Our Heritage of Serving

The Stewardship of Our Heritage
By Steve Viars

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I don't know if I ever mentioned this before but I grew up in the beautiful city of Gary in the northwest part of our state. Has that ever come up before? I know that some people groan when they hear that. Some of you just did that. I heard some groans over at Faith West even but after the last few weeks of learning that our church's history is pretty closely tethered to that great city, I assume that your view is changing. Why is that? Well, our former pastor for many many years, Pastor Goode and his wife Mildred, though they were from Georgia, they went to school down South, they served at Grace Baptist Church in Gary before coming here and much of Pastor Goode's philosophy of ministry that became so central to our story was actually honed in the crucible of the social challenges of Gary along with the religious challenges in our country in the 1960s. That, coupled with the fact that Pastors Goode's coworker, Dr. Bob Smith, and his dear wife Leona, were also from that part of Indiana. They were from Lowell and they met the Goode's, Pastor Goode and Dr. Smith received their biblical counseling soul care training together. What that means is that the place that is so often disdainfully referred to as "the region," that's a place we ought to be thankful for. Are you feeling it? Are you kind of feeling it? So on your way to Chicago, no more holding your nose at the steel mills and saying, "This place smells." You've done that, haven't you? Or telling your kids to lock the doors because you might get robbed. No, no more of that. Here's what you need to do: you need to just tip your hat while you're driving by, remember our church's heritage and then say, "You know, this city is very special." You could say that with integrity, right? This city is very special.

Well anyway, I'm not convincing anybody with this introduction. Growing up in Gary in the summer time, your naturally rooted for the Chicago Cubs, right? I realize it's been a year or two since the Cubs have been in the World Series but next year. This has all been rebuilding. Rebuilding, but next year. Next year, we hear we're going to get there for sure. Well, in the fall then you rooted for the Bears. That's just the way it was, the way it is. It gets in your blood. There are certain names you revere, certain seasons you'll never forget. Classic games, especially any time we can beat those evil Green Bay Packers. We hate them, right? In Christian love, we hate them. Well, if you follow NFL football, you know that last Sunday night, the Bears played the Packers, huh? Yeah, they did. One of the worst losses for the Bears in their entire franchise history. That's right. The Packers were actually...some of you are laughing and clapping...that would not, I feel like I need

to give people their lines and appropriate responses. This is a sad story. The Packers were actually leading at halftime by a score of 42-0. At halftime. They went on to win by a margin of 55-14 and, honestly, it could have been far worse. It could have been far worse.

One of the observations that's been made about that game is how many different players on the Packers did so well. Not just their quarterback, although Aaron Rogers had a great night, six touchdowns in the first half. But so many other players shined as well. Five different receivers caught touchdown passes in that game. Four different running backs had double digit yardage totals. The same was true on the Packers' defense. They sacked the Bears four times with four different players. Of the 19 different guys playing defense for the Packers throughout the game, 18 of them had tackles. I realize that phrase "it was a team win" is undoubtedly overused but in this case, that was true. They found a way for lots and lots of their players to shine.

Well, compare that to what occurred recently in one of the largest evangelical churches in this country and I want to be very careful here. I know very few facts about this situation. I don't want to be critical, especially if another person or a church is hurting but a few weeks back and if you pay any attention even to secular news, you know this, a pastor of a church in the northwest part of our country resigned. It wasn't a moral issue; it didn't have anything to do with embezzlement or anything like that. There had been some complaints about his leadership style, especially early in his ministry, so the church decided to do an investigation. The pastor decided to resign before the process was even complete, at least from the perspective of anything being communicated publicly. Now, what happened next is what I think is especially noteworthy for our purposes this morning. They decided that that church cannot go on without that one man so all 13 campuses have been told that they are on their own to decide between now and January 1 if they want to do one of three things: either merge with another church in their area; closed; or try to make it as an independent congregation.

