

The Ministry Priority

By Don Green

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Bible Verse: Philippians 1:25-26
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Truth Community Church
4183 Mt. Carmel Tobasco Road
Cincinnati, OH 45255

Website: truthcommunitychurch.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tcomm

For our message this morning, I invite you to turn to our text in the book of Philippians 1. Philippians 1 will be the source for our text for today and specifically verses 25 to 26 which will follow on the heels of our preaching over the past month or so from this section of Scripture.

Philippians 1:25 and 26 say,

25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.

Now let me start with a question here this morning, just something to kind of stimulate your thinking and to get you into the mindset of the text for this morning: why did God save you? If you're a Christian here this morning, why did God save you? We understand that you did not save yourself and that man cannot by the mere exercise of his volition become a Christian, we cannot cause ourselves to be born, we need birth from above, and so we recognize the act of God in saving us. Why did God save you? Well, we could answer that in a few different ways, I guess. First of all, we're mindful of the fact that God did not save you because you somehow deserved it, because you were somehow better than someone else or wiser than someone else. No, God saved you because he loved you, because he loved you with a free and sovereign love of his own choosing and he decided to. He wanted to save you and that was not prompted by anything in you but it was prompted by the full abundance of the ocean of love in his own blessed eternal heart. That's why God saved you, he saved you because he loved you even before the foundation of the world.

You could say that the purpose of God in saving you was that you might be delivered from the eternal torments of hell, so that you might go to heaven, that your sins might be forgiven, that God was gracious to you to deliver you from eternal punishment so that you would dwell instead with Christ in heaven forever and be a part of the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, and that Christ would be the bridegroom and that he would have a people who loved him like a young bride loves her spouse.

That's part of the reason why God saved you and so there's a lot more that we could say about that, I suppose, but there is also a purpose in your salvation that pertains to your time on earth that I want to explore and to let this text that I read from Philippians speak to us about. In Philippians 2:10 there's an aspect of salvation that we've talked about often here but we want to reemphasize, I want to reemphasize, my point is that we as a church, we've looked at passages from Ephesians and Titus that talk about this purpose that pertains to your time on earth. You see, God saved you in part that you might have a purpose of ministry to his people within his body in a local church, and that God specifically spells out these purposes in his word so that in Ephesians 2:10 it says, "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus." You've been saved. You've been made new. You've been born again in Christ Jesus. Why? "For good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." God saved you and appointed the course of your life so that you would walk in the life that he has given to you and perform biblically considered good works that would glorify God and would be the result, the earthly result of your salvation.

You could also look at a passage like Titus 2:14 where it says that Christ "gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." And so Christ saved you to purify you, to set you apart for his service, and in that new life that he has given you, that there would be a zeal in your heart, a burning desire in your heart to serve Christ and to do good with your life. It's not that we do good to be saved but we do these good works in response to the saving grace, the saving mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ. He changes our hearts so that we have new desires and we live according to those new desires. James says that faith without works is dead, and so the idea of someone having true faith without manifesting something of what we're talking about here today is utterly foreign to Scripture. It's unknown and it's unknown in Scripture because it's not true.

Well, beloved, just taking this one step further and by way of introduction in terms of what we're going to unfold here this morning from God's word, is that one aspect of the good works that God saved you to do is that you would have a life that is marked by loving fellow believers. Of loving fellow believers. So God saved you out of his love for you, he saved you for an eternal purpose, but in this life there's also good works that he's appointed you to do and an aspect of the good works, the good deeds that flow from the Christian life is that there is this heart desire and there is this life affection and this life affection that is given over to loving fellow believers. James 2:8 says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 1 Peter 4:8 says, "keep fervent in your love for one another." And if you would for just a moment, turn over to the epistle of 1 John 3 just after the book of James and Peter, 1 John 3 and John talks about love a lot, we're only going to look at one text, but in 1 John 3:23 he says, "This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us." Just as Christ commands us to believe in his name for salvation, he commands us to love one another within the body of Christ, within and amongst his people. And in verse 18 of 1 John 3 it says, "Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth."

