

A Different Understanding of Ourselves

Rich Nathan
October 6 & 7, 2018
Making a Difference
Luke 17:7-10

People in America draw their identities from lots of different places – our ethnicities, our occupations, our families, our faith. Sports is a huge source of identity for lots of people. For example, consider these folks. Which team do you think they root for:

Slide

Cheeseheads for Green Bay Packers

How about these guys?

Slide

Buckeyes

What stadium are we looking at here?

Slide

Penn State White Out photo

That one was a little easier with the words Penn State in the end zone.

These days, one of the most important sources of identity for many people is politics. You can tell what someone's politics are in 2018 by the hats they wear:

Slide

MAGA hat photo

Slide

Pink Women's March hats

Sociologists tell us that teens often form their identities by joining cliques. I don't know what the cliques were in your high school, but there's always been the jocks.

Slide

Jocks photo

There are the nerds.

Slide
Nerds

Of course, there are different kinds of nerds. They have their own sub-groups. They have the Anime nerds. The fantasy movie nerds. The video game nerds.

The hipsters.

Slide
Hipsters

Those are the folks wearing the tight jeans and flannel shirts and knit caps.

There's the theater crowd.

Slide
Thespians

Stoners.

Slide
Stoners

Those are the folks, of course, who smoke a lot of weed. Their clothing reeks from it.

Preppies.

Slide
Preppies

When I was growing up, we had the greasers.

Slide
Greasers

I don't think they are around anymore. You know the guys that slick back their hair and had a cigarette behind their ear.

There are the goths.

Slide
Goths

I didn't know they are still around, but apparently they are. You know the teens who scare other teens because they are dressed in black and they have black lipstick and purple nail polish and those gloves.

There are lots of sources for our personal identity. Sadly, many folks feel that their persons, their identity, how they understand themselves, is under assault if their dreams and desires in a certain area go unfulfilled.

I'll never be whole or happy unless...

I'll never be whole or happy unless I have a baby.

I'll never be whole or happy unless I get married.

I'll never be whole or happy unless I have this kind of house or this kind of job or drive this certain kind of car or make this amount of money.

If you're a Christian, and by that I don't mean that you're a church goer, I often have to explain this especially in the Midwest where there are lots of people still coming from religious backgrounds. But if you're a Christian – and by this I mean that you've made a personal decision to follow Jesus and you're committed right now to continue to follow Jesus – if you are a Christian, a Jesus follower, then what is your identity? How do you think about yourself most of the time?

I'm starting a new series today entitled "Making a Difference". I think that every one of us ought to aspire to make a difference with our lives. Many of you are probably familiar with the poem called "The Dash" that was written some years ago by Linda Ellis. Let me read this poem to you in case you're not familiar with it. The Dash, of course, is dash on people's tombstones.

Slide (he wants the dash highlighted if you have an easy way to do that)
Tombstone

It's talking about that dash between the time when someone was born and the time they died.

Slide
The Dash by Linda Ellis

I read of a man who stood to speak at a funeral of a friend. He referred to the dates on the tombstone from the beginning...to the end.

He noted that first came the date of birth and spoke of the following date with tears, but said what mattered most of all was the dash between those years.

For that dash represents all the time they spent alive on earth and now only those who

loved them know what that little line is worth.

For it matters not, how much we own, the cars..the house...the cash. What matters is how we lived and loved and how we spend our dash.

So think about this long and hard; are there things you'd like to change? For you never know how much time is left that still can be rearranged.

To be less quick to anger and show appreciation more and love the people in our lives like we've never loved before.

If we treat each other with respect and more often wear a smile...remembering that this special dash might only last a little while.

So when your eulogy is being read, with your life's actions to rehash, would you be proud of the things they say about how you lived your dash?

In this series called Making a Difference, we'll consider what we do with the Dash – the time between our birth and our death. I called today's talk "A Different Understanding of Ourselves". Let's pray.

Slide Luke 17:7–10

⁷ "Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? ⁸ Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? ⁹ Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' "

Four times in this text, Jesus refers to his followers as servants.