Now, all that begs this question, I think: is the church of Jesus Christ as described in Scripture to be comprised of a few superstars whom everybody else comes to passively watch or is it a whole team of ordinary people that achieve wins for the glory of God together? And when you bring that around to the heritage that we've been given at Faith, is it a story of a few people over the last 50 years or is it a story of a lot of people? You see, what is the Scripture's pattern on that point and how closely has our story aligned to that pattern? Friends, I would suggest to you that the answer to that question gives us a third strong reason to be very, very thankful for our heritage.

With that in mind, I'm going to ask you to do something kind of hard this morning, are you ready? I'm going to ask you to turn to two passages of Scripture at the same time. Are you ready for that? If you say, "Well, why?" I couldn't decide which one I wanted to speak on most, okay? So Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4. That's on page 152 and 182 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you if you need that this morning. So Ephesians 4 in one hand, you've got two hands with you, right? And then 1 Peter 4 and we're going to study both of them this morning. Now, if you are new with us this morning, I probably just need to pause and explain the setting for what we're talking

about. We have two themes that are converging here today. First, it's November, although it feels like January, huh? Praise God for the creativity and just the unusual nature of God's creative acts but it feels like January but the calendar says it's November and around Faith that means it's Stewardship Month. That's our annual opportunity to step back and think about all that God has entrusted to us, either individually or as a church and then to think back over the last 12 months about how faithful we have been to that trust and then to think forward about what greater faithfulness looks like in the days ahead. Then secondly, it's our church's 50th anniversary so we're having a delightful time this month thinking about the stewardship of our heritage. You see, by God's grace, it's a delightful story to tell. It really is, beginning with the fact that the pastor of our mother church, so to speak, Pastor Rowe from Kossuth Street Baptist Church led a group of families to attempt to plant a brand-new church on what was then the newer south side of town. A number of homes were being built there and they had a concern that a church would be available for those who were moving there. So we reflected on some of the original documents that described what this group was trying to do along with minutes from their various business meetings and what's clear is that we have been blessed with an incredibly rich heritage and so what we're trying to do this month is highlighting the ways that that is especially true and then posing our typical stewardship questions to those key themes: here's what we've been given, are we being faithful to the trust?

Two weeks ago we explained that the story begins with our heritage of the Gospel and I won't take the time to read from the program of the Dedication Service of our first permanent building in 1967, I've done that the last couple of weeks. But it's amazing to me and I hope to us how clear that small group of people was about articulating their commitment to believe, to live out, to proclaim the good news of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the free gift of salvation that was available through trusting in him. And what's so marvelous about that is they sounded so much like the Apostle Paul when he told the Corinthian church, "Christ didn't send me to baptize but to preach the Gospel, not in cleverness of speech so that the cross of Christ would not be made void for the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." He went on to say in a couple of verses later, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." By God's grace, that is an essential aspect of our heritage and I hope we're deeply grateful for that. We really should be.

Last week we added another piece of the puzzle, it's our heritage of spiritual growth. You see, as pastor in Gary, Pastor Goode became very concerned about people who said they had accepted the Gospel but whose lives did not give evidence of that practically: in their marriages, in their families and the way they functioned in the work place, etc. etc. Dr. Bob Smith was saying the same thing in his medical practice where he had all sorts of people who were his patients who said they were Christians. They said they had accepted the Gospel but, boy, that wasn't affecting the way they were responding to their medical diagnoses. So God led them to receive training in biblical counseling and soul care and they came to this town to implement what in many ways was the grand experiment, asking: is the Bible really sufficient enough and is the doctrine of spiritual growth outlined in Scripture powerful and practical enough to help men and women grow and

change in ways that can really make a life-changing difference? It wasn't so much that our church wanted to have a counseling center, we wanted to be a counseling center where those doctrines, the sufficiency of Scripture, biblical progressive sanctification, that was permeating all of our lives and that was permeating all of our ministries. Colossians 1:28-29 states it as clearly as anywhere else in the Bible, "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man," look around, think about the five services we'll have today. "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present," not just the super-saints, "we may present every man complete in Christ."