So kind of wrapping up the introduction here, a person with this love of God born in their hearts, a person who has the indwelling Holy Spirit, whose fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and so on, a person who has truly been born again and a person who is living in obedience to Christ in his Christian life will somehow manifest a love that gives himself to those whom Christ himself loves, that gives herself to those whom Christ himself loves and this is evident in the things that we are going to see this morning. Today's text illustrates the nature of that love and how far it goes and how preeminent the priority is. Beloved, this aspect of Christian life is not something that if you were going to list out the 10 most important things in your life, biblically speaking, would come in at 8 or 9 if it even made the top 10. It's not like that. This is a matter of surpassing priority and when you think through the nature of Christ and who Christ is and what he did and why he did it, you're going to see that it could be no other way. It could be no other way.

So let's walk through the text and then see some other things in the rest of Scripture. Let's look, first of all, at Paul's love for the Philippians. Paul's love for the Philippians. You get an open window into the importance of this, the strategic nature of this, as Paul unfolds his own heart as he writes to the Philippians. As we've seen in the past, Paul has had an internal conflict as he considered his life in prison. He realizes that there are aspects of living that will be good for him, that there's an aspect of dying that will be even better for him, and we looked at this last week. In verse 22 he said,

22 But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. 23 But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; 24 yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.

Now we looked at this last time but let's just pause here for a moment and realize and remember what Paul is saying. Paul is conscious of the fact that the best thing that could happen to him personally and what the highest desire of his own heart from a personal perspective is, just leaving everybody out of the equation and just considering himself, the best thing that can happen for him is that he would die and go and be with Christ because he loves Christ more than he loves anything else, and to be with Christ, to be in his conscious presence, to be delivered from the remnants of his sinful flesh, to be delivered from the conflicts of the world, to be delivered from the chains of the Roman guards that were holding him in custody, to be released from all of that in a negative way and to be delivered into the presence of Christ would be the highest fulfillment of the reason that he was saved. That would be really really good. Paul says in his own words, he says, "That is very much better for me." But that's not all there is to it. He says, "If I live," look at it in verse 22, if he lives, "I'm gonna have fruitful labor. I'll do productive things here in the flesh. I'll edify the saints with my apostolic ministry. I'll have more opportunity to evangelize the lost and that will be fruitful to me. That would be good. It's not that that's bad. That would be good, it's just that ministry compared to the presence of Christ is not the same. Ministry is great," he says, "but, boy, to be with Christ is even better in terms of what I would do with my time and my life and my presence. I'd far

rather be with Christ than to do what I'm doing even though I like what I'm doing," he says. He says, "It's hard to know which would be better. I'm hard-pressed from both directions to know even what to think about this."

So what Paul is doing here, it might help you to remember, Paul is writing to friends here. He's writing to people who have supported him over the years and he is giving them a very personal letter like some of you would enjoy getting from someone you considered a close friend, when a close friend opens up their heart and tells you transparently what they're really thinking. You like that, right? You like the closeness and the intimacy of that, that relational sharing together is something that you enjoy. Well, that's something of the spirit of what Paul is doing here. He's writing to friends and he's not only telling them about his external circumstances which he did earlier in chapter 1, he's saying, "Here's what's going on in my heart. Here's what's in my heart as I'm thinking about life." And he says, "You know, frankly, it's hard to know what I should want out of the future because there's good paths either way but, boy, do I want to be with Christ."

So he goes on and he manifests how he resolves this in his own heart so that he is able to move forward with a sense of focus and direction. Look at the end of verse 24 again and keeping in mind our preliminary comments about love. He says, "yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake." And then in verse 25 he says, he shifts from his internal perspective to his external expectation, he says, "Convinced of this," convinced of everything that I've said here, that it's better for me to stay and it's because it's more necessary for your sake, "Convinced of this," he says, "I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again." Notice something as you're looking at these two verses here, how he has shifted from the first person perspective of what he wants and now he's looking externally and you see this in the second person pronoun "you." I'll continue with you all. For your progress and joy in the faith. So that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again. Four times in those two verses he is speaking about them. He is looking out for what is good for them, what will bring them joy, what will satisfy them, what will help them.

