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John 12:26 “How and Why You Should Serve Jesus”

Intro. If I were to offer you a life of self-denial and service to others, would anyone be interested? It doesn't sound very appealing. Yet that is the life that Jesus calls us to. However, for those who accept the challenge, Jesus Christ offers great, eternal reward to all who serve Him. Are you more interested?

I want to give the background to this powerful little verse. Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Then, a group of Greeks came asking Philip to aid them in getting to see Jesus. Reports of His teaching and miracles drew these Greeks to see Him. This led Jesus to reflect upon His upcoming death. He compared His death to the planting of a seed in the ground. The seed must die in the ground before new life and fruit will spring forth. Even so, Jesus knew that He had to die a sacrificial death in order to obtain the fruit of many souls from many nations. So He was willing to deny Himself and go to the Cross.

But in order to win souls and build up His Church, Christ would need the help of faithful servants. So in v.26 there is a phrase that is repeated twice in that one verse, “If anyone serves Me.” So serving Jesus is clearly the focus of this brief text. I want to talk to you this morning about serving Jesus. What a great example He set for us! He said in Mt. 20:28, “just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” He opens His service to everyone, for He said, “If anyone serves Me.” Jew, Gentile, rich, poor, male, and female, we all may serve Jesus. Now I hope that everyone in this room is already serving Jesus, but I want to clarify what it means to serve Jesus, and seek to motivate you to become an even more faithful servant of Jesus.

I am just preaching through a book of the Bible and I believe this message is timely in the life of our church. While most of our ministry positions have been filled, some significant ministry positions have not been filled. We did not have enough qualified and willing men to serve as deacons this year. Our children's ministry has not had enough leaders to step up, and so we have had to discontinue our AWANA program, and I believe that has contributed to the loss of some children and their family members. Other services go lacking. I have devoted my entire adult life to serving Jesus and I want to challenge you to serve Jesus as well through my message today.

So let's see first of all:

I. THE REQUIREMENTS FOR SERVING JESUS

If you are going to serve Jesus, you must do the following two things:

A. You Must Follow Jesus – Here Jesus says, “If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me...” The words “let him follow Me” are actually a command (3rd person imperative). Following Jesus is not optional for those who would be servants and disciples of Jesus. “To follow” is the condensed summary of the Christian's duty. It is the law of Christian discipleship. And notice that we are not to follow an ideal, or just a doctrine, or a religion, but a Person, Jesus Christ. There are many people devoted to many good *causes*; but few are devoted to *Christ*. People ask what it is that distinguishes the teaching of the New Testament in regard to duty, from the teaching of lofty

moralists and sages of old. The true characteristic of Christian teaching as to conduct is this, that the law is in a Person, and that the power to obey the law comes from the love of the Person. All things are different; hard tasks are lightened if only we are following Him.

What does He mean by this commandment, "Follow Me"? "Follow" is a present imperative. That means we must follow Jesus habitually, day by day. But beyond that, there are three primary aspects of following Jesus that I will mention now. First of all, it means to:

1. Imitate Christ - Any man who wishes to serve Christ must imitate Him, walk in His steps and share His life. We must follow Him by imitating His character: His love, compassion, humility, patience, and so forth. Of course, all that we know about Jesus is from the Bible. We must faithfully read and study the Bible to know the pattern that we are to follow.

What an astounding statement Jesus makes here! Think of one Man standing up before all mankind, and calmly and deliberately saying to them, "You are to take Me for your pattern and your guide." Who did He think Himself to be? Only the Son of God could give such a command resulting in so many followers.

2. Win Souls – Jesus said in Matthew 4:19, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." Surely, to serve Jesus you must follow Him in being a fisher of men. Again, in the context of the Greeks seeking Jesus, following Jesus may mean following Jesus to share the Gospel and the love of Christ to people of other cultures. Following Christ may mean leaving your comfort zone and go to strange places to serve Him, to translate the Bible into strange languages, to blaze new trails for Christ. It means to share the gospel, to win souls and plant churches. It means to sacrifice time, money, and selfish energy in order to build up the kingdom of God.

Finally, these two aspects of following Christ will be fulfilled only if we follow Christ in yet another way:

3. Die to Self – Note the previous context vv.24-25, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." If you love your old life of worldly pursuits, and hold on to it, you will ultimately lose that life anyway. So Christ calls upon His followers to turn from a life of self-centered worldly pursuit and die to self. Likewise, Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 16:24, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." There Jesus links self-denial and death to self to following Him. So here we see that we must be prepared to follow Him upon the road on which *He* was going, a road that would soon lead to the Cross. So based on the context, we must be willing to die to self to serve Jesus. Our Lord's supreme Example of self-sacrifice is commended to us all as the royal law for our lives. To follow Jesus is to deny self and worldly ambitions.