Now, here's the question before the house: what if you get a significant percentage of the church family tethered strongly to those two key values? Here's the answer: that's a place the Lord can entrust with significant ministry responsibilities. You see, tether that to serving. That's a place the Lord can trust with significant ministry responsibilities because there are so many people who are joyfully and delightfully serving God together. Friends, by God's grace, that has been a very important part of our story. It actually pains me to say this but it's true: in many ways, we have been like the Green Bay Packers were last Sunday night.

With that mind, let's read these two key passages and I really want to encourage you. Now we're going to the Bible so this isn't a time to zone out, this is a time to zone in, right? Ephesians 4, beginning in verse 11 where Paul says,

> 11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, [why?] 12 for the equipping of the saints [who? That's you. Why?] for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. 14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; 15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, [now, here's where it's going. Please pay careful attention to this verse and think about the Packers] 16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Now, please look over at your verses in 1 Peter chapter 4. We're going to jump in for sake of time at verse 7. Listen to what it says about serving,

> 7 The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. 8 Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Be hospitable to one another without complaint. [now listen] 10 As each one has received a

> special gift, [who would that be? That would be any person who knows Christ] employ it in serving one another as good [what?] stewards of the manifold grace of God. 11 Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving [now hear this] by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

What a great couple of passages, huh? In fact, I believe in many ways Ephesians 4:16 should be a church family's dream. Here it is, "from whom the," what? "The whole body, being fitted and held together by," what? "What every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." Here's what we're talking about: we're talking about an environment where everyone in the church has identified his or her spiritual gifts. Just look around the room, multiply it by our five worship services today and think about what that could mean where everyone in the church has identified his or her spiritual gift and where everyone has been trained to use his or her spiritual gift and where everyone has been deployed into meaningful service positions where as a team of brothers and sisters in Christ, we can accomplish God's plan and purposes together. The keyword is what? "Everyone." Certainly not perfectly but to a significant degree, that has been this church family's story. We've been entrusted with that heritage, friends, and the question is what? How faithful then are we going to be to that trust?

We're talking about our heritage of service and with the time that we have remaining, let's look for three steps on the path of creating team wins like the stinking Packers, creating team wins with the family...pray for me in my bitterness, okay. Well, I have issues...with the family of God. Well, it starts right here: develop a profound appreciation for the way the Gospel impacted you. Do you have that, by the way? I hope you do. And also its potential impact on others. You might say, "Hey, where did we get that in the text?" Well, from the very first word "therefore" which points us back to the previous three chapters, some of the most delightful sections in all of Scripture where Paul has reminded the Ephesians about what happened to them when they trusted Jesus Christ because of the power, the comprehensive nature of the Gospel. It changed their and it changes our very identity. That's why we say these chapters articulate the Gospel indicatives: it tells you who you are in Christ because of the Gospel.

That's also what Peter meant when he said, "We serve as," what? "Good stewards of God's grace." He's talking about the Gospel. When you think about that in its context, remember what Peter had already said in that book, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away and reserved in heaven for you." Here's what I hope: I hope every one of us is still amazed by the Gospel. You've got to have that or you're not going to serve well. I hope every one of us is still amazed that God made it possible for us to become his children through the finished work of his Son.

Now, where does that lead logically? Well, there's also a sincere desire that others would come to know Christ. I've been quoting from the epistles of Peter. You may know, here's another one of those every man statements, 2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you," why? "Not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." Another interesting aspect of that every man. You see, that is what motivated many, many people in this church over the years to serve the way they do. We want every person in our community to have had a meaningful and positive interaction with a follower of Christ and then to have subsequently heard a clear and compelling presentation of the Gospel of Christ. Now, what that person chooses to do with that, that's between them and God but our service in Christ's church is directly tethered to our love for the impact the Gospel had on us. Do you have that? And tethered to our desire to proclaim it to as many people as we can. Serving because of our love for the Gospel has been a part of our ministry DNA from the very beginning.