So he finds the resolution to this inner conflict that he's described, "I'm hard-pressed from both directions," the resolution to that and his path forward is found in this principle of love for other believers. This is really significant, beloved, far more so than it might seem on just a cursory reading of the initial text. Paul is saying that, "Love is directing my motivation here even more than my own personal desire to be with Christ. Although that would be very much better for me, I am content and I am glad to embrace the fact that I expect God to leave me here, to not let me suffer martyrdom at the hands of the Romans just yet. I believe that God is going to give me more time with you so that I can minister to you, to help you, to increase your joy, to increase your confidence in Christ and that you would progress in the faith in a way that would not happen if I departed now." This is incredible. This is incredible. Paul just said with a full conscious realization of what he was saying, he said, "I'll wait on heaven because I can do good for you." And in that he exposes the motivation of love that motivates the true Christian life.

Paul says, "I'm convinced of this," the "this" that he's convinced of is the whole thrust of the preceding verses. What he understands as he's writing now is he understands this: he understands that their need, the Philippians' need for his ministry meant that he wasn't going to, the Lord wasn't going to take him just yet. There was more work for him to do and he's implying an expectation that God would overrule and direct any Roman authority decisions so that Paul would be granted more time to live, and he bases that on the extent of the need that the Philippians had for him, and so he says, "Your progress and joy in the faith is more important to me than my own personal experience sooner rather than later of the immediate presence of Christ."

This is tremendously humbling. The great apostle subordinates his own desire for heaven to the spiritual needs of humble believers in Christ. Look, most of these people who were at the church of Philippi when Paul wrote this, their names are long forgotten to us. We have no idea where any of them are buried. These are people that were wisps of wind from the perspective of human history, vapors that are gone, a candle that flickered in the wind and then went out, and yet Paul saw in them something of such great value and importance, Paul saw in them that their growth in Christ and that the confidence of their faith transcended in importance whatever would happen to him. And here's the thing, beloved, he saw that he was in a position uniquely to strengthen their confidence, to strengthen their faith, to be a source of joy to them, and that that transcended and trumped everything else that he had been talking about. He says, "I want your proud confidence in me to abound." He wants the Philippians to abound in greater spiritual assurance as a result of Paul's ministry. Watch this, Christ himself, the Lord Jesus Christ himself would work through Paul, would work through his ministry, his teaching, his interactions with them, Christ himself would work through Paul to give them joy and that greater purpose of Christ to do work in the Philippians through Paul was of far greater value than what happened to him immediately.

So what can we say about this? Paul said that, "To die for me is gain. The best thing, you know, it's better for me if I die because then I'm with Christ and that's perfect." But there was something more important than what was perfect for Paul, to die is gain for him, but what he says is that, "My confident expectation that I'll be with Christ immediately upon my death," that doesn't, that hope did not make him withdraw, that hope did not make him selfish in his perspective, that hope didn't cause him to say, "And therefore because for me it's better to die, that's what I want." No, no, no, and think about it, think about it, how good that is and Paul says, "That can wait because I have something that I can do for you, something that can benefit you." So his hope did not make him withdraw and forget about what would be best for the Philippians, his hope led him to an exercise of duty, of glad duty. "I have something that I can give to you and I want to give that to you more than I want what's best for myself," he says. And in that, Paul is manifesting something very very profound.

Grace has been given to you, my brother and sister in Christ. Grace has been given to you but it has not been given to you so that you can keep it for yourself or that it can make life better for you, as if that were the preeminent priority of why grace was given to you.

Grace has been given to you in part so that you would walk in the good works that God prepared for you beforehand, that he appointed for you beforehand. And grace has been given to you in part because there are other people who need your ministry, who need your love, who need your care, who need the giftedness that God has given you to be exercised for their benefit; that there is a church that needs your contribution and your care so that it would excel still more in its ministry than what it is able to do apart from you. This is revolutionary. This changes everything because it reorients the whole purpose of why you have been saved.