In v.25 we see the great hindrance to dying to self: He says, "He who loves his life will lose it..." There are so many people today who live and work for nothing else than for that which they can get out of the material world. Yet Jesus says you will lose that life sooner or later. But a Christ-centered life leads to life eternally.

Are you living only for the present, for what you can have on this side of eternity? Are you living for yourself? Are you living for what you can enjoy now? Are you living for self? If you are, then God says you will lose the very things you are living for.

It is far better in the long run to follow Jesus in the path of self-denial and serving Jesus. Are you following Jesus in this way? Are you using your time for selfish pursuits or in the service of Jesus?

B. You Must Fulfill the Role of a Servant – The Greek word translated “serve” and “servant” is the word from which we get our word “deacon.” It refers to one who executes the commands of another, such as the servant of a king (Esther 2:2; 6:3, 5 LXX; Mt 22:13). The word is also used of a server of tables, one who serves food and drink (Luke 10:40; 12:37; 17:8; 22:27; John 2:5; 12:2; Acts 6:2). The former is more likely the meaning here. Thus, having an attitude of obedience to the Lord Jesus is essential for being His servant.

The Psalmist gave a graphic illustration of our posture as a servant of our Lord. “Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, ...so our eyes look to the LORD our God...” (Psalm 123:2). Rather than always giving verbal commands, Oriental masters often gave their servants hand signals. In his letter on Egypt, Savary,¹ an ancient traveler to that land in the late 1700s wrote: “The slaves, having their hands crossed on their chests, stand silently at the end of the hall. With their eyes fastened on their Master, they seek to anticipate his every wish.” That should be our ambitious desire. We should always stand ready to follow the leading of Jesus through His Word, and through His Spirit. I would add that Christ speaks to us through His pastors as well.

So what does it mean to serve Jesus? In the immediate context it means to follow Jesus, ready to do His bidding. I can easily run ahead of Jesus and do work for Him that He may have never told me to do. In fact, the last phrase may give another clue of what it means to follow Jesus. He said, “and where I am, there My servant will be also.” To serve Jesus is to go wherever Jesus is to be ready to do whatever He commands.² Some by their schedule reveal they are not fully with Him. Their being with Him is a matter of convenience. Our present society challenges devotion to Christ. Soccer, baseball, dance, and other functions conflict with Christ’s schedule. I am persuaded that when worship is being conducted in a member’s church Christ is there (Matthew 18:20³). If that member isn’t present, they aren’t where Christ is. You can also be sure that Christ is seeking to minister to hurting people. That’s where we often see Him in the Gospels. He is where unbelievers are, seeking to win them to Himself. Jesus said in Luke 19:10, “for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” He is there among the lost, and there His servants should be! I am a firm believer in the importance of a pastor spending time in his study, but I am now reminded that he should also spend time where the Spirit of Jesus is among lost and hurting people.

So the bottom line is that you must live in daily obedience to Jesus. Jesus said in John 15:14, “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.”

II. HOW YOU SERVE JESUS

Jesus is now in heaven. How can we serve Him here on earth? Well I believe we serve Jesus:

A. By Worshiping Him - There are numerous times when the Hebrew word for “serve” actually refers to the service of worship (Ex. 13:5; 20:5; 23:24; 23:33; cf. Rom. 12:1-2; Heb. 9:6). I believe this is the idea in Rev. 7:15, “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple.” Likewise, Rev. 19:5 says, “Then a voice came from the throne, saying, ‘Praise our God, all you His servants....’”

So I believe you serve Jesus by gathering with His people for worship. Some of us actually serve in the worship service preaching, singing, playing instruments, ushering, operating the sound

¹ Claude Etienne Savary (1750–88). He was an orientalist, pioneer of Egyptology and translator of the Qur'an.

² Indeed, this is the primary meaning rather than this being a promise that we will be with the Lord in heaven.

³ “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

board, and so forth. But you in the congregation serve Jesus when you sing His praises, when you give thanks unto His name, when you pray, when you give to support His work, when you share His love with others in the congregation, and yes when you listen to God's Word, say "Amen," and grow to become more like Jesus.

B. By Serving Him through the Local Church – Jesus said in Mt. 16:18, "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church...." Jesus is interested in building up His church in the world, and His Church is made up of local churches, and we are one of them. I believe that most of our service unto Jesus should be through a local church. Look at the book of Acts. The apostles did not just preach the gospel, but they also planted churches wherever they went. They established leadership. They built up the congregations.

Will you help us build up the ministry and influence of our church in our community? Will you serve Jesus through our local church? At least 100 of our members have accepted a ministry position, but we need more leaders and workers. We need a Children's Church Director. We need some leaders and workers who will revitalize our children's ministry. We need a Twilights President. We need volunteer S.S. Nursery Workers. We need more choir members, especially sopranos. Jesus came to serve our interests, even to death. Surely we should serve Him!

