- But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin. 1 John 1:7

This list is not exhaustive, but perhaps we could take some time to think through our interactions with our brothers and sisters in Christ and ask God where we can better serve Him and them in light of these 'one anothers'.

Spiritual Gifts

The first and best gift that God has given us in order to serve Him within the body of Christ is His Holy Spirit. But God has given every member of the body some spiritual gift, which is both evidence of the Spirit's working and in order to build up the members of the Christian community.

"There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." (1 Corinthians 12:1-7)

“The word for service, *diakonia*, implies an eager readiness to serve. God will give us gifts, or use the talents He has already given us, if we have a genuine desire to serve Christ and to strengthen His body, the church.” (Watson p100)

John Hindley explains that spiritual gifts are meant both to create and depend on unity amongst God’s people:-

“The idea is that God’s people are meant to use their Spirit-given gifts to serve the rest of God’s people. They create unity, and they depend on unity. That is why different people have different gifts. It enables us to help one another, and causes us to rely on one another.” (Hindley p92)

How do we discover our gift? In his book “Growing Leaders” James Lawrence outlines a practical exercise that might help us:-

Look up – Ask God to show you what your gifts are. Be prayerful as you consider your gifts, and flexible as you explore his leading.

Look at- Review the lists of gifts given in the scriptures and try to assess which ones are definitely your gift, probably your gift, unsure or definitely not your gift. The main passages listing spiritual gifts are Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:8-11, Ephesians 4:11-13 and 1 Peter 4:8-11.

Look back – Think about the past. Where would you identify God’s blessing on you? Where have you seen unusual fruit in your ministry? What have you enjoyed doing as a Christian? What have you found energizing? When have you heard other people mention that you are good at something?

Look in – What do you feel passionate about? What really excites you? If you were guaranteed success, the resources and gifts to achieve it, what one thing would you most like to do for God?

Look out – Ask other people what they think your gifts are. Ask those who know you, want the best for you and will be honest and truthful. Then weigh their insights carefully. Gifts should be recognised by other people, so compare what they say with your own assessment.

Look around – As you consider your church, what needs exist? What openings are there for using your gifts? Do any of these opportunities interest or excite you even if you don’t feel qualified or skilled at this point in time? Ask if you could have a go at some of the possible options as a way of experimenting and testing whether this is your gifting.

Serving in the second half of life requires, more than ever, that we understand what our gifts and strengths are so that our time, energy and capacity can be applied most effectively.

Tony Horsfall writes “In the second half of life we need to be operating in our primary gift, where we are most competent, so that we are most effective.” He goes on to identify three key questions to help us to discern what God wants us to do:-

“There are three key questions that we need to answer: (1) Who am I as a person? (2) What are my gifts? (3) What is my passion? As we prayerfully reflect on these questions we discover that God has already written His will on our hearts. It is there inside us in the coming together of these three strands.” (Horsfall p116)

For those who have primarily been serving God through their secular work, there may come a time when that role ends. The time made available and the freedom to choose how to use it, becomes the major asset. This opens up all sorts of possibilities, which of itself can be quite daunting and lead to a long time of transition with the rethinking of where and how to use the time and energy released to further the Kingdom of God. The notes for the third session on Transition dealing with New Beginnings may be helpful in this situation.

In later second half we may experience good health and capacity but for some there may be physical illness or disability, diminishing eye sight and possibly becoming house bound or even bed bound. But as Michelle Howe writes “If you are still alive and breathing, then the Lord has something of importance for you to accomplish; otherwise He would have taken you to heaven.” There are numerous examples of those with severely limited capacity continuing to serve God and others by intercessory prayer, by their witness to the Saviour and their encouragement of fellow believers.

Remember God’s promise in Psalm 92:12-15:-

“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;
planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in courts of our God.
They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green,
proclaiming “The LORD is upright he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him””