I mentioned to you that back in the Dedication booklet from our congregation back in 1967 on the occasion of the first church building being dedicated, they had a little section called, "Do you remember?" Do you remember? They were already reminiscing after being two years old. "Do you remember the first home that was open to start our prayer meeting?" Why would a person serve like that? That will get your carpets dirty. Why would a person do that? Well, it's because, remember what Peter said? If you love the Gospel, you're going to be hospitable. They said, "Do you remember the hours of work night and day the last month before we moved into the new church?" Think about that little group of people comparatively. Think about what that would have meant. They said, "Do you remember the painting of the auditorium by 31 people in one evening?" Don't you love that? What is all that? That is our heritage, not a few superstars but a family of men and women who were so impacted that their sins had been forgiven to the shed blood of Christ and that their lives were being changed by the power of the Gospel. They wanted to serve. Get that, it wasn't that somebody made them, guilted them, they wanted to serve because they wanted the Gospel to be faithfully and powerfully proclaimed. That was the point that Wesley S. and Nathan M. made last week on behalf of hundreds and hundreds of others who could have given a very similar story. They said they served so faithfully because they can't get over the way the Gospel has impacted them. They serve so faithfully because they can't get over the possibility of sharing it with someone else who has never heard. You see, their service is tethered to their appreciation and excitement about the Gospel.

That brings up an important evaluative question, doesn't it? What does your level of service in Christ's church say about the depth of your appreciation for the Gospel? And if you would say, "Well, we don't want some kind of superstar church," well good because you ain't got a superstar here. But if you don't want to have a superstar church, then you have to want to be on the team, not just by talking about it but by doing it. Could I get an amen on that? Some of you were groaning when I was talking about Gary and now you're kind of quiet when I say that. I can hear the quiet even over at Faith West. What does your level of service in Christ's church say about the depth of your appreciation for the Gospel? Are you serving as a good steward of the manifold grace of God?

Now, what's the second emphasis we can derive from these passages? Here it is: take steps to grow spiritually and develop the gifts that God has given you. You have to do something with this information and just to be sure we all have our eyes on the ball, let's go back to our key verse, "from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." Well, how do you get there? Were you following the logic of the text? I mean, if we want to be an Ephesians 4:16 kind of church, how do you get there? The logic is clear: there has to be a sincere desire to be equipped. There has to be a sincere desire to get to a better place spiritually. Why not? Think about the logic: otherwise your service will be hypocritical or it will be deficient in any number of ways. In other words, if your service is not tethered to the Gospel and not tethered to having grown and been equipped spiritually yourself, whatever you're trying to do for God is either going to be hypocritical or it's going to be deficient and powerless in all sorts of ways.

I was working with a couple many, many years ago from another church. This was back when some churches were still doing the whole bus ministry thing and so this couple had a bus route. The problem was, their marriage was in such a disarray that they would get into arguments and sometimes even in front of the bus kids. So the pastor got word of the fact that this husband and wife were arguing and fussing and fighting with each other right in front of the bus kids. Do you know what the pastor's solution was to that problem? Give the wife her own bus. In his mind, their marriage problem became a great crucible for creating yet another bus worker.

Connect that to what we saw last week, the every man emphasis of Colossians 1:28 and 29, "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ." You see, what does that have to do, we've talked about the Gospel, we've talked about spiritual growth, now we're talking about serving about what I'm asking you is: what is the relationship between these three things? Here's the answer: you cannot lead somebody in serving to a place you've never been and what motivates your service is your love for the fact that the Gospel provided not only forgiveness for your sin but also a process of change for your life. You see, seeing God progressively change you, that is infectious, isn't it? You absolutely have to share that with somebody else because you're so excited for the work that God is doing in you.