That was my opening question, right? Why did God save you? Well, in the early days of your conversion, and this was certainly true of me and I think it's probably common Christian experience, we're saved, we're joyful, we realize that our sins have been forgiven, and we tend to view that from a little bit of a self-centered perspective because we're brand new babes in Christ. Babies are born and they tend to be pretty self-centered. They want to eat when they want to eat. They want to sleep when they want to sleep and the other things that are the consequences of that, and they just expect life to kind of revolve around them. And that's okay, that's part of being a baby, but we realize that babies are meant to grow out of that. Well, in the early days of your conversion, and like I said this was certainly true of me, I'm not coming down on anyone, I'm just describing what I think is simple truth. In the early days of conversion, it is common for a Christian to have a self-centered approach to their new life in Christ. What is God's will for my life? I want to know what God has for me, what should I do. It's a good question to ask but there's more to being a Christian than that. And prayers tends to be self-centered, "Lord, help me today. I've got this, this and this going on. Give me grace that I might get through the day. Help me with my exam. Help me with my whatever." You get the idea, and we're just viewing God in a way that makes him the one who can smooth our path in life and we view it from that perspective.

Well, as you grow in grace, as you grow in Christ, beloved, that should start to diminish, that controlling perspective should start to diminish in your life and in its place comes a sense of opportunity and duty and responsibility to be a servant to others who likewise have been saved by grace through faith so that Christian love transforms the very thing that you want from life and death, it transforms even what you want from God. It transforms what you pray for in what we will see here in the remained of our time this morning. But this transformation of attitude, beloved, is inevitable when you seriously meditate on the person and work of Christ, and that's where I want to go next. We've seen Paul's love for the Philippians, that was point 1. As we consider this matter of love as the motivating factor in the Christian life, let's go point 2: Christ's love for the church. Christ's love for the church and, you know, this is another one of those times where I really feel like I ought to take my shoes off as I'm preaching because the ground is so holy that we're about to look at. Beloved, remember why Christ came to earth. He said to Zacchaeus, actually to the crowd that had gathered around as he ministered to Zacchaeus, he said, "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost," Luke 19:10. Paul in another one of his writings in 1 Timothy 1:15 says, "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among

whom I am foremost." Christ came to seek and to save that which was lost. He came to seek and to save sinners.

Jesus in his own words spoken in these terms in Matthew 20:28, he said, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." To give his life for the church. To give his life for everyone who would ever believe in him, that's why he came. He came out of love, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whoever would believe in Him would not perish but have everlasting life." He didn't come to receive service, he came to give it. It's the difference between the passive voice and the active voice in a verb. "I came to be served." No. Passive voice. No, that wasn't it. It wasn't to receive something from others. "I came to serve," he says.

Look at the Gospel of John 17, John 17 beginning in verse 17. Let's go back and start at verse 13 and just get the full context for what he's saying. This is Jesus praying to his Father on the eve of his crucifixion and he says, "now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves." This is exactly what Paul is saying in Philippians 1. He is concerned that their joy would be made full, Paul was. This is Jesus on the eve of his crucifixion saying to his Father, "I'm praying that they would have My joy made full in themselves. I want them to prosper spiritually, Lord." He says, "I have given them Your word and the world has hated them because they are not of the world even as I am not of the world. I don't ask You to take them out of the world but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world even as I am not of the world." He said that twice now, hasn't he? Verse 17, "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." Now watch what he says here as he goes on in verses 18 and 19. He says, "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth." This is the Lord Jesus himself saying what he is doing with the fullness of his being and his essence and he says, "What I am doing is I am sanctifying Myself for this work that is just ahead on the cross. I have sanctified Myself, I have set Myself apart." And why, here's the question for today, why did he do that? He said, "I do it for their sakes. I do it for these whom I want to have My joy made full in them, for these that I want to be sanctified in the truth." He's praying to his Father and he says, "I sanctify Myself, I set Myself apart and I do it for their sake."

