

Chef or Waiter

Trinity CRC, July 24, 2022 AM

Farewell Sermon for Pastor Michael McGowan

1 Corinthians 3:5-11

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The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians,

⁵ What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as *the Lord has assigned to each his task*. ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹ For we are co-workers in God's *service*; you are God's field, God's building.

¹⁰ By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Brothers and sisters and boys and girls loved by Jesus,

Having worked for 5 years with Pastor Michael, I know that what Paul said in v.10 regarding the work of pastors is true of him: "each one should build with care." Pastor Michael took great care to build his work in this church on the sure foundation of the Jesus. He's the foundation of our lives.

Jesus is the one on whom we build. Therefore he's the one we listen to. He's the one who gives us direction. He's the one who promises to work through us. He's the one whose Spirit works in us. He's the one who can change lives. He's the one who supplies our needs. He's the one who therefore deserves all praise. So today we praise Jesus that his grace has touched Pastor Michael and that Pastor Michael has therefore gratefully and humbly served Jesus through the things he did among us here at Trinity.

Servant-waiters

Speaking to the Corinthian Church as their pastor, Paul writes that he and Apollos are 'servants through whom you believed'.

The word 'servant' here comes from the Greek word *diakonos* which gives us the English word *deacon*, or *attendant* or *minister*. It simply means *one who serves*. We hear about it in Acts 6 when it is determined that the disciples in the New Testament church are being kept from sharing the "ministry of the word" in order to wait on tables. Some of the widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food and that wasn't acceptable. So this is the time and place where the office of deacon was initiated to ensure that the church would always serve the widows and others in need.

While we might be tempted to think—based on Acts 6—that only deacons are servants in the church, That’s not Paul’s point here. He would argue that every Christian is a servant of God. Here in 1 Corinthians 3, Paul uses the word to show that he and Apollos are simply the people who serve the food of the gospel. They dish up what God has prepared! God is responsible for choosing it and cooking it. He’s the chef and they are the waiters. In that sense, they wait on tables.

Everyone in the church is God’s servant. We serve at his pleasure. We serve what he himself has prepared. We serve in his name. We serve out of love for him and all he’s done for us in Christ. We serve to exalt him, not ourselves. We serve so that people see how great he is. He’s everything! We serve so that people might know him. We want to exalt the chef, not the waiters. In the words of theologian NT Wright, “You shouldn’t make a fuss about which waiter brings the food to your table. What matters is that God is in charge in the kitchen.” Each pastor and each member of the church— young or old, male or female, black, brown or white—we’re all servants of God, we’re all waiters and he alone is the chef! That’s an important reminder.

Paul is addressing an issue where people are getting their focus wrong in the church. He’s saying to them that it’s not about the pastor. It’s about Jesus. Every pastor’s job is to point people to Jesus. Every Christian is likewise a servant of Jesus. Focusing on the messenger instead of the Lord is going to lead to trouble. In fact, in Corinth, it had already led to trouble.

To highlight our servant role, Paul uses an agricultural illustration. He says in vv. 6-9 that gospel workers are like farmers who plant seed and water them. But God alone is the one who makes anything grow. A farmer can plant and water all he wants. Those are the things he can do and should do. But he cannot make a seed grow. That farmer depends on the Lord alone to make the seed germinate and grow. With greenhouses and the like today, farmers have a bit more control of the growth but ultimately God still gives the seed the ability to sprout. In this illustration, the Lord is like the chef. He’s the provider and we are his servants who plant and tend the crop. Paul calls himself a co-worker with Apollos in God’s service.

Similarly, Paul uses a construction illustration. He says the church is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ. Jesus, as God, is the starting point. **Without** that foundation, the church is doomed. It will not stand, no matter how great all the pastors, elders, deacons and members are! We serve as we build up the church but we build on what God has provided in Christ. So again, we are the servants, the waiters and God is the chef.

Pastor Michael, you’ve served us well here at Trinity. I’m sad to see you leave because I have been blessed by your servant-heartedness. I know you recognize the priority of Jesus as our foundation. You have served hard and well to help us build the church stronger. And you’ve done so by repeatedly pointing us to Jesus, the head and foundation of the church. You’ve been faithful in reminding us through preaching and in modelling for us that God is the chef and we are the waiters. I’ve heard many testimonials over the years about your love of God’s people and your humble service in the name of Jesus. You’ve been a wonderful waiter and consistently gave glory to God the Chef!

Seeking God's Glory

It should go without saying that a servant-hearted Christian does not seek self-glory but God's glory.

I read an article recently by Cody Wilbanks entitled "No Michelin Stars for Pastors" in which he says,

In the culinary world, earning a Michelin star is the greatest honor for both a restaurant and a chef. Michelin celebrates great achievements in the food industry on a scale of one to three stars. There are many Michelin-star chefs, but there are no Michelin-star waiters. Waiters are important, of course. A good wait staff is vital to making the dining experience enjoyable. They work hard, serve well, and deserve pay for their efforts. In the end, however, they aren't the chef.

In line with that, he writes, "In his book *Dangerous Calling*, Paul David Tripp cautions pastors against the ever-present danger of glory: 'Perhaps there is no more powerful, seductive, and deceitful temptation in ministry than self-glory.' Should we begin to think of ourselves too highly, he warns, 'You'll constantly confuse being an ambassador with being a king'" (167). Another way to say that is that you'll confuse being a waiter with being the chef.

