

Who do You Serve?

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Preacher: Drew Kennedy

[0 : 00] So, I'm just going to pray as we come to think about God's Word. To begin, let's just bow our heads in prayer. Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are our great God and King, that you reveal yourself through your Word, and we can understand what you expect and want from us.

We apologise, Lord, for all the times when we fail at this and go so far astray from you and your Word, Lord, we thank you, Lord, that you bring us back, that you're forgiving, kind and gentle with us.

We pray tonight that this time of worship would be pleasing to you. We pray for your Holy Spirit to come and equip us to listen, Lord, and understand so that we would become more moulded to the image of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Amen. So, tonight we'll be continuing our series on distinct discipleship and being distinct disciples. And the question I want to start with, to focus our subject on service, and the question is, who do you serve?

So, I want us to think about that tonight. Who are we serving? Because everyone is serving someone. And I hope by the end of the sermon that we'll all be saying that we're serving God more, and we're not serving ourselves, and we're serving his kingdom and not our own kingdom.

[1 : 29] In C.S. Lewis's famous work, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which some of us might have read, and some of us will watch the film, I've watched the film and not read the book, We see an act and an example of self-service right away, in the very beginning, from this character, who is Edmund, the younger of the two brothers, for those of us who really know our stuff on it.

Edmund goes through the wardrobe by himself, and he gets lost in the forest that's frozen and snowy, and begins to walk through it to try and find his way home. He's alone, and he gets cold, and he gets hungry and disorientated.

And he must have been miserable, wondering how am I going to get home, where am I, and what's going to happen to me now. And then he encounters the villain of the piece, the White Witch, and she offers him his favourite sweet, Turkish delight.

And with the circumstances, it is easy to see why Edmund accepted this supposedly very kind offer, and his circumstances. But this leads Edmund later to be captured by the White Witch, because he's wrapped up in his own circumstances, and then from there, his siblings have to come and rescue him, and in the process, risk themselves for him.

And I was thinking about this, because we can all be like Edmund, we can be wrapped up in our own selves, and in our own circumstances, and we can want to serve ourselves, and make a priority of our own needs.

[3 : 14] But this isn't the way of the Lord Jesus, and this isn't the way of his kingdom, and it's not the way of his people, us, the church. Or at least it shouldn't be.

But as we heard from our reading tonight, even the disciples had this sinful tendency, and this weakness, and this failing, that they sought to serve themselves. These men that we hold up in church, as paradigms and examples to follow, of Christian service, didn't always demonstrate their service to God, or to their brothers.

And in this reading, it's quite the opposite. In this passage from the Gospel of Mark, we see James and John, the two brothers, seek their own good, and their own advantage, over the Lord's, over the Lord Jesus, and their brothers.

And it's bookended at the end as well, by their brother's response to this, and how the Lord Jesus responds. And from there we should see, and how we should respond to our desire to serve ourselves.

So, self-service. Or selfless service. When the passage opens in verse 32, the Lord Jesus and his disciples are making their final climactic journey to Jerusalem.

[4 : 33] James and John followed the Lord Jesus from the very beginning of his earthly ministry. And they've seen how the Lord Jesus is completely different from everyone else, in every way that they've ever met.

they've seen the Lord Jesus show real power in his works, and in his words, in comparison with the other leaders of the day. And you would hope that this group of men, above everyone else, above all others, would see and understand who Jesus is, why he came, and what he came to do.

He's the king come to establish his kingdom on the earth. And although he is a king, he's not a king like any earthly monarch, and he won't establish his kingdom like any other earthly king would.

He won't establish it with force and with might, but he'll establish it with weakness and humility. In verse 33, the Lord Jesus tells the disciples in no uncertain terms that he's going to be tortured and killed.

And we, like the disciples, are so selfish as people that our brains have natural inbuilt instincts when we're in risky situations. Fight or flight, the Lord Jesus was in this situation.

[5 : 53] One of us would have fought or fled, and our brains tell us to do this in this sort of instinct. And these aren't always wrong. They take us out of risk, which is sometimes right.

But the Lord Jesus, instead of fighting or flying, running away, he still, instinct, went up to Jerusalem purposefully, even though he knew what was going to happen there.

He lays aside his status and his power and his authority and makes the decision to go up to Jerusalem to hand himself over and to die the death of a criminal for sinful people.