Beloved, do you realize that the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, the blessed second person of the holy Trinity, the one who is immortal, the one who reigns forever, the sinless Son of God, the exalted Son of God whom angels worship and adore, that that Christ said, "I am taking My life, I am taking My person, I am taking My very being, My essence, and I am using it for the benefit of those who will one day believe in Me. I'm using this for the benefit, for the sake of, in the interests of those who will believe." And we look at the exalted Christ and we realize a simple but most profound truth: he did this – watch this – he did this for the spiritual welfare of common, simple people who would believe in him like you and me. In all of his glory as the majestic firstborn of all of creation, he took that lofty position and used it for our sake.

I'm completely embarrassed, I'm humbled by that. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. This is amazing. This is beyond human motivation. This is what God is like. This is what Christ is like that he took with full knowledge of his own blessed essence, knowing how valuable he himself is, he says, "I'm going to spend it all for their sake." Why me, Lord? Why you? You see, what Christ did was in love, out of a love motivation, for the concern of others he literally spent his life on earth for the sake of his chosen ones. That gives you a sense of the priority, the ministry priority that Christ places on his people, places on the body of Christ, that this is what he did.

Now in love he went even further, you could say, he went to the cross, he was resurrected, he is ascended, I'm not talking about that aspect of it but what he did was he gave to his disciples their marching orders for after his physical presence was gone from the earth, and his marching orders for them are in perfect harmony with everything that we've been talking about here today. His marching order to the apostles was, "You take care of My sheep. You take care of the ones who believe in Me. I've given My life for them, now it is your responsibility. I am delegating to you the responsibility to care for them."

You can see this before the cross in John 15, John 15. These things about which we are speaking here this morning, seeing from Scripture, these things are the obliteration of selfishness in the believer. John 15:12, Jesus said, "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you." "You see My pattern of love, this is what I want out of you. You see how I have given Myself for My people, this is what I want out of you. I want you to give of yourself for My people in like manner." He says in verse 13, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." That you give your life essence for the sake of these of whom I speak. Verse 14, "You are My friends if you do what I command you."

Well, beloved, as you start to think through that, as I remember the early days, the early years especially of my conversion, "God, bless me. Bless me, Lord. Bless me, Lord. Bless me. Bless me. Bless me." And 90%, 95%, 98% of the things that I prayed for were all about me. I didn't realize that I needed to grow out of that at the time. Now I look back on it and I realize I needed to repent of the way I was praying because I was so selfish and completely lacking in this love, concern, giving of self for the sake of others. Now look, it's not that you can't pray for your needs. That's not my point. Don't go where I'm not intending this to go. I'm simply raising the specter and the fact that yourself is not to be the preeminent focus of your walk with Christ and even of the way that you pray. It becomes incidental to the greater concern of the well-being of the fellow believers that are within your circle of knowledge and influence. This is utterly transforming.

Look over at John 21 at another text that we've looked at in the past from a different perspective, and I want you to focus on as we look at this familiar text, the three commands that Jesus gave to Peter. Now, of course, Peter had denied Jesus three times on the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus here in this passage is restoring him publicly to his apostolic ministry and calling forth confessions from Peter that would put him in a position to go forth now that Christ had been crucified and raised again. In verse 15,

"they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.'" Jesus said, Jesus has said, "Peter, let's talk about your love for Me." Peter affirms it and what command follows on the heels of that to Peter? Jesus says, "If you love Me, tend My lambs." Verse 16, "He said to him again a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him," what? "'Shepherd My sheep.' He said to him the third time," verse 17, "'Simon, son of John, do you love Me?' Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, 'Do you love Me?' And he said to Him, 'Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.'" "I know there's not much in my life right now to prove that, Lord, so I appeal to Your omniscience. You know what's in my heart even if everything about my life speaks failure right now. Lord, you know that I love You." "Jesus said to him, 'Tend My sheep.'" Verse 15, "Tend My lambs." Verse 16, "Shepherd My sheep." Verse 17, "Tend My sheep."

Later through his apostle in Acts 20:28 as Paul was leaving the Ephesian elders, he said to the elders what they were to do, he gave them their marching orders. He said, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd," to tend, to care for, "the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Do you see it, beloved? Let's step back and just kind of raise our head above here and get our head above water to look around and remember what we're doing here. We saw Paul in love for the Philippines say, "I'll wait on heaven if it means that I can minister to you. I'm concerned for your progress and joy in the faith." We see in the person of Christ that he set himself apart and that central in his thinking just before his crucifixion was, "I am doing this for the sake of My sheep. I came to seek and to save the lost." Laying down his life for the sake of this body of believers that would one day be his. You see it in the Apostle Paul as he instructs church elders saying, "You be on guard. You shepherd the church of Christ. You shepherd that flock that God purchased with His own blood."

