

West Side Fellowship

Works of Service – Where do we start?

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2v10

Over the last few weeks we have looked at the various types of ministries, from humble helps and administrators right up to even more humble Apostles and Prophets. We've also looked at the difficulties of ministry as well as the blessings. This is all good, but without action it is just something else that we add to our intellectual beliefs. We are very good at deceiving ourselves that faith and belief are the same thing, yet they are very different. Belief will acknowledge the truth, it has an intellectual understanding of the word of God, yet does nothing about it. The man or woman of faith not only believes, but that belief leads to action. It is similar to repentance; it is easy to understand what sin is, even to be convicted by the Holy Spirit, at that point we believe. Yet only when we take action do we repent. Saying sorry and acknowledging the truth is not repentance, repentance is an action, a change of lifestyle and direction.

So if we are going to be true children of God, who want to grow up to be the great sons and daughters of God, the men and women of faith; it is going to mean action in our lives, for without action, without service, our faith is dead (**James 2v14**). The great danger we face is that we deceive ourselves, listening to the truth, even being convicted, yet never acting (**James 1v19-25**), missing out on the true blessings of service.

When Liz and I worked with Operation Mobilisation there was a saying that is so true of all ministry, it was:

You can teach a servant to preach, but it is much harder to teach a preacher to serve.

The same is true for all type of ministry, it starts as Jesus did with the humbling of our hearts (**Philippians 2v5-8**). This sounds simple, but humility before God is not something that comes easy to any of us. We like the idea of serving God, but we want to serve Him our way, in other words we are serving ourselves. We want to tell God how the job needs to be done rather than allowing Him to tell us. In doing so we make ourselves lord and Christ our servant. Even in prayer we need to understand that the servant listens while the master gives the instruction. So often our prayer life is reduced to telling God what He needs to do to make our life better, the true servant is always going to be a listener first.

Over the years I have been in ministry, the biggest issue I have come across is the lack of listening in the church. We will acknowledge how important it is, but the truth is that many even in leadership struggle in this foundational area of our faith. Listening to God is not something for the spiritual elite, it is for all God's people. As Jesus said "My sheep listen to my voice" (**John 10v27**). This is not something that certain sheep do, it is what all the Lord's flock do, it is a recognition of

who the shepherd is. The danger we face is that instead of dealing with this root problem, we follow the other sheep assuming they know the way.

This week we are going to take a look at **2 Kings 5v1-18** and look at some of the lessons we can learn from the account of Naaman. Now Naaman was a well known person, by today's standards he would have been a celebrity, a war hero who led the army in battles and spent his time at the palace being honoured by the king himself. It's not an upbringing that encourages humility and yet it's through his weakness that the Lord was able to reveal himself to him, that weakness was his health.

What is interesting is that the Lord was only able to reveal himself to him through his weakness. His pride and ability prevented him being approached in any other way and it is a pattern that is mirrored in many of our lives, for when we approach the Lord we do not come to Him in power or ability, rather as we stand before the glory of God we see our weakness and need. This is crucial when seeking the Lord because without recognising our need and lack of knowing, we come to Him assuming we know part or all of the answer. Once we have set our mind on what the answer is and how the Lord will speak and instruct us, we become deaf to the voice of God, only able to hear if He says what we want Him to say in the way we want Him to say it.

The Lord has a habit of speaking through the most unlikely people, a simple example of this is the person that starts Naaman's journey to seeking the Lord. She is not a princess or a member of the royal court, she is actually lower than a servant, a slave girl, a prisoner in a foreign land. Too often we assume that the Lord is going to lead us by someone important, that his word will come to us by some great pastor or prophet when the Lord is able to use the nobodies of this world. It is so easy for us to become judgemental and so miss the word the Lord sends to us. As we think of ourselves with sober judgement (**Romans 12v3**) we are humbled before God, but can then see others as equal or above us and so become open to the Lord using those in humble circumstances to speak to us.

Despite the initial message coming from a slave girl, we see that Naaman still hasn't understood how the Lord works. He's used to dealing with men of importance, so if someone can heal him, they too must be important and so would be found at the palace. So Naaman heads off to the king of Israel to find this special prophet and being an important man, he expects to be at the front of the queue for his cure, so takes plenty of money and gifts to bribe his way. Those bribes can be financial, giving to buy God's blessing. We can bribe Him with our actions, maybe using fasting as a means to force the Lord to speak. Sadly at other times we will even try to use repentance to buy His favour, offering to stop our sin "if" He will give us something in exchange, as if we are offering Him something special rather than acknowledging our failings. When we come before the Lord we are in no position to demand the when and where the Lord will speak to us. Our job like any servant is to wait patiently on him for his timing and place and the only thing we can offer Him is a broken and contrite heart (**Psalms 51v17**).

Once again we find that Naaman is confounded by the Lord, because his solution was not found at the palace. It is a lesson for us all to learn, for it is easy to assume that the Lord will speak in the big meeting with the famous preacher, again our assumption blinds us to many of the ways that the Lord speaks to us; for as Jesus taught His disciples, seeking the Lord is best done in the quiet place alone with the Father, rather than in front of the crowds. For the Lord does not need the big and the spectacular to speak, that is the way of the world, the flesh. God's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom (**John 18v36**) and the ways of the Spirit run in opposition to the ways of the world.