Well, how do verses 11 and 12 fit into the discussion? The answer is: accept the responsibility to progressively walk worthy of your calling in Christ. We have to live in a way that honors him and then next, look for ways to be equipped and to help us to equip others. Think about this: why did God give a church pastors? Have you ever wondered about that? Why do we have that guy? Well, the text says he gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers, why? So they can do the work of the ministry to free us up to go and make big bucks. Is that it? No, it's not my job to do the work of the ministry. You might say, "That sounds terrible." It sounds biblical.

It's my job to equip the saints. Now, there's work in that, by the way, but it's my job and the other pastors of our church's job to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry.

Now, this is how these three emphases all fit together: our heritage of the Gospel motivates and directs our outreach. Because we have that heritage of being so Gospel centered, woe is us if we don't preach the Gospel. And so we're thinking about Christmas and thinking about how can we get the word out at Christmas time? And our heritage of spiritual growth, trying to go deep in being equipped in practical ways is what qualifies and empowers our service. Maybe this diagram will help, we talk about this around here. For some of you this might be review, for some it might be new. You know what that is, right? That's a river. Have we all got that? And you know what those are right there? Those are canoes, right? Well, we call that the discipleship river and each one of those canoes represents an individual follower of Jesus Christ and when you think about all the things at our church or any church is trying to do to help people grow, to try to help them progress spiritually: so our worship services, our ABF's, our small groups. The goal is to get every person in our church in the center of the river where the current is swiftest, growing at the rate that God wants them to grow. That's crucial.

Well, we're not just concerned about that, we're also concerned about getting more people in the river. That's where that fits into this so we want to be passionate about outreach and we want to be the kind of place where anyone who is won to Christ can be equipped, can be given resources to help them grow. Now, here's the question that we often ask other churches and even ourselves: is everybody in the church growing at the rate that God wants them to grow? Is everybody in the church benefiting from the normal discipleship means and methods of the church? And the answer here and the answer anywhere is no. Some people are stuck in sin and can't get out. Some people have questions and they don't have Bible answers. They are not benefiting from the normal discipleship means and methods of the church. What do we have for people like that? Well, our answer diagrammatically is that. What is that? That's an eddy. An eddy is a wide place in the river where the water is not as deep, the current is not as swift and the idea is that we're taking a person alongside individually and helping them learn how to canoe. For us, that's where biblical soul care fits into this. That's where biblical counseling fits into this. We want to be, here's the thing: if we're going to say to you that you have to want to be equipped then on our side of the equation, we're going to say that we want to provide all the resources necessary to make it possible for you to be equipped in whatever way is necessary at this point in your spiritual journey.

But here's what we're also saying: if we can get that done well, and it's hard, some churches are great at outreach, not so great at discipleship. Some churches are great at discipleship, not so great at outreach. Some churches might be doing the outreach and discipleship thing well but when somebody is stuck, there are no additional resources so getting all of that done well is hard. But here's the bottom line: if you can, then you have an army of people who are prepared to serve. Then you have an army of people who love and are qualified to serve. We're well on our way to Ephesians 4:16 where "the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper

working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love."

Now, let me ask you some evaluative questions really, just between you and the Lord at this point. Where are you in that river? Where are you in that river? Have you genuinely come to Christ? Friend, if you have not trusted the Gospel, I would urge you to do that today. What awaits you is the possibility of having your sin forgiven. What awaits you is the possibility of having an answer for where you'll spend eternity. What awaits you is the possibility of the power of God and the truth of his word and the love of the body of Christ helping you grow. So if you've never trusted Christ, I would encourage you to do that. But for those who would say that you have, please think about this: are you making yourself available to the appropriate resource package that can help you grow so you're best prepared to serve? You see, you can look at a church like this like a smorgasbord, you couldn't possibly do everything, you couldn't possibly get involved in everything but the fact of the matter is that the other side of it is, we could put all sorts of things on the smorgasbord but at some point, you've got to pick up your tray and head down the line. What I would encourage you to do is and maybe with a friend, maybe with a small group leader, maybe with a deacon, with one of our pastors, is to do an evaluation personally of where are you in the river. In other words, are you benefiting from all the resources to help you grow spiritually? Have you identified your spiritual gift or gifts? Have you allowed yourself to be equipped or trained to use those gifts in service in your church? And have you allowed yourself to be effectively deployed into meaningful service? That's how we become an Ephesians 4:16 kind of church.

