

Serve with Love

BLESS Series, January 29 & 30, 2022 | Acts 6:1-7
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JESUS SETS THE BAR HIGH ON SERVING WITH LOVE

In the Gospel according to John, chapter 13, Jesus and his disciples gathered for a meal.

Their feet were filthy because they had walked on dirty streets.

It was the custom in that day for the host of a meal to provide someone to wash the feet of the guests so that, as they reclined at the table, they wouldn't have to smell each other's dirty feet.

As the disciples gathered, no one rushed to grab water and a towel.

Surprisingly, Jesus took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, washed his disciples' feet, then dried them.

Later, Jesus commanded them all to follow his example.

Jesus set the example of what it looks like to serve with practical, godly love.

I tend to miss the bar on serving with love.

Years ago, I was involved in a Habitat-for-Humanity project to build a house for a needy family.

My team showed up late in the project to do finishing work, and we had a large team.

The coordinators had a little trouble assigning enough projects to keep us all busy.

They gave me a shovel to regrade the property so that water would flow away from the house.

It was rough work with just a shovel, digging through tree roots in the summer heat, but I was determined to make the house secure for years, so I dug with reckless abandon.

At the end of the day, I showed the foreman the work that was left. He told me that it was fine because they had rented a Ditch Witch and would do the whole project in half an hour.

I lost my servant love in that moment. I thought my time had been wasted. I got angry.

It's easy to miss the bar on serving with love.

Serving with love is part of a BLESS lifestyle.

BLESS is an acronym. B stands for Begin with Prayer. L represents Listen with Care. E stands for Eat Together. The first S means Serve with Love. The second S adds Share Your Story.

A BLESS lifestyle lives out the Bible's commands to love our neighbors and make disciples.

I hope you will sign a BLESS covenant. (There are BLESS covenant cards in the lobby and online.)

The BLESS covenant is a promise that we will live a BLESS lifestyle in 2022.

In the process, we will try to BLESS one person.

This is something we can all do! I asked us all to pray about this covenant the first week of this series.

We gave it to you the second week of this series to consider. Last week Pastor Mark reminded you

about it. Now it's time for us to start making some decisions. I would love to see us all sign a BLESS covenant and turn it in by the second weekend of February.

Serving with love changes the world.

The world was changing as God's people served with love in the book of Acts.

As we look at the book of Acts today, we'll see that serving with love leads to new problems, new possibilities, and new people. More importantly, we're going to see that serving with love in Jesus' name changes the world. That's what we want to see.

SERVING WITH LOVE LED TO NEW PROBLEMS

Serving with love led to new problems in Act 6:1:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

The church in Jerusalem had a feeding program that addressed real problems.

These are the early years of the church's existence.

Powered by the Holy Spirit, the apostles taught and worked wonders. The church grew.

Those in the church began to hold their possessions together.

Whenever anyone in the church was in need, someone would sell a possession, bring the money, and the apostles would give it the person in need.

In particular, the church took care of the widows in the congregation.

Widows frequently had no source of income. The Bible commands us to care for them.

The Jews of the first century already had a program to care for widows. However, the church took it to a whole new level. The church saw a need and met that need.

Sleep in Heavenly Peace opened my eyes to a real problem I knew nothing about.

Sleep in Heavenly Peace is not necessarily a Christian organization.

However, there are many chapters run, staffed, and funded by Christians.

Sleep in Heavenly Peace's mission is to provide a bed for children who have no bed.

Sleep in Heavenly Peace helped me to see poverty that I had missed, and it's all around us.

They pointed out that many children have no bed, no pillow, and no safe place to sleep at night. When families are homeless, that's an obvious problem. But need takes many forms. Sometimes families are forced to move quickly with no preparation. Sometimes families are surfing from one place to another, just trying to stay warm and sheltered.

Sleep in Heavenly Peace helped me to open my eyes and see that children without a safe place to sleep are everywhere. The problem is real, and I had missed it.

The Jerusalem feeding program addressed real problems, but it also experienced problems.

As the congregation in Jerusalem grew, it contained thousands of people.

Many of the first, original Christians were Jewish Christians who had grown up in Judea, Galilee, and similar places; they spoke Aramaic. Acts calls them Hebrews.

There were also Jewish Christians from around the world. They tended to speak Greek. Acts calls them the Hellenists.

They came to Jerusalem to connect with their Jewish faith and met Jesus.

In the first century, many people who lived abroad in the Hellenistic world came to Jerusalem to retire. Sensing that they were near the end of their lives, they wanted to end life and die in Jerusalem, the Holy City. Husbands tended to die first, leaving behind a large population of Greek-speaking, Hellenistic widows in Jerusalem.

The Hellenistic Christians complained that their widows were being neglected when the church did a daily distribution of aid.

When we serve in love, we see problems and run into problems.

Serving with love opens our eyes to the problems around us.

When we look around, we see real needs.

The Faithful Hands video we saw earlier reminds us that we have neighbors here in our congregation who cannot always do everything they need to stay in their homes.

We have neighbors with families suffering from food insecurity.

Sometimes our neighbors just need a word of encouragement after a difficult day.

Let's open our eyes to the needs around us.

SERVING WITH LOVE LED TO NEW POSSIBILITIES

Serving with love led to new possibilities in Acts 6:2-6:

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

The church's problems with its feeding program had to be solved.

Rather than let the problem linger, the apostles called the church together and addressed this need.

They were concerned that if they continued taking logistical leadership of the growing food-distribution program, it would leave no room for them to do what they were really called to do.

Laying the problem before the congregation, they proposed a solution. The congregation would select seven people of the highest character to oversee the program.

