

## **The Habit of Serving**

Acts 9:36-43, 1 Peter 4:10-11

Friends, we've been working our way through this sermon series on how to develop habits that will make us highly effective stewards – doing our very best with the blessings God's given to us so that they are used for His kingdom.

And we've seen that we need to practice the habit of giving in order to give the time needed to develop the habits that can make us highly effective

And we've been challenged to develop the habit of study to shape our minds and our perspectives so we're in the know about God's plans and how to stay faithful to them,

And today we're going to look at how exercising the habit of service makes the difference between a true steward and Prima Donna Volunteer.

Have you ever met a Prima Donna Volunteer?

They usually are quick to tell you about all the charity work they're doing, how much of a difference they're making in people's lives. They'll do things for you without you asking, but afterwards they can make you feel like you owe them...

They need constant recognition and accolades or they begin to feel underappreciated and threaten to take their talents elsewhere... a Prima Donna Volunteer, and while these people maybe do ten times the amount of "volunteer work" than others the irony is they had not developed the habit of service.

They give – but they do not serve.

You see Friends the habit of serving is a way of being that affects your doing. It's a way of relating to people and interacting with them, it's an orientation towards others. It is less of an action and more of an attitude – and it stems from knowing the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

I think the apostle Paul nails it in Phil 2:3-8 where he says...

*“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your*

*own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude as Christ Jesus:*

*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!*

I can't think of a better definition of the habit of service than this.

And this morning's scripture passage shows us three people who, because of their experience of Christ's forgiveness, truly understand what it means to serve and do this habitually, and we can learn from their example.

So let's look at Tabitha first - what stands out most in the text is that she was noted for always doing good and helping the poor – she would make them coats and clothes for them and provide for their physical needs.

She had the spiritual gift listed in 1 Cor 12:8 which is called “Antilempsis” (sounds more like a disease than a gift) but it means “a timely act of rescue, coming to the aid of someone” and we translate it as a “Helping” - the spiritual gift of Helping.

And she used this gift with an attitude of serving. The evidence of this is when she died, all those whom she helped came to pay her tribute and wanted to tell others about what she had done for them.

Friends, ask yourself – what will you be most known for at your funeral? Will people talk about how amazing your talents were, or will they be sharing how you touched their life by serving them with those talents?

Now - the other thing we can learn from Tabitha is that she wasn't afraid to put herself at risk by using her gift in service.

To help the poor in the ancient world meant to expose yourself to people who were sick and diseased – and often contagious. Now the text doesn't say anything about how she got sick but

it's highly probable that she did - because of who she was helping out!

Friends, do you shy away from the habit of serving because you're afraid of who you need to help and what risks that might pose to you? A health risk, a safety risk, an economic risk?

Are you afraid people might take advantage of you if you are putting other's needs above your own?

Friends, remember the scripture tells us that *"in all things God works for the good of those who love him"* (Rom 8:28) and Tabitha's story shows God working a great deal of good through the consequence of the risk she took in serving.

When Tabitha died, her fellow disciples heard that the Apostle Peter was in the nearby town and sent for him, why?

Well Peter was known for having the gift of healing, and of miracles. In Acts 5 we read how *"People brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by."*

*Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed."*

The Christians in Joppa were hopeful that maybe Peter could help Tabitha even though she had died. The Holy Spirit was with Peter in a powerful way.

So when the request comes to Peter – how does he respond? He drops everything he is doing in Lydda and immediately makes a 10 mile journey on foot to go see Tabitha's body in Joppa - a person of no great consequence in the big scheme of things who was already dead.

Peter the Apostle, the one whom Christ has designated as leader of the disciples, the rock on whom He would build his church – this Peter drops everything for somebody who is really a nobody.

Friends this is a reminder to us not to let our blessings or our status go to our heads, it's a reminder that no matter how high we climb, we always need to be willing to serve people who

seem to have no particular significance to us or what we are doing.

So Peter goes to Joppa to help.

And notice how Peter goes about using his gift of miracles to help, it's not flashy or showy or done in a way that attracts the attention to Peter.

The miracle happens the exact same way it did when Jesus raised Jarius's daughter back to life. People are sent out, there is prayer to God, and then a simple instruction uttered "*get up.*" and Tabitha is restored to life to continue her service to the poor.

Peter doesn't take the glory for it – Jesus does. And we know this because the scripture say that when everyone heard about this – they don't praise Peter, they put their faith in Jesus.

Amazing isn't it?

But it doesn't end there – these are new believers and they need instruction and help so Peter alters whatever plans he may have had and stays in Joppa – he doesn't go back to Lydda.

He stays to help instruct and teach the new believers – and the text says he stayed for some time. Where did he stay? With Simon the Tanner, and here we find yet another example of Peter's attitude of service.

Tanning animal hides is a messy, smelly but necessary business, perhaps a bit like running a hog farm or a chicken farm today.

Tanners provided an indispensable service, but most people preferred to benefit from their skills, not associate with them or visit them... unless it was absolutely necessary and then only for a brief visit.

But Peter stays with Simon for some time...because he has an attitude of serving overlooks these kinds of things.

But we can't forget about Simon either. I said this is a story of three people who have the habit of serving. Simon the Tanner opens his home to Peter and offers him hospitality and allows him to stay for an indefinite period of time.

Peter is probably teaching classes there, taking up space that Simon would use for his business, getting in the way and underfoot.

But Simon graciously serves Peter by allowing him to stay at his home and do God's work.

So... three people using their spiritual gifts, stewarding their possessions, their time and energy and practicing the habit of service and God works through all of it to bring many people to faith in Jesus Christ!

Exactly what that scripture passage in 1 Peter 4 is speaking about.

"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various

forms... so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ"

That's exactly what happened; maybe Peter had this story in mind when he wrote this verse.

And friends it's exactly what will continue to happen if we are obedient to his instruction.

"Use whatever gifts we have received to serve others – as faithful stewards..." not as Prima Donna Volunteers...but as highly effective stewards who practicing the habit of service.

And friends let us never forget that the habit of service starts with having Jesus Christ serve us with his forgiveness first. Remember when Jesus put on the servants towel, took a basin of water and washed his disciple's feet?

At first Peter was unwilling to allow Jesus to do such a lowly task for him. He said No! You shall never wash me feet. But Jesus gently rebuked him and said - "*Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.*"

You see friends the challenge with developing the habit of serving is that we might want to impress Jesus with our good deeds, our charitable giving, with how much we want to make a difference in this world and help people.

And we can try to use all these things to hide the things we don't want Jesus to see. The things we're ashamed of, the times we've lied, cheated, stolen, hurt others or were incredibly self-centered – the list can go on and on...

But friends if you want to be able to be the most effective steward you can be, if you want to develop the habit of service in your life – you need to first take those things you don't want Jesus to know about... and let him wash you clean from them.

If you don't then what Jesus said to Peter applies to you – you'll have no part with Christ and all your good works will just make you a Prima Donna Volunteer – someone who gives but doesn't truly serve.

But if you do allow him to wash you – as Peter did, then you will have experienced the ultimate expression of service by

having him forgive you, and this will enable to serve others, just as Peter did – and you will be a true steward of the gifts God has given you.

And your service – with whatever gift you've received - will make an eternal difference in someone else's life.

So friends, do whatever it takes to develop these habits and be the best stewards you can be. Amen.