Now, here's a second question: what are you doing to help us make the river more robust? More effective? More engaging to men and women in this culture? You say, "What do you mean by that?" Well, that's part of the beauty of this: you can help others grow simultaneous to your own growth. You see, it's this, "I want to find ways that I can be equipped. I want to find resources so that I can get to a better place," but at the same time, "I want to help somebody else get there as well." Please don't think about all of this as being overly segregated or sequential. In fact, often one of the best motivators to growth is to jump into a serving opportunity and here's why: because as you're stretched beyond your limits, many times that's what's going to motivate you then to call out to God to find additional ways that you can get to a better place.

Now, what does it look like in practical terms? I want to be sure that this is as practical as possible. When you think about being a good steward of our heritage of serving, I would encourage you to think about the serving opportunities around our church in four very distinct categories. The first one is this: just our bread and butter serving opportunities. The things that we have to do and any other church has to do Sunday after Sunday, week in and week out in order to accomplish our mission. Things like serving in the nursery. Things like serving in our children's and youth ministries. Things like serving in one of our tech teams, our will worship teams. I would encourage you to always view those as coming first. We're not going to get excited about something else until we're sure that our bread and butter ministry responsibilities are covered. Again, tether that back to our main emphasis of outreach and practical discipleship. Why am I working in the nursery? It's

because I want to make it possible for others to hear the Gospel. It's because I want to make it possible for others to be equipped to grow and serve. So I'm serving in the nursery not as an end in itself but because I'm tethered so tightly to these core values.

That's what motivated men and women to volunteer for one of our Serve 14 positions. We come around once a year and we encourage people to think about all of our children and youth ministry opportunities and we ask them to sign up for a year. I'm so glad we didn't have to beg, borrow and all of that in order to get people to do that. You filled all of those positions. Why? For the very reasons we're talking about this morning: people who have come to know the Lord are amazed by God's grace, have identified their gifts, have been equipped to serve well and now they've been deployed into those meaningful ministry opportunities. Well, guess what happens? What comes after Serve 14? Yeah, Serve 15 so sometime next spring, we'll have that emphasis where we will attempt to fill those positions again. The way you do that is you first go to all your Serve 14 people and say, "Would you be willing to serve for another year?" Here's what I'm hoping: as a result of understanding the stewardship of our heritage, think about those people, 31 of them painting the auditorium in one night, that's our heritage. I hope that folks are going to say, "Listen, I'd be happy to do that for another year." I hope there's going to be very few positions that we actually have to fill next year and here's why: because we're a congregation that is maturing in our serving, meaning we define faithfulness not in terms of months or years but in terms of decades because of our heritage.

So we have our bread and butter ministries. Secondly, we have our bonus ministries. God in his grace has entrusted this family with a Christian school. Are you glad about that? With Vision of Hope, with a counseling ministry, with a seminary, etc. etc. I believe this: humanly speaking, the Lord did that because of our heritage of the Gospel and because of our heritage of spiritual growth and because of our heritage of serving. I really believe that. You see, humanly speaking there were and there are many men and women living in Ephesians 4:16 and what does God often do when that happens? If you're faithful with the five talents he has given you, what do you get next? Five more talents and you're glad about that, aren't you? I hope you would say, "Absolutely. If the Lord could entrust us with more, bring that on." Well, that provides additional service opportunities, again, after we're sure that the bread and butter ones are covered.