The Greek word for servant is Doulos

SLIDE

Doulos

Doulos literally means "slave." The term doulos, or slave, occurs 125 times in the New Testament and in almost every instance the term refers to the relationship between a believer and Christ. In fact, doulos, slave, is the second most frequently used term in the New Testament to describe the relationship between Christ and a believer. Only the Greek term that we translate "disciple" is used more frequently.

The interesting thing is that the term disciple is almost exclusively used in the gospels and in the book of Acts whereas doulos, or slave, is used throughout the New Testament. So we read verses like this:

SLIDE Romans 1:1

Paul, a doulos of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle...

SLIDE Philippians 1:1

Paul and Timothy, douloi of Christ Jesus, to all of the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi...

SLIDE 2 Timothy 2:24

The Lord's doulos must not be quarrelsome...

SLIDE James 1:1

James, doulos of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...

SLIDE 2 Peter 1:1

Simon Peter, a doulos and apostle of Jesus Christ...

SLIDE Jude 1:1

Jude, doulos of Jesus Christ...

Virtually every writer of the New Testament saw himself as a doulos, as a servant, a slave of Jesus Christ.

Before we move on, we need to correct any misimpression you may have right now regarding what it means to be a servant or a slave of Jesus Christ. Being a servant of Jesus brings us surprising freedom.

Slide

Being a servant of Jesus concerns our freedom

Certainly, a Christian has other identities in the New Testament. There are literally dozens of different ways that we Christians are described in the Bible. We're called "Children of God", the "Bride of Christ", "Friends of Jesus", "The Body of Christ", God's field, God's temple, his co-workers. We're even called his saints, which in New Testament usage refers to people who are set apart for God's use.

As I said a moment ago, nearly 125 times in the New Testament, Christian believers are called servants of Jesus or servants of God. But we need to be very, very careful when we speak about being a servant or a slave of Jesus because most of the connotations we

have regarding being servants or being slaves have to do with situations of oppression and abuse and mistreatment.

I'm sure that just about the first thing that comes to mind when you might think about slavery is the 350 year history of enslavement of Africans in the United States. You might also think about children and women in sex trafficking today or the enslavement of minors and adults in labor trafficking.

Listen to me now. There is nothing oppressive or abusive or hurtful regarding being a servant of Jesus. Being a slave of Jesus in the New Testament involves these paradoxical truths.

Slide (transition in one at a time)

- The more you serve Jesus the more free you become
- The more you serve Jesus the more fulfilled you become
- The more you serve Jesus the more you discover what God created you for
- The more you serve Jesus the more you find your true purpose in life

Slavery to Jesus produces freedom in us. Listen, there is no absolute freedom. We are all servants of something as the Apostle Paul said in Romans 6:16-17.

Slide Romans 6:16-17

¹⁶ Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance.

Singer/Songwriter Bob Dylan put it real simply when he wrote:

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You gonna have to serve somebody
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you gonna have to serve somebody

If you serve anyone or anything other than Jesus and you give yourself absolutely and unreservedly to the will of anyone other than Jesus or to serve anything other than Jesus, or a cause, even great causes that don't involve Jesus, your service will result in bondage.

Slide Proverbs 29:25

Fear of man will prove to be a snare,

but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.

In radical contrast to serving anyone or anything else, serving Jesus is liberating. Serving Jesus is freeing. When you serve Jesus, not with a half-hearted commitment but with all your heart, you become fully alive.

Slide

- Being a servant of Jesus concerns our freedom

Slide

Being a servant of Jesus concerns our entire lives

I've said this in many different teachings, but I need to repeat it. Being a Christian is not like being a grapefruit. I have my religious section where Jesus is, but then I have my work section, my entertainment section, my finance section, my sexuality section, my political section. Grapefruit Christianity is no Christianity at all because Jesus wants to be Lord of everything in our lives.

Being a Christian is much more like chocolate milk where the chocolate is stirred into every molecule of the milk. Jesus and his will gets stirred into every part of our lives. Being a servant of Jesus concerns our entire lives. When you are a servant or a slave, you don't get to keep a part of your time for yourself or some of your money for yourself or some of your property for yourself. The Lord owns everything, including our life, our kids, our future, our relationships. The servant that Jesus talks about in this story didn't have work time and my time. All the servant's time belonged to the master.