So now we find Naaman outside a small house with all his entourage, once again expecting a great spectacle as some man of God comes out and says some special words or performs some ritual. Instead he doesn't even get to meet Elisha, all he gets is a messenger who tells him to go and wash in the Jordan seven times. Now at this point the Lord has spoken to Naaman and offered to heal him so you would think that he would be happy, but instead we see Naaman storm off in a rage (**2 Kings 5v11**) because the word that he has received is not what he wanted. He would have been happy with some great or expensive challenge. Instead he is told to wash in the muddy waters of the Jordan, the sort of river that would require a bath after swimming in it.

Here again we see why so often we refuse or ignore the word of God when it comes to us. It's asking us to do something simple, Naaman was being asked to wash! It's the most basic message that the Lord has for His people, the message of repentance, cleansing from sin, to be humbly washed in the blood of the lamb. So often we are two steps ahead of the Lord, we are seeking to find what He wants us to do and instead of getting the instruction to go, He gives the instruction to repent and prepare our hearts and attitudes. He starts to do the foundational work to prepare us when we think we are ready to go. These simple tasks can often be the most difficult. Just like Naaman, we will complain about the location or the method, even the humiliation of the task. Yet it is these basics that build in us the heart of Christ and transform our spiritual lives. For the most important change in Naaman's life was not the cure for his leprosy, it was the obedience to the word of the Lord that led to a change of his heart. Once humbled his biggest concern was about making sacrifices for the Lord and not bowing down to foreign gods (**2 Kings 5v17-18**), again it is the part of the word of God that we so often miss and why what may seem like a small request from the Lord has far bigger implications in our life than we can imagine.

Too often when we approach the Lord we bring Him the problem and tell him how it needs to be fixed. Then frustration and disappointment set in when the Lord does not move as we expect because we again have not listened to his voice. Often, just as in the life of Naaman, the problem is in the heart, not in the flesh. A change of heart can transform the circumstances we find ourselves in as we start to see them from the Lord's point of view. Also as our hearts are transformed into the heart of Christ, our interaction with the issues of this world brings peace instead of conflict. It is the progression that we see in **Romans 12v1-2**, humbling ourselves as a living sacrifice that brings pleasure to the Lord, but also brings us into a knowledge of His will as we follow in the footsteps of Christ.

There are many books that will try to teach short cuts to hearing the Lord or give ways to try and manipulate God. Others teach us to seek Him through others instead of going directly to the Father, the very thing that Jesus died on the cross for (**John 14v6**). The truth is that there are no short cuts, it all starts with taking the time to seek the Lord, not just occasionally but constantly. In **1 Thessalonians 5v17** we are told to "pray continually". As Christians it's so easy to reduce this to having an endless shopping list to put before the Lord, rather than understanding that this is about having our ears open to God at all times. For real prayer is listening to God, to being open to hearing His voice at all times; not just in the few minutes we allocate to Him in our quiet time. Cultivating the listening ear is a crucial part of our spiritual growth and sadly is an area that is so often dismissed, for you cannot serve if you do not hear. It's the constant question Jesus has for the churches in the book of Revelation (**Revelation 2v7, 2v11, 2v17, 2v29, 3v6, 3v13, 3v22**) and is the question we need to ask ourselves today; the lack of ability to listen to the Lord is probably the greatest weakness in the church today. It undermines any kind of obedience and service towards the Lord, for without listening we cannot be led of the Spirit and become the Sons and Daughters the Lord wants us to be (**Romans 8v14**).

Jeremiah 29v11 is a scripture that is often quoted by Christians, of how the Lord has plans to bless us. It's true, he does have plans to bless us, it's just we don't know what those plans are because we have not read the following verses. For you will know the plans of God when you "seek Him with all your heart". For how can we minister to others if we cannot hear the Lord for ourselves? This means putting the effort in and admitting to the Lord and ourselves the true position we find ourselves in.

About ten years ago I rode my motorbike all the way to the top of Norway, as far North as it's possible to drive in Europe. It was an amazing ten days travelling over six thousand miles alone with the Lord and the trip was a complete success. It was an achievement that I was very proud of. However, it was an achievement that was made possible by understanding my failings, for I had set out to do the same trip the year before and had failed. I got distracted along the way, called in to see friends, and enjoyed their hospitality. In doing so I ran out of time with several hundred miles still to go. On my second attempt I was single minded, I didn't allow myself to be distracted by other things and kept my mind firmly on the goal. One of the great stumbling blocks to hearing the Lord is being distracted by other things.

One of the great blessings of the Christian life is that no matter what our current or past failings may be, the Lord still calls us to come to Him. It's easy to look back on our failings in prayer and give up or make excuses that we just can't hear Him. The solution is to continue to wait patiently and to act on the simple instructions He gives us. Listening to the Lord is tough, it requires a daily and ongoing sacrifice. But if we will persevere, the reward is a true walking with the Lord and a peace of knowing we are in just the place He wants us to be.

*I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry.
Psalm 40v1*