

Comedian Jay Leno (**picture**) told of being in a store and making a purchase. The checkout clerk was a tad surly, so he finished his transaction and she didn't say a word. As he picked up his items, he asked, "Aren't you supposed to say, 'Thank You!'" To which, she quipped, "It's on your receipt."

What would we do without volunteers? Imagine how poor our community, and our world would be without volunteers. Yet, how often do we fail to say "**Thank you!**"

Robert Orben (**picture**) said, "*Here's to all volunteers, those dedicated people who believe in all work and no pay.*"

Erma Bombeck (**picture**), "*Volunteers are the only human beings on the face of the earth who reflect this nation's compassion, unselfish caring, patience, and just plain loving one another.*"

But I think Terri Guillemets (**picture**) may have said it best, "*Volunteers wear working boots but leave a trail of angel footsteps.*"

What would we do without volunteers? They coach kids' sports, lead Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, assist with voting, deliver meals, help children in school, volunteer in service clubs, lead FFA, help out in local hospitals. Nationally and internationally there's the Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, Doctors without borders. The list goes on and on and on.

It's a privilege today for us to honor volunteers and say a small thank you. The Bible is a continual history of those who volunteered to serve God. Their lives illustrate some key traits of a good volunteer. Volunteers give and give, expecting little or nothing in return. They live out 1 John 3:8, "*Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*" For the next few moments let's look at some volunteers we find in God's Word.

Volunteers give what they have. We find the record of this in three of the Gospel accounts; Matthew, Mark and Luke. It's what's known as "The Feeding of the Five Thousand." It wouldn't have happened without a little boy giving away his lunch.

Jesus had spent the day teaching and healing, surrounded by a huge gathering of people. As evening approached, Jesus turned to one of his disciples, Philip, and asked, "Where will we get bread to feed these hungry people?" Philip was shocked! Jesus must have known that they didn't have enough money to feed the huge crowd! "It would take more than six months wages to feed this many people," Philip said. But then another disciple, Andrew, said, "Here's a boy with two fish and five loaves of bread. But it's not enough for so many people." But Jesus took the loaves and the fish, thanked God for them, and distributed them to the people. When the meal was over, they gathered up twelve baskets of leftovers. Yes, it was a miracle to feed all of those people. But I want to suggest that it was also a big miracle for a little boy to give away his lunch.

When the little boy shared his lunch, he demonstrated a profound truth—when we offer ourselves and what we have to God, God's power can work through us. The child with two small fish and five round loaves of bread never wondered if his lunch could help Jesus or not. He simply volunteered to give it away. If this kid had held onto his lunch, he'd have been the only one fed. Instead, his generosity made it possible for all to be fed.

Can you imagine how this little guy felt as he watched everyone eat his fish and bread? Imagine him realizing: "That's not my lunch—it's the Lord's!"

That's what a volunteer does. They may not have a lot. Maybe it's an hour or two a week but they give what they have. Maybe it's a few days in the summer that they give to a summer camp or a County Fair. They give what they have.

17th century, Dutch artist, Nicolaes Maes painted a picture entitled *Old Woman at Prayer* (**picture**). It depicts a simple woman sitting alone at her table praying over half a loaf of bread and a small bowl of soup. You can tell from the surroundings she's very poor. Her rough hands reveal the evidence of many years of hard, manual labor. Maes was inspired to paint this after visiting this woman. She invited him to join her for the meager meal. It wasn't much but she gave what she had. She thanked God for the food and then looked up with a smile said, "*All this and Jesus, too!*" Her comment inspired that beautiful painting. It's what a volunteer does. They don't focus on what they don't have. Like the little guy with the lunch, they give what they have.

2. Volunteers offer hospitality. The Gospel accounts indicate that Jesus had no home and with His disciples slept out in the open. In Luke 9:58 Jesus said of Himself, "*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.*" But whenever Jesus was in the village of Bethany, He always had a place to stay.

A woman named, Martha, with her sister, Mary, and brother, Lazarus, welcomed Jesus into their home. Martha was a predecessor of Martha Stewart...she had the gift of hospitality. Luke 10 tells us that she busied herself with the tasks of serving their guest. While we're not told precisely what those tasks are, a good guess is that she began preparing a nice meal.

