

SERVED TO SERVE

Mark 10:35-45

We hope the winter is about over since yesterday was officially the first day of spring. But we may still have to face this issue—what an author calls “The Code for Snow Shoveling.”

At any given moment in winter months, there could be a ferocious snow storm blowing through the north United States. The snow stops eventually—hopefully before people run out of bread and milk and eggs--and then people will emerge from their homes and begin the process of clearing the snow from their sidewalks and homes. Are there local social “rules” that assist with snow removal?

Local ordinances aside, snow removal is necessary if you want to leave your home—and help others leave their homes—unless you plan to wait for spring. People may employ shovels or snow blowers and it seems to be common courtesy to help out neighbors in need. That would include the elderly, for example, for whom shoveling could present a health issue, or if you know your neighbors are on an odd shift, or if there is a pregnant mom or parent of young children. These are cases where neighbors might be moved to help each other. But there isn't a hard and fast rule to this. If you don't have a relationship with your neighbors or if there are conflicts with your neighbors, regardless of their situation, you may not be moved to help.

Snow blower owners are in a particularly tough spot. The machine makes relatively easy work of what can be a very labor intensive process. If someone who owns a snow blower sees someone else struggling with a shovel by no means are they *obligated* to help, but it could hurt the sense of community within the neighborhood if they don't. Where do snow blower owners stop, then? How many houses is enough? Do they need to clear driveways AND sidewalks? How do they avoid falling into the pattern of being the savior for their block all the time?

One person I spoke with said he started waiting until he hears the shovels stop. Rather than being the first one out or joining the ranks of shovelers, he attends to the task later in the day, which absolves him of having to clear everyone's sidewalks and driveways. It's come to that because his neighbors expect him to help, and frankly, he's tired. Others report making it more of a community affair. They may borrow the machine once the owner is done and do their own home, passing it along the street in this way (and chipping in for gas to make sure it's available next time). The issue with this, however, is that it's not a community machine, and when it breaks or needs to be replaced, the costs fall to the original owner. Others have gone the route of having a neighborhood owned machine, but this kind of arrangement requires strong community ties. And of course there are people who enjoy being “that” person—the one who does the whole block, and then offers to drive over and help out friends in need.

Voluntary actions that contribute to the well-being of others are not unique to human beings. Known as prosocial behavior, helping, sharing, donating, and cooperating have been found in many social species, including insects, birds, bats, cetaceans, small mammals, and primates. Humans may be unique in the magnitude of help offered because we display a tendency to routinely help others even at great cost to self. This is a nuanced decision. While we may not consciously recognize it, we're likely to help those who can return the favor even if it's not in kind. Our social relationships are built on social debt. Healthy relationships require us to discharge that debt (by helping someone in need) while accepting debt (allowing others to help us).

The one thing people seem to agree on—offline and online—is that if you're relying on a neighbor to help clean your snowy paths, at minimum say thanks.

How much do we help to really help or to help us feel better or less guilty?

Jesus' disciples were climbing over each other to be first in His eyes. We read:

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to [Jesus] and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.

Jesus tells them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them." The Gentiles were dominated by the Romans. The Romans could be brutal in keeping people in control, but their preferred method was patronizing. The Caesars liked to call themselves "Benefactor." The idea was that by providing peace, good roads, aqueducts for water, and other public building projects the people in turn would obey the emperor. It would be like the politician giving the people what they want to get the vote.

But then Jesus says:

But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

He is saying that following Him means no thought of being on the top and patronizing people. We do not give to control others, but truly to serve.

This might seem to jive with our understanding of democracy, the equality of all people, and cooperation. Businesses have found that they work more effectively if everyone has a part in the decisions. But what motivates us to be a part of that? So often it is what I can get out of it. If I help others, they help me. I may shovel so others can shovel for me when I need it. Or it makes me feel better to do it. Or I don't have to feel guilty. Or I don't have to feel that I owe someone else. That's not what Jesus is describing.

To see what Jesus means we have to see Him. We have to see this in His eyes. The Caesar may have been a benefactor to people. But He needed their loyalty to have the power and wealth to benefit him. He lost that when the Germanic barbarians invaded the empire and were not subservient to him. Hitler and Stalin thought of themselves as benefactors. Adolph Hitler gained power over people by the popular will as he was elected leader of Germany. He helped take them from a nation reeling from depression after World War 1 to the most prosperous nation on earth. But he was nothing without their loyalty to him. Joseph Stalin would never have won an election, but people were so afraid of him that they obeyed him. Years later some Russians still long for the stability they had under Stalin. He may have achieved his power by fear, but it still depended on the people fearing him.

But Jesus has no needs from us. Caesar needed the loyalty of people to have all his power. Hitler gained power over people by popular vote, then took over as dictator. Stalin never would have won a true election, but through fear he had power over the people. But both Hitler and Stalin needed the peoples' obedience to get what they wanted. But Jesus doesn't need our praise and glory. He doesn't need us to be subjected to Him like Caesar. He doesn't need to help us to feel better or less guilty. There are absolutely no strings attached to His service to us. There is nothing we can truly give Him in return that He can't get Himself—like trying to buy the gift for someone who has everything.

Yet, Jesus put Himself in service to us—not just scooping a sidewalk or giving us a few minutes of His time. No, He made Himself truly last in service to us. He wasn't removing the snow for the friendly neighbor or the elderly widow. He was doing it for the obnoxious neighbor whose dog messes in our lawn, whose leaves blow in our lawn, who play music too loud, and who never do their own scooping. Jesus went to the cross for those who totally took advantage of Him, the people who He gave life and who took that life and exchanged it for death.

That changes everything. Jesus puts Himself last so we can be first. And as first we too are willing to be last. He served us so we can serve others.

Whether we want to patronize people like the Caesar did to keep them clearly under us or help them so we feel better for not owing them, we seek to be in control of the situation. The desire stands in the way of really serving as Jesus calls us to do. When we seek that control, then we block the forgiveness that God offers us in Jesus. We want to trust in "me," not Him. And what is so ironic about that is when we seek to control, we are really the ones controlled—by our sin.

But Jesus didn't seek that control. As God He had it. He was God almighty not only when He calmed the sea or fed the 5,000, but also when He took abuse, allowed Himself to be taken advantage of, and died on the cross. Yet, instead of trying to be on top of the situation, He placed everything in the hands of His Father. By that He took away the sin that controls us so we can let God be in control and truly serve as Jesus serves us.