Sadly, there have been way too many stories of pastors who have forgotten this important lesson. Think back to all the televangelists who have fallen hard. Years ago, it was Jimmy Swaggart and then Jim & Tammy-Faye Bakker. There's been countless protestant and Roman Catholic pastors and priests who've harmed their church members through abuse of power. Two years ago, Ravi Zacharias, the prominent and highly respected Christian apologist with strong Canadian ties was found to have abused his power over women. We are hearing more of mega church pastors falling, though it also happens in smaller churches to be sure. In the past few months, allegations of abuse have come to light in one of Canada's popular mega churches in the Toronto area. Bruxy Cavey, the lead pastor of the multi-site church, The Meeting House, has had all sorts of abuse allegations levelled against him and has resigned his position. A number of other staff have also been accused and resigned as well. And we'll have to wait to hear what happens in the courts. But this is all so very tragic and takes glory away from God as people call God into question because his servants appear so fake and self-centred.

All of these people at some point forget that it's not about them. They forget that they are not the important one. They are not entitled to anything special because they are the pastor. They don't get a free pass on immortality because they are the pastor. They don't get to take advantage of people because they are a leader. They don't get to line their own pockets with inordinate wealth because they think they are worth it. Absolutely not! Ministry is not about self-glorification or self-satisfaction.

Let's also be clear that the Christian life more generally—for all of us—is not about self-glory. When we serve—whether at church, home, work or anywhere else—in order to get people's accolades and praise, then we're missing the mark. When we serve with self in mind rather than Jesus, we're not serving for God's glory.

Nothing teaches service like children. Michael and Kristi, you came here with a puppy. Now you've got four children. As parents, you serve. And while it is very tiring and trying at times, you serve because you love them. That's what love does.

It's even more so with respect to our serving in Jesus' name. We do it because we love him and we know our place in relation to him. Do you remember what John the Baptist said about Jesus? Boys and girls, who knows? I've got a roll of peppermints here if you get it right? What did John the Baptist say about himself in relation to Jesus? He said, "Jesus must become greater and I must become less. He must increase and I must decrease." He must get the glory and not me!

We all know—at least I do—that it feels good to be affirmed. We like getting encouragement. But seeking glory for ourselves instead of wanting to glorify the Lord is a form of idolatry. We put ourselves in place of God. That's not to say that we don't need encouragement from others. We all should encourage one another. There isn't anything wrong with thanking people for their work in some fashion. We're doing some of that today as we reflect on Pastor Michael's work among us for the past 5 years. He's done very well. We thank you so much for your faithful service.

I know, however, that Pastor Michael isn't seeking glory or fame for himself as he has served here. He's been pointing us to Jesus. He's done that most noticeably to us all from the pulpit! He's done it in his pastoral visits. He's done it in the classes he's taught and in all the leadership he's provided. That was his goal. I'm certain of that.

To summarize, we are the waiters, the servants. We shouldn't seek the glory in serving. The glory belongs to the Chef.

The Reward

Yes, the waiters get to serve. But while the glory goes to God, that service comes with rewards. Paul wrote in v.8:

*1 Cor 3:8 The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be **rewarded** according to their own labor.*

Paul doesn't elaborate on what the reward is here but we can think of at least two: grace and joy.

First of all, serving heightens our awareness of God's grace. We get to serve others what he's prepared for us in Christ. We get to share the good news of God's grace. We get to enjoy God's grace as he uses us despite our failures.

I can recall from my own ministry experience the times that I felt I had failed the greatest became the times when God's grace came through most wonderfully and amazingly. Back in the first congregation I served, something went bad and got kind of ugly at a meeting one night. I was being accused of things I hadn't done and, in trying to defend myself, I said something that I regretted. I immediately felt I had just signed my expulsion papers. But then I got up and apologized.

The man who was chairing the meeting said with his heavy Dutch accent, "Congregation, our pastor has said he's sorry. Do we forgive him?" And the whole

congregation said yes and applauded. I was so humbled and again amazed at God's grace for me.

The next morning a normally very quiet man called me on the phone. We had probably the shortest conversation I've ever had. I answer the ringing phone with the customary "Hello" and he said, "Hello Pastor. This is Bob. I just want you to know that we love you. Okay? Bye!" Then he hung up. And I cried.

That event shock me and also powerfully illustrated to me that I need grace from God and from God's people in order to do my work. He supplied it and so did the church. I was rewarded in serving—even in a tough situation. I was reward by being reminded that we live and serve by grace.

And that goes hand in hand with joy. Joy is our reward for serving. We get to see how God uses our feeble efforts and does much more than we can ask or imagine. I admire Pastor Michael on many levels, including his preaching. But as a preacher, I know that it's amazing that any sermon could change anyone's heart. But so often we get messages from people that say how a sermon affected them or a song or a whole service. Then we look back and give praise to God with a heart full of joy. Joy for having been used to exalt the Chef. Even if we as preachers put the food on the plate in a certain way and it caught someone's attention, it's still the work of the Lord himself, the Chef, who gave us the wonderful feast to share. He's gets the glory. We get his rewards of grace and joy, which is both humbling and encouraging.

It's all because of Jesus. Remember that the Lord Jesus is responsible for the great feast we get to live on and serve up for one another and others. But he is also our Chief Server. He tells us that he set us an example that we should serve others as he served and continues to serve us. He did that most fully on the cross. But illustrated it also on the night of his betrayal when he washed his disciples' feet.

Out of love and thankfulness for your service among us, Michael, I would like to invite you up here for a moment to do for you what Jesus did for his disciples. You have served us well. Let us all—through my washing of your feet—serve you in gratitude for all you've done for us.

And all God's people say, Amen.

I invite the musicians forward and we can sing "Take My Life" while I wash Pastor Michael's feet. So you can see it better, why don't we remain seated as we sing.