Romans 12:13 says that we're to "*practice hospitality.*" We're to go after or pursue opportunities to show the love of Christ by welcoming people into our homes or to lunch or over a cup of coffee. Back then, there were few safe inns, so church people would take in traveling Christians into their own homes.

Many volunteers will open their home to a visiting exchange student or a traveling missionary. We seek to be a blessing to someone else but the fact is that we're blessed by the experience and will often form a bond of friendship that can last for a lifetime.

Sadly, hospitality is a dying art. Many are like the man who took his dog to the veterinarian and asked him to cut his tail off completely. "I don't like to do that," said the vet. "And why completely?" "Well," said the dog owner, "my mother-in-law is coming to visit us, and I don't want anything in the house to suggest that she is welcome."

Volunteers welcome others and are willing even to be intruded upon. One of the most effective ways to demonstrate love and God's values is to look for way to welcome others and build bridges of friendship. It all reminds me of the movie, *Christmas Vacation* (picture). The Griswolds have Christmas at their home this year; that means everybody will intrude in some way on their celebration, everyone including cousin Eddie. With his humongous dog, bratty children and smelly motor home, they're all "welcomed" into their home.

3. Volunteers look for ways to help and encourage. There was a great article in "The Atlantic" called *Masters of Love* which is about the importance of kindness in a marriage. According to researchers, kindness and paying positive attention are the most important predictors of whether a marriage will last. Being kind to each other and being a refreshing presence for other people by expressing kindness in tangible, practical ways makes a lasting difference.

Kindness makes life better for everyone. It has an even greater impact on people like Paul who feel abandoned by others. In 2 Timothy 1, the Apostle Paul wrote about a man named, Onesiphorus, verses 16-18: "*May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me— may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that day!—and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus.*"

Stored in a safe place at the Library of Congress is a small blue box. The label reads: "Contents of the President's pockets on the night of April 14, 1865." That was the fateful night on which President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. The box contains five things: (1) *A handkerchief embroidered "A. Lincoln";* (2) *A country boy's pen knife;* (3) *A spectacles case repaired with string;* (4) *A purse containing a \$5 bill—in Confederate money!* (5) *Some old and worn newspaper clippings.* Those clippings are concerned with the great deeds of Abraham Lincoln. One of them reports a speech by John Bright, a British statesman, saying that Abraham Lincoln was one of the greatest men of all time. That's not news for us who live over a century later. We all know Lincoln was a great man, but in 1865, the jury was still out. The nation was divided and Lincoln had fierce critics as he made decisions that he hoped would restore the Union. Remember, Lincoln hadn't read the history books on himself! There is something poignantly pathetic about picturing this lonely figure in the Oval Office reaching into his pocket and spreading out these newspaper clippings as he read and re-read the encouraging words of a man who believed that Lincoln was a great man. It gave him the courage and strength to go on. People, especially leaders, need encouragement!

Shift the scene from the Oval Office of Lincoln to a dungeon in Rome. It's dark and cold. A dim ray of light filters in through the opening at the top. Inside sits an aged, weathered little Jewish man, chained to a guard. It's Paul of Tarsus awaiting execution. Keep in mind that the Apostle Paul didn't know that his life and teachings would radically change the course of world history. All he knew was that the end was near and that many of those whom he had loved and taught were abandoning him like sailors jumping off a sinking ship.

Suddenly, there was a noise above as the guard opened the hatch to his cell. The old man squinted into the light, but couldn't see who was climbing down the ladder to visit him. But he recognized the friendly voice, "Paul, Paul, I've found you at last!" "Onesiphorus! Is that you, my good friend?" The two men embraced warmly in spite of the stench of the prisoner and his squalid cell. Then, *Onesiphorus*, whose name means "*bringing help or profit,*" opened his pouch and gave Paul fresh bread, fruit, cheese and wine. He stayed a long time and came back often, bringing good news of the progress of the gospel across the Roman Empire. Each time he came, Paul was refreshed in body and spirit.

The dictionary defines *encouragement* as "*the action of giving someone support, confidence, or hope. The persuasion to do or to continue something.*" Volunteers are encouragers!

4. Volunteers look for ways to serve, often without being asked. A good volunteer has a servant's heart. Before the cross, John 13 records that "*Jesus...rose from supper. He laid aside His outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around Him.*"

During Jesus' day foot washing was the job of slaves. A master didn't wash the feet of their servants. And feet weren't anything like the primped and pedicured ones we see in fashion magazines or in the summer when ladies wear those special open toe shoes. Back then, people wore sandals and many went without foot wear.