C. By Serving Others in Jesus' Name – Not all of our service to Jesus should have a direct connection to the ministry of the local church. We should also serve Jesus simply in how we minister to people. Jesus said in Mt. 25:45, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me." That is a quotation of a king in a parable, but it clearly represents the words of King Jesus! Likewise, Jesus said in Mark 9:41, "For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward." Paul said in Gal. 5:13 that through love we are to serve one another. The unselfish desire to help and bless others is the Alpha and the Omega of discipleship.

Karl Menninger, the well-known psychiatrist, is reported to have said, in answering a question about advice for a person suffering from depression, "Lock up your house, go across the railway tracks, find someone in need and do something to help that person."⁴

III. THE REWARD FOR SERVING JESUS: YOU WILL BE HONORED

The context supplies the reason why such motivation is needed. Death to self requires great motivation does in not? Well Jesus promises, "If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor." Likewise, Prov. 27:18 says, "...he who waits on his master will be honored."

A. The Giver of Such Honor – Such a servant will be honored by no less a person than God the Father. God will not have someone else do this important work. This is the way it should be.

The Medal of Honor is the United States of America's highest military honor, awarded for personal acts of valor above and beyond the call of duty. The medal is awarded by the President of the United States in the name of the U.S. Congress to U.S. military personnel. Surely, it is considered a great honor to receive a medal from the Commander-in-Chief!

Even so, the day will come when God the Father Himself will honor those who have faithfully served His Son Jesus (cf. Mt. 25:21). So I encourage you to seek the honor that comes

⁴ Quoted in Michael W. Holmes, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

from God. Jesus said in John 5:44, “How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?” Do you seek the highest honor of all, to be honored by God Himself? How, then, can you be honored by God? If you serve Jesus faithfully and obediently, you will be!

B. The Means of Such Honor – The Christian is promised divine honor. How will God honor you? In 1 Corinthians 3:12-15, we read about the Judgment Seat of Christ. God very clearly lays out the concept of rewards on the day that Christians are judged before Him. Jesus may be primarily speaking about the Father honoring certain people on Judgment Day. Though we take up the cross to follow Christ, we must bear in mind that, as in the case of Jesus, the cross leads to the crown. We can share in the glory and honor that Jesus was to receive. After all, Jesus says in v.23, “The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified.” At the Judgment Seat of Jesus Christ, only the servants will be honored! God will proclaim before the gathered Church, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Mt. 25:21).

Will He say that about you? Will He so honor you? The bottom line is this: If you are not a servant of Jesus in some way in some ministry, then you are not going to be honored on judgment day.⁵ Dan. 12:3 says, “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.” So let me ask you this morning, “Will God Honor You on Judgment Day?”

But I believe that even in this life, God the Father honors those who follow Christ faithfully, and with self-denial. Such servants of the Lord are to be honored by God’s people. Phil. 2:19 says of Epaphroditus, “Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem (*entimos*).” God may prompt your heart to lead out in honoring one of His servants. Will you obey that prompting?

I have received a few honors in my lifetime. In H.S. I played trombone well enough to be selected for the GA Allstate Band. I received a bunch of band metals, yet I don’t even know where they are right now. I graduated from Bible College and Graduate School with honors. It was an honor to be granted the Doctor of Ministry degree in 2005. Yet those honors are nothing compared to what I desire far more, and that is the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus, “If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor” (v.26b). You see, that honor comes from the greatest Person of all. Furthermore, the honors of this world will quickly fade away, but the honor that comes from God will last for eternity! 1 Peter 5:4 says, “and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.”

Conclusion: Moses was called “the servant of the Lord” (Joshua 1:1). Joshua was called “the servant of the Lord” (Josh. 24:29; Jud. 2:8). David was called “the servant of the Lord” (Ps 18:1; 36:1). Does anyone consider you to be a servant of the Lord? More importantly, does God consider you to be a servant of Jesus? I call upon you to dedicate your life anew to the service of Jesus Christ. For some it will mean answering His call to the ministry or the mission field. To others it is making yourself available to serve in this local church. For some it will mean joining this church so you will be in a better position to serve Jesus through this local church. It may mean visiting the sick, taking a meal, or sharing the gospel as the Lord leads this week. The happy and blessed life is not one of self-indulgence, but a life of serving Jesus, and serving other in His name!

⁵ The context of 1 Cor. 3 is really talking about building up the church.

Sources: William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955); Ronnie Floyd (notes from his sermon on John 12:12-26 dated 5/16/93); John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament* (accessed from *Online Bible*), 1760; Oliver B. Greene, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. 2 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, 1966); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); Nelson Price (notes from his sermon on John 12:25-26 dated 3/29/98); Warren W. Wiersbe, *"Be" Series: New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, John* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Burge, H.A. Ironside, J. Vernon McGee, & A.T. Robertson read, but nothing added.

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