The congregation's response was enthusiastic. They loved the plan.

The congregation selected seven people to administer the food-distribution program.

They brought the seven before the apostles. The apostles prayed for them and laid hands on them, designating their assent and the transfer of authority to oversee the program.

Appointing the seven to oversee the food-distribution program was itself an act of serving with love.

Remember the problem: the Greek-speaking Hellenistic Christians thought that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of resources to widows.

The names of all seven of the people chosen to administer the program were Greek. The Hebrew-led congregation chose all Hellenists to oversee the daily distribution for widows.

Is that not an amazing act of self-sacrificing, serving love?

The Hebrews all stepped back and made way for the Hellenists to take leadership of this program. What a trusting move! What a self-sacrificing move! That's serving with love.

Serving with love in this way created new possibilities. It opened the church fully to the Hellenists and ultimately to Gentiles. Serving with love opens new possibilities!

Serving has shaped some of the best aspects of our culture.

In 1831, French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States to study what made our society work. He noted that Americans love to come together, find common cause, and solve problems together. We like to form churches, clubs, agencies, and associations.

That leads to what he saw as a particular bent toward serving people. He wrote:

I must say that I have seen Americans make a great deal of real sacrifices to the public welfare; and have noticed a hundred instances in which they hardly ever failed to lend a faithful support to one another. – de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*¹

For the nearly two centuries since, that has been a strength of our culture.

Even today, studies show that roughly one third of Americans volunteer in some way each year. Two thirds of us do something to serve our neighbors.²

Serving has shaped some of the best aspects of our culture!

Serving with love requires that we set aside our own interests.

Serving takes time and effort.

Serving takes other kinds of sacrifices as well, like trust.

However, serving with love leads to new possibilities, and they are very exciting!

When we serve with love, we strengthen relationships, start conversations, and build trust.

When we serve with love as part of a BLESS lifestyle, we create the possibility of a person coming to faith in Jesus!

Serving with love creates new possibilities, so let's set aside some of our own interests.

SERVING WITH LOVE LED TO NEW PEOPLE

Serving with love led to new people in Acts 6:7:

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

¹ <https://www.commonssensesociety.org/2021/11/23/real-sacrifices-to-the-public-welfare/>

² <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/04/us/volunteering-statistics-united-states-america-cfc/index.html>

The church's solution to the food-program problem led to more people becoming Christians.

The way they loved one another was magnetic.

The way they cared for their widows and one another was magnetic.

Even some of the priests became Christians.

Serving with love led to many people becoming Christians.

Serving with love is just one prompt among many for lost people.

It turns out that not all lost people are the same.

There's a tool for thinking about lost people called the Engel Scale.

It was developed in the 1970s to illustrate the multiple steps people take toward becoming a Christian. Most versions of the scale start from a negative number, involve multiple steps of moving closer to God, cross zero at the point of becoming Christian, then involve steps of maturing in Christ. This is a later version of the Engel Scale.

For instance, some people have little to no concept of God.

Others know God but are unaware of their need for him.

Some know God, know they need him, and are weighing their options.

Not all lost people are the same, and not all lost people are at the same distance from God.

People coming to faith in God usually go through many steps in their journey.

Most people need many prompts to come to faith in Christ.

Serving them with love may be one important step in their journey toward faith.

Serving with love can help people take a next right step of faith.

Raking leaves can change a person's perception of you.

Delivering a brand-new bed can change people's perceptions of Christians and of God.

Baking cookies and delivering them can deepen a relationship that leads to all kinds of places, like listening with care, eating together, and sharing your story.

Serving with love can help people take one more step in their journey to faith in Jesus.

LET'S SERVE WITH LOVE

Roman Emperor Julian knew what was at stake.

Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity. Then Constantine was followed by a series of emperors who also favored the Church. Then came Julian in the 360s, just a few decades later.

Julian was raised in a Christian home but abandoned the faith.

He began to push Christians out of high places and sought to revive the old religions.

Despite the emperor's disgust for the Christians for what he termed their "atheism" of not believing in the pagan gods, Julian could not deny their good deeds. The way they served and gave made people love them and want to be Christians themselves. Julian longed for the pagans to behave more like the Christians, a sentiment he expressed to one of his priests:

Why, then, do we think that this is enough, why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that

have done most to increase [their faith]? I believe that we ought really and truly to practice every one of these virtues. – Julian the Apostate³

However, pagans would never serve with love the way the Christians did.

As soon as he died, Julian's successors began undoing everything the emperor had done.

Serving with love eventually led most of the Roman empire to embrace the Christian faith.

Serving with love changed lives, changed the culture, and eventually changed the world.

Let's open our eyes to the problems around us.

That requires us to see problems we have not seen before.

As we see these problems, we must embrace them as our own.

When our neighbor needs a hand, we give a hand!

Let's open our eyes to the problems around us.

Let's set aside our own interests.

Serving with love takes time. It takes energy. It can take money.

It's in our own interests to keep our time, save our energy, and spend our money on ourselves.

For some of us, it's simply a hassle to leave our comfortable homes and walk away from what we would be doing otherwise, even if it's just watching TV.

Serving with love means setting aside our interests to make a difference in someone else's life.

Let's set aside our own interests.

Let's help people take the next right step of faith.

That step may be small, or it may be the defining step of faith.

When we serve with love, we are nudging people in the direction of faith.

Let's help people take the next right step of faith.

Let's serve with love.

³ Julian, "To Arcadius, High-priest of Galatia," Letter 22.429c-431b (Wright, Loeb Classical Library 157), 67-73. Quoted in <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/julian-the-apostate>.