For the sinful people he's met and spoken to on the way to Jerusalem, the sinful people who are following him, and all of us sitting here tonight, this is the great service he performed and the greatest service.

There will be no active service greater. And we could not do this ourselves. Only the Lord Jesus can do this. And only he came to do it to serve us all by dying on the cross.

[7 : 01] And we have this example to follow now, but we won't ever be able to follow it perfectly as we are sinful, limited, and finite.

So there are things we just cannot do that the Lord Jesus did, including this. and it also means that we will inevitably fail and fall into either serving ourselves or something else or not serving at all or serving for the wrong reasons.

And I think, in my thinking for this sermon, that it's easier for us in Britain where we have a culture of hard work and volunteering and serving others to fall into serving for the wrong reasons.

And hard work and volunteering are both good things. I'm not saying go into work tomorrow and just sit on your computer and watch YouTube videos. And I'm not saying stay in bed.

And I'm not saying if you volunteer somewhere to just quit because I've made you feel guilty. Don't do either of those. Keep going to work. Keep volunteering. But for the right reasons. Because these are both good things that God gives us where we're supposed to be distinct disciples and where we worship God in our thought, our word, and our conduct.

[8 : 23] But if we listen to the world about our work or our service and work or volunteering organizations or in church as well, we'll fall into thinking that these things are for us, to benefit us, that we are part of these bigger organizations and do our part, but we're actually there to benefit ourselves and for our own gain.

That we're there to purely go to our desk, to get our head down, do our work, and get paid at the end of the month. While avoiding as much trouble and inconvenience from our colleagues as possible.

Whereas what the Lord Jesus is saying, we should be doing the opposite of this. We should be the best employees and the best servants of the people we work with and our colleagues with and let them know that through our service, our attitudes, and our demeanors, and that we will serve them even at cost to ourselves because of who we serve.

In a volunteering role, we can begin as well to think rather than God putting us into that place and in that role to spread his fame and renown, that we are there to just pass time or pursue our interests or our hobbies.

But that's not the case. God puts us into that situation to serve him, to serve the people we're there with, and serve the organization we're members of.

[9 : 52] And this isn't a small task, any of this. However, this is the way the Lord has created the world to be. So by accepting Jesus and his service, we are fulfilling what God has intended and how the world has been created to be.

And the Lord Jesus says his yoke is easy and his burden is light. So if you're sitting here tonight and you don't know the Lord Jesus, don't be discouraged or put off by anything I'm saying because Jesus himself is not a hard taskmaster who press gangs people into service, but rather his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

And then we see selfish service in the next part of the passage. Selfish service. And James and John, they haven't paid attention clearly to anything that the Lord Jesus has just said to them in the previous verses when in verse 35, they approach the Lord Jesus and they ask him to do for us whatever we ask of you.

They're speaking to Jesus like up on the slide like he's a genie or a wizard and it reminded me of how in Aladdin, Aladdin finds a lamp and rubs it and then the genie pops out and grants him three wishes to fulfill his earthly desires.

But the Lord Jesus isn't a genie or a wizard in any sense. So as we think about our service, we shouldn't be thinking about any gain or any reward from it. And James and John want the Lord Jesus to use his power to just conjure up whatever they want upon their request.

[11 : 29] From a sinful, limited, human perspective, all of our perspectives, we can maybe get on board with that thinking because they've been following the Lord Jesus and they've seen him perform these great miracles and they think of him as a great man of God rather than the son of God at this point and in theory in their thinking in their minds that he could use that power to do whatever they would like of him.

Two sinful creatures approach their creator and make a demand of him for their own gain. They're wrapped up in their own desires and they can't see anything outside of themselves.

James and John try to advance themselves at the expense of the Lord himself and they don't consider what the Lord's purpose is in Jerusalem for the Lord Jesus and for them going forward. They try to advance themselves at the Lord Jesus' expense forgetting that he's the one that they've been following and he's been supplying all their needs along the way as they make their way to Jerusalem and they also make a request and try and advance themselves at the expense of their brothers trying to clamber over the other disciples to try and become their rulers and this will look different in all our lives we weren't there doing this but we still do this.

We are called to be humble servants but all too often we become arrogant rulers. We can fall into the thinking that we are better than other people because we are Christians then seek to get into positions of power of authority positions of power and authority over others.

[13 : 12] Once a person becomes a Christian he's called to the opposite of that mindset. He was once that way and God has saved him from it and called him into this new service.