Servants are like Mary, the Mother of Jesus, who was told by the angel Gabriel that she would bear the Jewish Messiah who would become the Savior of the world. Mary's response was not, "Wait a minute, Lord. You're talking about my body, my future, my pregnancy, my reputation." Instead, Mary said this to the angel:

Slide Luke 1:38

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."

What would it mean for you and me to be servants of Jesus in every area of our lives? Well, certainly one thing that it would mean would be that we would give our bodies to Jesus. How about coming before the Lord in the morning and saying very simply, "Jesus, I am available to serve you today. Use me as you will. I put my mouth at your disposal. Help me to speak those words that you want me to speak today. Help me to speak words of encouragement, words of gratitude, words of blessing. Keep me from complaining and gossiping and slandering, from being discouraging to anyone. I put my eyes at your disposal today. Help me to see what you want me to see, to notice what I should be noticing, to not look at what I ought not to look at. Put my ears at your

disposal. Help me to listen with your heart. Help me to not listen to things that I shouldn't listen to. I give you my hands, my feet. Jesus, I am available to do your bidding in my family, with my friends, in the grocery store, at my job, in my school, at the restaurant, at the gym, in my apartment, in the hospital where I work. Wherever I find myself today, I want to be available to you." Do you ever say that to the Lord? I'm available to you, Lord, to do your bidding.

I'd like to speak for a moment to small group leaders. If you are a small group leader, if you lead a co-ed small group for Vineyard Columbus, you lead a women's group, you lead a men's group, a teen group, a group for kids, if you're a small group leader here, would you stand? At the campuses, would you also stand? I just want to on behalf of Vineyard Columbus thank you for your service to the people that are in your group. One of the things that I'd like to ask you – if you'd keep standing – small group leaders is that you would lead your group into areas of service at least once a quarter here at the Vineyard. Once every three months or so. That your group would decide we're going to do something beyond just meeting as a group and choose to make a difference in other people's lives.

Many of you are already doing this with your group – thank you for that! For those of us who are not currently engaged in serving outside of our groups would you go to this website:

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Vineyardcolumbus.org/sgvolunteer

Find a place that your group wants to serve in and commit to serving there a few times this year. We have a goal that over the course of this series, we would sign up 1,000 new volunteers from Vineyard Columbus to minister both to our community and to others here in our church.

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- Being a servant of Jesus concerns our freedom
- Being a servant of Jesus concerns our entire lives

Slide

Being a servant of Jesus concerns our excuses

We all have lots of excuses why we can't serve Jesus. Let's read:

Slide Luke 17:7-8

⁷ "Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'?

⁸ Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'?

This woman or man was called in from the fields, tending animals or planting crops. She can't say, he can't say, "Master, I am an outdoor slave. I work the fields. I work in the stables. I work in the garden. I'm in the area of farming or animal husbandry. I'm not someone who works indoors." You need to find someone else to do that – you've got the wrong person here! If you are a servant of Jesus, there are

Slide

No excuses because of gifting or personality

Over the past 40 years in the larger society but also in the church, we have developed an amazing array of really helpful spiritual gifts tests and personality inventories that provide individuals and teams with helpful ways to discover who we are and where we would find the most fulfillment, where we would likely bring the most blessing to others. In fact, we have an incredibly helpful class here at Vineyard Columbus that we call Ministry 401. We're going to be offering it at Cooper Road on Tuesday, October 16, and also at our Sawmill campus.

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Ministry 401

Tuesday, October 16

7:00-9:00pm

(include Sawmill info)

Have you ever wondered where you as a follower of Jesus would be most effective, most fruitful based upon your own gifts, your talents, your life experiences? Ministry 401 will lead you through a series of inventories, basic tests, and help you to find your best place of service at the church. I can't urge you strongly enough to take Ministry 401. We're offering it on October 16. We'll be offering it at Sawmill on October 22. And we're offering it again in November as well.

We always need to offer a qualifier whenever we give a spiritual gift inventory or a test like that. Some people get the message that is if we see a particular need outside of that profile, then we don't need to meet it. I don't have the gift of hospitality so I don't need to open up my home for a small group meeting. I don't have the gift of evangelism so I never need to share my faith in a verbal way. I don't have the gift of healing so I never need to pray for a sick person. If you're a servant of the Lord, you don't get to make excuses because this need is outside of my gift area or outside of my personality or out of my comfort zone.