If you've ever worn a pair of sandals for a day in the park or where there was considerable dirt and muck or walked barefoot on a dirt road, you can imagine how dirty their feet were. It wasn't a fun job. Foot washing was an ordeal for a slave. So, why does Jesus take on the role of a slave to His disciples?

Jesus tells us: *"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you."* A good leader is a servant.

If you've attended Grace very long then you know that Corrie ten Boom (**picture**) is one of my heroes. Corrie was a Dutch watchmaker and later a writer who worked with her father and other family members to help Jews escape the Holocaust by hiding them in their home. They were caught, she was arrested and sent to a concentration camp. Her book, *The Hiding Place*, recounts the story of her family's efforts and how Corrie found hope while imprisoned at the concentration camp. It also made her very loved and famous.

On one occasion Corrie was asked if she had a hard time staying humble. This is how she responded: *"When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches and throwing garments on the road and singing praises, do you think that for one moment it even entered the head of that donkey that any of it was for him?"* She smiled and went on, *"If I can be the donkey on which Jesus Christ rides in His glory, I give Him all the praise and all the honour."*

Volunteers know that service often goes unnoticed. It's amazing all that you can get accomplished if you don't care who gets the credit.

Conclusion: Volunteering is a life of sacrifice. One of the most powerful movies of recent years is Steven Spielberg's, *Saving Private Ryan* (**picture**). The movie opens with a harrowingly realistic reenactment of the D-day invasion of Normandy. We see the action through the eyes of Captain John Miller, played by Tom Hanks.

Following D-day, Captain Miller learns that he's to lead a search party to find a certain Private Ryan, whose three brothers have been killed in action. The last living son is to be sent home to his grieving mother.

No sooner do Miller and his party begin their search for Ryan behind German lines than a Pandora's Box of moral questions is opened: *Why are all these men risking their lives to save one man? Don't they have mothers, too? Are they just pawns in some cynical PR maneuver by the Pentagon?*

As first one, and then another and another of the soldiers in the rescue party are killed, the questioning intensifies. After all, just how much is one man's life worth? The answer comes in a stunning scene at the end of the film. It's 50 years later and a now an elderly Private Ryan is visiting the graves of the men who saved him, who literally gave their lives for his.

"I lived my life the best I could," he says to their tombstones. *"I hope in your eyes I've earned what you've done for me."* But we can see that he has gnawing doubts. Obviously distraught, Ryan turns to his wife: *"Tell me I've led a good life,"* he implores. *"Tell me I'm a good man."* *"You are,"* she answers him.

But the answer is not convincing. And how could it be? Behind Ryan's question is the inescapable reality that however good you are and however much you've accomplished, you can never repay such a debt, such sacrifice.

That's a stunning moment in the film, because we, too, think of our debt to those 18-year-old kids who jumped off those landing boats into a hail of bullets. How do we repay such a debt? We have to admit with humility we can't: We can only express our gratitude.

Columnist George Will called the film *"a summons to gratitude"* for the generation that died so we might live.

But there's a parallel to the Gospel here that's so powerful. God Himself gave His Son's life that we might live. How does one repay Him for such a gift? *"Just how much is one man's life worth?"* God the Father said, *"It's worth the life of my Son, Jesus, sacrificed on the Cross for you."* If you had been the only person that had ever lived, Jesus in love would still have gone to the Cross and died for you.

We're coming into the Easter Season when we remember Jesus died to pay the debt for a problem we could never solve – our sin. Jesus is the supreme example of service and sacrifice. He's the greatest volunteer of all eternity.

Salvation and forgiveness is a free gift but the gift must be accepted. That's what that well-known verse in John 3:16 says, *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."*

Jesus volunteered for us so we don't have to and because we couldn't. Salvation from beginning to end is a God-thing. God has done everything necessary for us to go to heaven. He paid for all of our sin. He sent His Son who died on the cross and rose from the dead.

It's a gift but you must accept it. You have to trust in it, rest everything you have on the reality that Jesus Christ is Lord and you'll be saved.

Maybe you're here and you've never asked Jesus to be your Lord and Savior before, I hope and pray that you do that today.