He is called to go into all the world to spread the gospel and a key element of that and that witness is humble service. However just like James and John we all try and advance ourselves at the expense of people around us.

Even in church we can lose sight of where we are who we're supposed to be and who we're supposed to be serving and why. And although I've said that I'm not grandstanding.

I'm really talking to myself there primarily. It's all too easy for someone in my position in ministry training and theological education to think of service and turn it into a sort of spiritual CV where I attend church I get involved in church life and in service and going along to class and all these other things conferences and talks to catch the attention of someone to boost my own reputation and to try and get ahead of other people.

and to think of the future jobs I could get if these people see me in these places. So it can be all too easy to apply the principles of secular corporate networking to church life for some of us and me most included which is sinful and falling right along in the footsteps of James and John rather than our King Jesus.

[14 : 51] So we need to see this in ourselves repent and ask the Lord to renew our hearts so we can serve faithfully as we are supposed to without any idea or thought of reward or gain for ourselves.

Then moving down in verse 36 the Lord Jesus replies to James and John and asks them what they would like him to do for them and this reveals James and John's heart and reason for serving.

In verse 37 James and John make their request they want to flank the Lord Jesus at the earthly banquet they're expecting will be held in his honour when he arrives in Jerusalem. However there wasn't going to be any earthly banquet party or festival or big event thrown to celebrate the Lord Jesus entering Jerusalem. He's just told them that the exact opposite is going to happen.

That's just the first problem with the request though there's more to it. the next problem comes at the end of the verse when they say to sit in your glory. So they're expecting that this big party will be thrown they'll sit at either side of Jesus and they'll share in his glory.

[16:03] That that can't happen. You can't take no one not even James and John these disciples or the others can take a share in God's glory and none of us can either. He's the son of God come to rescue men from their sins by being physically put to death and then rising again.

This is where the whole of history has been leading to this moment where Lord Jesus will be crucified and rise. So James and John just like us don't deserve any share in this glory.

This is not a team effort it is a work of God alone. And then Jesus replies as you can see on the screen in the next verse as he often answer people who are questioning him with a question he asked them you do not know what you are asking are you able to drink the cup that I drink or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?

The background of the phrase in Jesus' question is important as it shows us his meaning and the full extent of how unqualified James and John were. The cup he refers to is the cup of God's wrath. In the Old Testament the prophets pictured God's wrath as a cup a cup full of all of God's hatred for sin and his righteous anger with sinners.

[17:25] The Lord Jesus is going up to Jerusalem to drink that cup and to have it poured out on him for all of our sin. And the baptism he speaks of here as well is another reference to the Old Testament.

This baptism refers to the Lord Jesus death and resurrection. Just like in baptism here where a person is lowered under the water and rises up the Lord Jesus will be killed be put in the earth and then he will rise again out of the earth to be his people's living saviour to continue to serve his people to serve us by standing in heaven for us.

And then James and John have the nerve to answer Jesus that they can drink this cup and be baptised with this baptism almost in an attempt to claw back please let us have those places. Jesus almost corrects them and says without them fully knowing what he means that they will go through similar hardship as well for their service to the king and that actually the honour James and John asked for cannot be given by Jesus even Jesus God the son God in the flesh cannot give these places further saying that Jesus is that perfect servant although he's God in the flesh he's still putting himself under the authority of God the father and serving and then as I clicked on to earlier a minute ago we see the other disciples weigh in in the conversation and they're not happy and an argument breaks out between the brothers but not for the same reasons as you might hope I sort of picture it as friends coming in and telling their other friends no you've said the wrong thing draw back stop talking shut up come away but it's not for that reason unfortunately it's because James and John have got in there before them because they asked for those places before the other disciples got the chance the other disciples are in the thinking we wanted those places we wanted that honour we wanted that glory we wanted that power that would come with those places instead of seeing them all seeing themselves as unworthy of those places of honour and as servants of God they want to propel themselves into those places of honour at Jesus right and left it shows as well that they don't understand who Jesus is and what he's come to do rather than use his power and pose his rightful rule on the earth he came he's going to be crushed sorry this incident in the gospel and the rest of the gospel shows who Jesus is and what he has done so we have no excuse to act like James and John and the other disciples Jesus never tried to undermine anyone for his own gain and as I was looking through things to speak with this sermon