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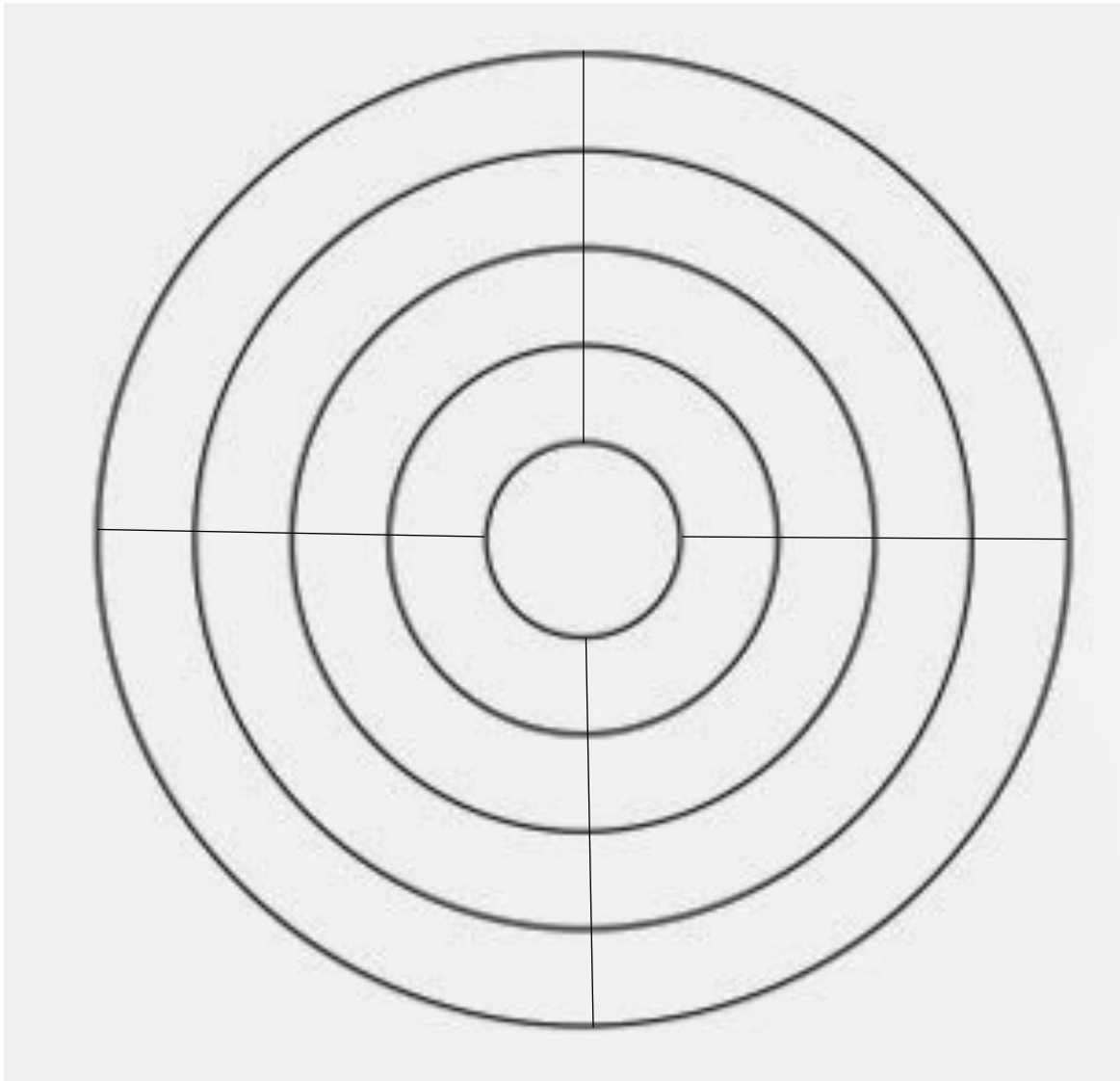
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Your Relational Circle

Picture yourself at the centre of a series of concentric circles....
(the circles represent closeness/significance)

Church

Family



Friends and Acquaintances

Work

Put the names of any person in your life with whom you have some significant contact. Place them within the relevant quadrant. Those who are important to you put in a circle nearer than those who are less important.

Serving in the Second Half of Life – Questions

1. What motivates you to serve Christ?
2. Which of the wrong views of God, others or ourselves that potentially affect our motivation in serving most resonates with you? How might that show itself?
3. Which of the “Marks of a servant of Christ” challenges you personally?
4. Jesus washed Judas, His betrayer’s, feet. Is there someone you find difficult to serve? Talk to God about it.
5. In whatever context you are or have been a leader – how does the concept of servant leadership influence how you lead?
6. How do you cope with the constant needs and expectations of others?
7. How do you maintain healthy boundaries around what you are responsible for to God?
8. Peter Maiden suggested five areas of service to consider. Is there a new area of serving that you have got involved in over the last few years? Perhaps you could share with the group what it is, why you chose it and what you enjoy about it.
9. Think about “Your relational circles” how does this motivate you to see the opportunities you have to share Christ within these relationships?
10. Which of the “one anothers” that help us to serve each other within the body of Christ do you feel is something that you need to strengthen?
11. What gifts do you believe God has given you? What opportunities have you had to use these gifts to date?
12. How do you think that serving changes, in the second half of life? How can we make sure we continue to serve as effectively as possible?