Then the third category: our community outreach ministries. Delightful ways to serve for example in our community centers, in our community leagues, in our food pantry, with a skate park, the programs that are associated with our Community Development Corporation. In fact today, we're going to have the open house for our first CDC home down on 7th Street. We had a group and this is happening more and more and more but we had a group fly in Friday from the Atlanta area. One of the guys on their team works in a company that has several jets and so they flew right into Purdue and they are thinking about doing a college ministry but they wanted to have an impact on their community so this group was not just from one church, there were actually some business leaders from their town very interested in what the Lord has allowed us to do and we're not here to glorify ourselves but we want to share it with others. Well, I took that group down to our CDC house on 7th Street. I haven't been there in a while which tells you

something, by the way, I don't do all the work of the ministry. You say, "I know you don't." I know because my job is to what again? To equip the saints to do the work of the ministry and I'll tell you, that house is beautiful and those folks were just standing there and saying, "This is exactly what we want to do in our town," and I would say that's because so many people have joyfully served. I hope you'll be at that open house today, by the way. What a great time to celebrate God.

Then fourthly, there's all of our seasonal ministries. In fact, you have an opportunity today to sign up for serving in the stewardship celebration next week. We're obviously on the cusp of the Living Nativity, several other Christmas oriented ministries. We do specialty things at Easter. We do things during the summer. This coming February, we'll have again our Biblical Counseling Training Conference. Every one of those, opportunities to serve. By the way, just in case you're wondering, do you say, "Do you feel guilty saying this?" Absolutely not. I will never apologize for encouraging God's people to serve. Do you know why? Do you want to hear why? It's because I do not believe that the average follower of Jesus Christ is spending too much time serving God. Busy yes. Busy serving God, seriously? Not the average follower of Jesus Christ. The second reason I make no apologies about it is I think it's good for you. I think it's good for us because I think someday we're going to stand before God and we're going to have to give account for the gifts he gave us and the time he gave us and how we used it and I would rather on a day like today, some folks are just a little bit uncomfortable which led to repentance, which led to change, which led to being able to give a better account at the judgment seat of Christ, don't you?

And so there's no question about the fact that our heritage is many men and women who have served a lot but I believe this: if everybody serves at the right level, nobody has to serve too much and it's amazing how God blesses us when that's happening. For example, I mentioned the Biblical Counseling Training Conference that's coming around in February. One of the ways that we serve together is by opening our homes for our guests because many of the persons who come, their churches are smaller, they can't afford housing for a conference like that so we make our homes available. Well, it would appear that we're going to have more opportunities than ever to do that. I was just looking at some stats. Last year we had more people at that conference than ever before, over 1,900 people came to our conference in February last year to hear those biblical truths. On this date last year, there were 918 people registered for a conference total of eventually 1,900. We had never had that many already in November. Do you know how many are registered today? 1,151. That's 30% more than our highest year ever. By the way, it's not, "Look at us." No it's, "Look at God who has chosen to trust us." Why? Because the people who have gone before us have served so faithfully and served so well. If everybody does the right amount, no one will have to do too much.

Now let's put this together in a package in case I'm not being as practical as I should be. I'm encouraging us all to ask the Lord to help us develop the level of spiritual growth where as a team we can be entrusted with more ways to glorify him. Do you agree with that? Do you like that statement? Where does greater faithfulness get you? More opportunities to serve. In fact, right now you're thinking about the bluegrass song aren't

you, "Work your fingers to the bone and what do you get?" You see, some of you don't even know it, do you? You're not even saved if you don't know the answer to that question. Bony fingers. Well, what do you get when you faithfully serve God? Greater trust. Greater trust and please tell me you don't want to rust out. Please tell me you want to wear out for God, huh? Please tell me you want to hit the tape going 100 miles an hour. You say, "When do I get to rest?" That's why they have the silk pillow in the caskets. Have you ever wondered? Satin sheets await you, baby. That didn't come out right. Oh, there it is right in my notes, I guess maybe that one did. You see, what did Peter say, "Whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies." There it is. "So that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever."

