



CENTER FOR STEWARDSHIP

Your Story

Living for the Neighbor:

We Serve Our Neighbor

GOAL OF THE STUDY

The particulars are virtually limitless, but the bottom line for most people is simple: they live their lives trying to do what is right for themselves. The pursuit of this self-fulfillment and personal satisfaction may be a licentious debauch that denies the body no pleasure; it may be a sophisticated drive for academic and intellectual excellence and distinction; or, it may be a highly praised, socially approved, and rewarded effort at altruism and self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Each of these answers to the goal and point of life are ultimately the same: each is pursued to attain fulfillment and meaning in life.

The Christian approach to life is altogether different. Instead of living to serve self, Christians are taught to serve God. It is the standard account of the basics of Christian faith. God created you and then sent Jesus to die and rise for you, and on the last day, the Lord is going to take you to be with him forever in paradise . . . so in view of all that God has done, you should now live your life for him. Service to the Lord is the only legitimate goal and purpose of a well-lived life. Most Christians readily and enthusiastically embrace this idea.

ANSWERS

- 1 The summary of Old Testament teaching—love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself—corresponds to seeing life in two dimensions. In the vertical component before God, we offer our love and worship to our Creator and Redeemer who accomplished all things for us; in the horizontal component before our fellow creatures, we love our neighbors selflessly. It is what we were put on earth to do.
- 2 One could say that both priest and Levite were serving God—at least they thought they were doing service to God. God's law made the one who touched a dead person unclean and so unable to serve. We would be closer to the truth to say that each man was merely serving himself and his own interests. The Samaritan saw a need and met it. He was serving the half-dead man.
- 3 In this context it is clear that a neighbor is anyone we happen to encounter who needs what we can give. Proximity and need are crucial aspects that make one a neighbor. One does not choose a neighbor.

The Samaritan meets the need of the half-dead man. Beyond his compassion, the Samaritan's motives are not revealed. There is no mention of God whatsoever. The Samaritan's faith, it seems, is irrelevant to the point that Jesus wants to make. Loving the neighbor is just that: loving the neighbor.

- 4 The parable is clear: Christians should be like the Samaritan; they should serve their neighbors. The goal, here, is to direct the group to recognize that the twofold criteria, proximity and need, are still in effect. Help participants identify specifically the neighbors they know and meet who need what those in your group have been blessed to be able to give.
- 5 On the face of it, this parable seems to teach blatant works-righteousness. The criterion for the distinction between sheep and goats is clearly that of the good works or lack of the same. However, since this is not the only teaching we have about God's judgment and the basis for salvation, we recognize that the works are done out of faith in the work of Jesus. Furthermore, it is the Father who blesses and

ANSWERS cont.

prepares a kingdom for us “from the foundation of the world” who makes a sheep a sheep, and not the works that a sheep does. Jesus is describing that sheep act like sheep and so can be recognized as sheep by their works. There is no contradiction, then, with the doctrine of justification. We are justified, and then we act like justified sheep.

6 Jesus’s final words seem to position our Lord squarely behind every person in need—thus, we don’t actually serve the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, or the imprisoned, we serve Jesus. On the other hand, the ignorance of the sheep argues against this position. The sheep did not set out to “serve Jesus,” they simply served the people who needed their love. They had to be told that Jesus was somehow part of that service. Thus, Jesus does not argue that we should serve the need of others because in doing so, we are actually serving God. Rather the assumption, as in the story of the Good Samaritan, is that when a neighbor is in need, God’s people meet the need—simply because there is a need. There is not some hidden or deeper motive or desire to “do something for Jesus.” The neighbor’s need is sufficient motivation for the action. Thus, sheep (Christians) are not encouraged to serve God, but to serve their neighbor.

7 First, it is good to remember that this counsel is to slaves who might struggle with giving their masters wholehearted service. Paul insists (verse 23) that they should serve with a willing and eager attitude and suggests thinking of Jesus in the spot of their earthly master to help ease the challenge of serving freely and faithfully. Even verse 24 fits the thesis of service to neighbor. Creatures serve their Creator; that is true. Yet, they serve him by doing what he put them on Earth to do . . . and he put humans on earth to be good humans, to serve the rest of creation around them. In other words, to serve God is to serve your neighbor since that is what God desires from you.

8 If everything belongs to God already, then he needs nothing from us. God does not need our good works; our neighbor does. Thus, true service to God is not offering or giving God anything. He does not even need our praise or prayers. He is God, complete and sufficient, in need of nothing from any part of creation. What is right, though, is that creatures praise and thank God—this is something they need

in order to be true creatures. The best service to God is to acknowledge him as God, and not to offer empty works or pale attempts at good deeds. Rather offer your inability and your need; by seeking his aid, he is honored to be the only source of help. Our best praise and worship is not what we put in the plate or sing with our lips; the best worship of God is to confess our need and to seek his aid in our weakness.

9 When it comes to our standing before God, we are completely free and unburdened. Fully justified by God’s grace at work in Christ, we are not bound to fulfill any law or any obligation to experience God’s favor. On the other hand, in this world and as a part of God’s creation, we have work to do; we have responsibilities that must be fulfilled . . . for the sake of the neighbor. From the standpoint of our role in this world, we are not free; our neighbor’s need binds us. What the neighbor needs, we must supply, as we are able. Therefore, Christians live freely justified and under no compulsion, yet fully creatures and so servants to those around them. We live as God created us to live, in service to creatures who are all around us, the ones we encounter in our daily lives.

10 This question is intended to lead to an awareness of the importance of living for the sake of others. Rather than trying to find holy or spiritual work to do, Christians can serve their neighbors by simply doing what needs to be done, and then celebrate that God declares that ordinary, mundane work holy. It bears remembering that the neighbor most in need of your service is likely the one with whom you share a home; our families certainly qualify as neighbors who need what God has equipped us to give. We use our gifts and resources to serve those who need our service: not God, but our fellow creatures.