Well, let's bring this down to a level of application, then, as we consider point 3: our love for the church. Our love for the church. And beloved, here's the point, speaking to believers that are at different levels in your spiritual growth, in your spiritual experience, we think about this in response to these things in this way: God has graciously worked in you if you're a Christian, I'm speaking as to Christians, those of you who are not Christians, I invite you to come to Christ to repent of your sin and put your faith in him for your salvation, to truly repent of your selfish approach to life and to give yourself over to Christ, but today we gather as believers and we're talking primarily to believers and asking the Spirit of God to help imprint this on our hearts, to renew our hearts in this way because this is more than just an intellectual acknowledgment; the very way that we think and the very nature of our hearts need to be renewed in this direction and that takes a work of the Holy Spirit for which we ask him in this moment and for which we trust him going forward. Let's think about it this way: God has graciously worked in your life, my Christian brother, my Christian sister, God has graciously worked in your life, he's graciously worked in my life in ways that we don't deserve, and we give him thanks for his kindness to us personally. We understand in the terms of Galatians 2:20, he loved me

and gave himself up for me, that I had a personal interest in this that Christ in some manner thought of me in his sufferings on the cross because he was dying for my sins on the cross. So somehow he thought of me in his perfect life, somehow he thought of me in his death. Now he stands for me before the Father's throne and names me as his own. There was personal interest in it that is just overwhelming. But beloved, as we rejoice and as it were, luxuriate in those wonderful truths, we should also simultaneously increasingly see that salvation was given to you and me not simply for a means to our own personal peace and prosperity. Let me say that again because that's really important: God did not save you simply to make your life one of peace and prosperity. That would be totally contrary to the whole way that Christ himself acted. If the whole point of being in Christ was for it to be for our own personal good and our own personal comfort, we would be at cross purposes with what Christ himself did and said that the nature of his life was. "I sanctify Myself for their sakes." Well, if we're in Christ, then there's going to be an ever-growing recognition that we've been set apart not only for blessings of our own, we've been set apart that the blessing of the people of Christ would be a priority in our lives as well, that somehow we might be able to make things better for the believers that are in our lives.

So as you grow in Christ, beloved, as you grow in your Christian experience, you should ever be seeing rising like the sun above the horizon, rising up to noonday, you should be seeing the priority of his people becoming that which becomes a defining priority in your own life, whatever that means. I'm going to talk about that in a moment but that there is this recognition in principle, here's what we're after, is for you to recognize in principle that somehow the people of Christ as a Christian are a priority in your life, and you give of yourself to them. You say, "Well, what do I give?" Well, what are you good at? What do you have? What time? You know, what are you good at that could make the things better for the people of God or for the local church with which you identify? Somehow what you are has been given to you that that might be a benefit and a blessing to the people of Christ, and it's going to be different for each one of us. There are some with resources, there are some in poverty. What they contribute is going to be different. There's some that are going to be gifted to speak, there's going to be others that are gifted in ways of mercy, 1 Corinthians 12:13 and 14; Romans 12; 1 Peter 4. God's gifted us in ways that are designed to be used for the benefit of the body and so as Christians we realize that we live and we love to meet the needs of humble brothers and sisters that are just like us.

The Christian life was never meant to be a selfish pursuit of personal peace and prosperity. Christ laid down his life for us. Paul laid down his life. Paul in a sense, not to say too much, Paul laid down heaven itself for the church at Philippi and, beloved, I want to tell you that the Scriptures haven't changed in the intervening 2,000 years. Christ hasn't changed in the intervening 2,000 years so that there is still this sense of the purpose of one of the primary purposes of your salvation is to be a benefit to fellow believers. And the beauty, there's just so much beauty in this. I keep saying "the beauty" of this, I guess I should say "another beauty" in this, another beauty in this is that when we do something for fellow believers, Jesus said we're doing it for him, we're doing it to him himself.