[20:38] I came across a lot of self-help books and self-help and self-improvement websites they're everywhere now it seems like every bookshop in the city and through the country is packed with lots of these things and it's permeated our culture and our society and our thinking and the way we operate as a culture and one website I looked up in particular had across the top of it serve yourself first these things are in all these books and websites it's not usually as explicit as that but it is marketed in a gentle way so it's not marketed as the selfishness it is but these things all logically lead in the same direction into one place looking out for yourself at the expense of others to

undermining and trying to get ahead of other people for your own gain and for your own benefit and James and John were buying in to this here and the other disciples then came at their back and did the same thing and bought into this thinking and into this mindset trying to outmaneuver anyone for their own gain especially here in church especially among our brothers and sisters in Christ is not Jesus way it's not the way of his kingdom and then in the next few verses towards the end of our passage Jesus reiterates his teaching and further explains it from the beginning of the passage in verse 42 he calls them all to him to settle the debate that is going on between them you know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord are over them and their great ones exercise authority over them the Lord Jesus is essentially saying here that his disciples are behaving according to the pattern of the world the rulers of the day made sure that the people that they were ruling knew who was in charge and who they were to be serving and then the Lord Jesus continues and says but it shall not be so among you the Lord Jesus is saying here that they are to be different that we are to be different that the people of

God the church are to be different out in the world we're constantly being told to strive for promotions and for pay rises as we look when we leave school for university and college courses we're encouraged to go to the best college we can the best university we can for what we can get out of it it will serve us better as we train and it will stand us in better stead when we leave to find jobs and careers so often all these things of life are sold to us in a packaging that's for us for ourselves for our improvement for our gain what we can get from something how it will help us in our next endeavour or project and there's nothing wrong with going to good universities or good colleges and doing these good courses but we shouldn't just see these places as stepping stones because that leads us logically to see the people that we are there with the people we study under the people we work with as stepping stones and as we know the thing with stepping stones is we step on the top of them and we aren't called to step on the top of anyone and then the next part of verse 43 the Lord

Jesus actually states the opposite which is totally against our culture's thinking and our way of doing things but whoever would be great among you must be your servant if you want to be great in the kingdom of God as we should rightly you must put yourself to the bottom of the pile instead of trying to get to the top and stop striving for the top spot or to be top dog or trying to get into the spotlight God's kingdom doesn't work that way and we should praise God that it doesn't and then he goes even further in the last part of the verse and calls them to be slaves of each other not in the 21st century sense we hear this word slave and our minds go to the American south and the terrible things that happened there to people but it's being said in the first century context and the Lord Jesus is emphasizing that they must be at each other service as a slave was always at the service of his master in that day then he reiterates his previous teaching from verses 33 and 34 that he's freely giving himself over to be killed for them and for us with the result that we are brought into God's family we're ransomed from death and destruction and we're brought into life we're made friends of God where we were once enemies that we'll not have to pay the price for our sin as Jesus has already taken the punishment and was with God the Father speaking on our behalf meaning we can stand before God and be counted as righteous if the life of a humble servant is good enough for the Lord Jesus the King of the universe God in the flesh is good enough for the disciples as we see in this passage if it's good enough for Jesus and the disciples it's also good enough for us both in our service of God the church and others outside the church so just to go back to our previous idea who are you serving are you going to be like

[26 : 32] Edmund are you going to be like James and John in this passage or are you going to follow the example of our master are we going to serve ourselves and our own kingdoms or are we going to serve Jesus and his kingdom I would encourage and implore the Christian sitting here tonight to more and more serve the Lord Jesus wholeheartedly to build up his kingdom and his fame and renown and if you're not a Christian sitting here tonight I would encourage you not to be put off this is the way the world has been made we are to be servants of God servants of his kingdom servants of his glory and not our own and to serve his kingdom so as we think about that I'm just going to pray to close heavenly father we give you praise and honour you're so high and far above our ways but you come down to us by sending the Lord

Jesus to clearly tell us what we must do to be saved and we thank you as well that is a free offer you make to us we ask forgiveness Lord when we sin against you in your name we we ask Lord that you continue to draw us back to yourself and show us our error through your word and through

your people we thank you for your word Lord and how it teaches and instructs us we also pray that you continue to mould us into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ we would just ask you to bless us now Lord as we part company and go into the rest of the week and we just ask and thank you for all these things in the worthy and precious name of the Lord Jesus Christ Amen