You probably can't tell, but I have a Type A personality. I like to be really, really productive. It makes me feel good. If a day passes where I haven't achieved something or produced something, I feel like I've wasted the day. Do you know what is most difficult for me to be loose change in the pocket of the Lord that he could spend anywhere he chooses? When the Lord asks me, "be content with being unproductive. Sit there and watch children or grandchildren play a sport." Actually, if they are 6 or 7 or 8 years old and their team is terrible, just sit there and not do email or bring a book.

Years ago, the Lord spoke to me and said, "Rich, if you can't serve me by doing absolutely nothing then you think more highly of yourself than you ought to think." Nobody is so valuable, so indispensable to some greater goal that they can't be completely available to their families, their spouses, to their friends, to their children, to their aging parents, to sit in a nursing home for a few hours with a parent who has Alzheimer's and do nothing other than be there. Nobody's time is so important that they must always accomplish something.

Am I speaking to anyone here? Can any one of you resonate with my feelings? I don't know what cuts across the grain for you. We're all wired differently. But none of us can offer any excuse to Jesus regarding why this particular thing, this mundane action or this great thing, this upfront activity that puts us in the spotlight is something we can say "I simply won't do." Instead, we must say along with Mary, "I'm a servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your will."

There are no excuses because of our gifting. And there are:

Slide

No excuses because of age

In the passage this man or woman comes in from the field after working all day and is not able to say to his master, "Look, I've put in my time working for you. Now it is time for me to reward myself." As Rick Warren once said, "You can retire from a career, but you can't retire from being a servant of Christ."

Our culture says that if you have enough money at age 55 or 60 or 65, or whatever, go ahead and indulge yourself. You deserve it. Spend your retirement years playing golf, or gardening, or traveling from place to place. Be a snow bird and spend 6-9 months of the year in Florida or Arizona soaking in the sun but not serving in a church there! You deserve it; you worked hard. Followers of Christ are shockingly countercultural when it comes to understanding retirement. We retire from careers, but you never retire from being a servant. We see our older years as a time when we can maximally serve.

Those of you who are over the age of 55 or over the age of 65 or 75, God is not done with you! You haven't put in your time serving the Lord or serving at the church and

now it's somebody else's job to do that. Moses' best years were after he was 80. Joshua took portions of the Promised Land when he was well up in his 80's.

For those of us who are over the age of 55, volunteering our time serving in the church, or serving in some ministry of Mercy & Justice through the church provides so many benefits to us. We bridge the generation gap. We can assist younger generations to know God just as we have known the Lord for many decades. Older folks, serve alongside of younger people – it's great for our mental health, for our physical health, for our emotional well-being. All of us need to feel like we're making a difference.

If you are young – you're in your teens or your 20's – remember that in the Bible, God used many young people to influence nations. Samuel was a child when he heard from the Lord. David was a teenager when he defeated Goliath. Jeremiah was a teen when the Lord called him to minister. Mary was likely a young teenage girl when she bore Jesus, the Savior of the world. Timothy, Joseph, Daniel were all very young.

Slide

- No excuses because of our gifting or lack thereof
- No excuses because of our age.

And there are...

Slide

No excuses because of inconvenience

CS Lewis, my favorite Christian writer. He is the author of the Narnia Chronicles, Mere Christianity, The Screwtape Letters, and other Christian classics. Lewis was a professor of medieval English at Oxford University. During WWII he took in many children into his home, children who were fleeing London and other cities that were vulnerable to German bombing. Because they were children and their parents weren't with them, they needed lots of attention. It was a huge inconvenience to have these children running around his house. Lewis was a bachelor. He was a scholar and a writer.

Not only were the kids a huge inconvenience, but they made a lot of noise. As someone who was a teacher and who taught college, I can only imagine what it would be like to sit and try to prepare one of my college classes, or a message for church now, and keep writing books and articles and letters while kids are running through the house.