I would encourage you to do this: determine, friend, whether you really value being a servant of God. Do you really see that as part of your identity? Then identify the way or ways that God has gifted you and if you need to get a friend, a deacon, a small group leader, a pastor around to help you do that, we would be more than happy to do that. Investigate what serving opportunities would be the most natural use of the way God has gifted you. Then, plan what training you need. We're never going to encourage someone to serve without providing training. Then make yourself available for deployment. One of the ways to do that is to spend some more time with your friend, the Stewardship Commitment Card. That's why it's in your bulletin. I would encourage you to review this and I realize people say, "Well, I don't like making written commitments." Really? That's exactly why you ought to make a written commitment because the people in our heritage did and God chose to bless them.

I just want to throw this in: if you're married, find ways to make it easier for your spouse to serve. Listen, guys if your wife would like to serve in a particular way, don't put her on a guilt trip, free her up. Say, "Baby, that's great if you want to serve over at the church house on Tuesday night getting Christmas gifts ready. I'll be in charge of supper." You might want to call the church and ask us to pray for your kids but make it easy for your spouse to serve. Also, look for opportunities to serve as a family. A lot of this can be done, like the tribe, right? Serve in the Living Nativity together, Bethlehem. Some of you who have been around our church know what that means, "Oh, not Bethlehem." Yeah, husband, wife, all the kiddies, get in Bethlehem and have a great time serving Jesus.

Enjoy the every person aspect of this. Do you realize that you could make a great friend in the next couple of weeks? That's right and I hope you don't say, "Boy, Jesus is trying to jam me up with all this serving." No, God wants what's best for you and your life will be enriched by serving other people. That is so true.

Then apply these principles to every area of life. You'll like serving. You may not like it on the front end but you will like it when you're done and that will put that in your DNA for other areas of life. Then make serving decisions in light of God's strength, not yours. Whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies.

You know, we had a chapel this week for veterans on Veterans Day at our school. I got this letter from our administrator, Scott, who said, "I thought it would lift you up to know what one of the honor guard members here today shared with me. He said he was a Guardian on a recent honor flight from this area. Many of our elementary classes wrote letters and cards of appreciation to be distributed to veterans during that honor flight's mail call. One of our students wrote a note stating she was from Korea and she specifically thanked veterans for saving her country. That card from Faith Christian School made its way to a Korean war veteran on the honor flight. The note brought several veterans to tears and led the honor guard member who was here today to say how God was clearly in that." That's right, huh? We're not smart enough, frankly, to have planned all of that out. But here's a young girl who used her gift for writing and the opportunity to do that to just do her part and then God picked it up and did an amazing thing with it. We're not talking about serving in our strength, friends, we're talking about serving in the strength that God supplies.

I mentioned that we had this group hear from the Atlanta area. We were going through Faith West, we were going through some of the apartments and by the way, those young ladies really have their apartments looking nice. We purposely did not go into the guys' apartments but anyway, what was fascinating on one of the apartments, one of the five bedroom apartments, there was a little pegboard there and thumb tacked to the pegboard was a green bag. Now, everybody in this church knows what that means, that's a Christmas For Everyone bag. Here are these young ladies who are college students and instead of just focusing on themselves, they've gotten together and they are going to sponsor a Christmas For Everyone child together. Serving even while they are in college. Yesterday out at Bethany Farms, there were over 60 people planting fruit trees at Bethany Farms which is the beginning of our orchard because we're hoping and praying that God will allow us to develop a ministry for men some day there and you have that many people on a day like yesterday out serving. It is an absolute privilege and an absolute delight to serve God together and it's an important part of our heritage.

Would you stand with me for prayer, please?

Father in heaven, thank you for the opportunity to study these matters. Lord, thank you for the way so many people in this church joyfully serve. Help us to evaluate ourselves, Lord, and make whatever adjustments are necessary in order to serve you more faithfully in the days ahead. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.