Look at Matthew 25. There's an eschatological setting to this that we won't go into. Verse 34 of chapter 25, looking forward to when the Son of Man comes in glory, he separates the nations, puts the sheep on the right, the goats on the left. Verse 34 he says, "Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'" All these things, these simple acts of mercy and kindness and the righteous are baffled by what Christ is saying. "Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You?" "Lord, when when did we do this? I have no memory and I think I would remember if You had been in my immediate presence and I had given You something to drink, Lord. I'm sure that wouldn't have escaped my memory. I don't remember anything about this. How can this be true? Why are You commending me for something that I don't remember doing?" "When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" verse 39, verse 40 "The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'" The manifold grace of Christ rewarding us for things that we didn't even realize we were doing for him and to him as we simply manifest love in very simple practical ways to the people of God.

What I want you to see, beloved, is this, is the ministry priority in the Christian life, to see that love for the church, love for the people of God becomes an extension of your love for Christ, it becomes an outgrowth of your love for Christ. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for it. You say, "Don, excuse me but you've said that 20 times already in this message." I know. I'm repeating myself. I repeat things for emphasis. Christ gave himself for the church. We who are in Christ carry on, we continue what he started. People of Christ are in front of us, then we're blessed, we desire, we want to minister to them just as Christ ministered to us. Oh, we want to continue it as our mind increasingly is conformed to become like the mind of Christ and to see his people in the same way he does, as those who are worthy of sacrifice, those who are worthy of love, those who are worthy of giving, those who are worthy of our time and our effort and ourselves. This is life in the body of Christ and the local church gives a context to live these things out in love, and as we see from these words of Christ in the economy of God, every contribution matters, every act of service matters, nothing is lost in the sight of Christ, so much so that even as we're sitting here today, even your simple presence in this room is a ministry to your fellow Christians. By your presence in this room you're saying, "I'm with you. I share in your convictions. I share in the life here." So that even the humblest, newest, simplest person here joining together for those reasons, you're ministering in that way, you're serving in love.

For you young people that are new in Christ, you're finding your way, you're making decisions about what you want to do with your life and your time, let me encourage you that love for Christ changes what you want to do with your time, it changes what you want to do with your life, it changes what you want out of life. These things go everywhere. And for us old guys, us older guys, you notice I included myself there. This

wasn't the royal "we" this was the "we" as in you and I. Us older guys, you know, our time continually shrinks that we have left, right? It becomes less and less of what we have left in the reservoir to spend. Well, how much more should we, then, look at this and say, "Where is my opportunity to serve the body of Christ? Where is my opportunity to give of myself for them that my joyful attitude, that my service would be of benefit to them even if I don't have that much longer to go?" This just permeates all of life and goes to our deepest motivations, not just what we do from week to week.

The hymn writer said it really well speaking about the Church of Christ, said, "For her, my tears will fall. For her, my prayers ascend. To her, my cares and toils be given til toils and cares shall end." The priority of ministry shapes all of life, my friends. Do you see it?

Let's pray together.

Lord, on this week as we approach Thanksgiving, we thank You for a wonderful Savior who gave Himself on our behalf. Lord Jesus, we thank You for laying down Your life, for being obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. We thank You for Your perfect life which is counted to us as our righteousness. We thank You for Your death and Your shed blood which washes away all of our sins. We thank You for that resurrection life, that power that now animates our own spiritual existence in Christ. We thank You for Your ascension, that You are at the Father's throne interceding for us, representing us before Him. We thank You for the promise of Your coming all for us and all so unworthy, O God, and yet You did that for us. Bless us in this week, some even as they travel to go to minister to others, Father, in the name of Christ. Bless us in this coming week that we might somehow give of ourselves to Your people in a way that would reflect the glory of Christ to them and would abound for their joy and progress in the faith, and may it not only be this week but may it mark what our church is like, Father, in the future, may it mark our individual lives that there is this increasingly evident selflessness for the benefit of others that animates what we do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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