Actually, God used this inconvenience of having children running through the house and it helped produce one of his most famous writings. One afternoon one of the evacuated children grew interested in an old wardrobe and asked Lewis if perhaps there was anything behind it. This child planted in Lewis' mind the seed for which his most beloved book, The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, grew. Lewis' biographer said,

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Having children in the house benefitted [Lewis] immensely. He had been shy and ignorant of them, but he now gradually acquired the knowledge and affection for them that made it possible for him to write the Narnia books. Without their presence in his house, it is unlikely that he would have ever had that impulse.

Slide

- Being a servant of Jesus concerns our freedom
- Being a servant of Jesus concerns our entire lives
- Being a servant of Jesus concerns our excuses

And finally,

Slide

Being a servant of Jesus concerns our blessing

In this parable, Jesus tells us that serving him earns us nothing. Here's what we read:

Slide Luke 17:9-10

⁹Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' "

God says in this parable, "I owe you nothing." The test of our understanding of God's grace involves a very deep and penetrating embrace of this truth that we have absolutely no claim on God for anything. We can have no self-righteousness before the Lord saying, "Well, Lord, I've lived a certain way. I've tried my best. I've prayed and prayed, therefore, you owe me." At the core of our being, if we want to follow the way of grace laid out in the Bible, we all have to believe that God owes us nothing.

What do we get out of serving Jesus? If being a servant of Jesus doesn't automatically translate into us having a great marriage or our kids being protected, being entitled to good health, what do we get out of serving Jesus? We get personal blessing.

Let me quickly tick off a few reasons why we who consider ourselves followers of Jesus should want to serve him.

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Service is essential for connecting with other Christians

Erwin McManus, who pastors Mosaic Church in Los Angeles, wrote a book some years ago titled *An Unstoppable Force*. He said, "A person who attends, but does not begin to

serve, will drop out within a year. One can ponder all the research...on how to assimilate...new believers in the Body of Christ, but it comes down to one simple variable, if people begin to serve, they stick. If they don't they won't."

People deepen relationships not only by sitting in a circle in a small group discussing the Bible but also serving shoulder to shoulder next to each other in a ministry. Serving together deepens our connection to the church.

Serving is essential for experiencing fulfillment in life

When people say they feel empty or unfulfilled, they are often told in church, "You have a God-shaped hole. You need to read your Bible more. You need to pray more. You need to worship more." All of that may be true.

But the Apostle Paul wrote this in Ephesians 2:8-10,

Slide Ephesians 2:8-10

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For *we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Ephesians 2:10 is almost always neglected in our understanding of what a person needs. It is true that every person has a "God-shaped hole", as the philosopher Pascal put it. But there is a second hole inside of every person, a purpose-shaped hole. And the purpose-shaped hole cannot be filled by more prayer or Bible reading. Until we do the works that God prepared for us to do, we will remain unfulfilled. In other words, we must find a place of meaningful service to feel fully alive!

Finally,

Slide

Service is essential for promoting emotional and physical health

How do we increase our joy? Through acts of service and self-giving! This is the change that you see in Charles Dickens' story of Ebenezer Scrooge. With every new expression of giving and benevolence, Scrooge becomes more joyful until we find him dancing in the streets and laughing. By serving and giving he became the most generous man in England, and the happiest.

Psychologists talk about "helpers' high." Acts of helping measurably boost a person's happiness. Medical studies suggest that as a person cultivates healthy emotions through self-forgetful activities and giving, they actually prevent aging at the cellular level.

For example, there was an early study done some 30 years ago comparing retirees who volunteered with those who did not volunteer. Volunteers scored significantly higher in life satisfaction and the will to live and had many fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety, and bodily pain. Non-volunteers spent more days in the hospital, took more medication, and were generally sicker.

In another older study, families of recently deceased loved ones reported a major psychological benefit, a mood lift from the decision to donate the organs of their loved ones. Serving Jesus brings the server blessing.

A Different Understanding of Ourselves

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Luke 17:7-10
#MakingADifferenceVC

- I. Being a servant of Jesus concerns our freedom

- II. Being a servant of Jesus concerns our entire lives

- III. Being a servant of Jesus concerns our excuses
 - A. No excuses because of gifting or personality

 - B. No excuses because of age

 - C. No excuses because of inconvenience

- IV. Being a servant of Jesus concerns our blessing