

Servanthood, the way of Christ

Pastor Tim Melton

In Mark 10:35-45 we find this story. James and John, two of Jesus' closest followers, came to Jesus with a special request:

"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And Jesus 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."

What are they saying here? We want to be great. We want the place of honor and glory. We want to be associated with you in such a way that we are recognized and applauded. Just a few verses before, Jesus had foretold his death for the third time and still his disciples were pursuing their own agenda, prestige and glory.

In response to this question we are told that the other ten disciples were indignant, but don't think that the other ten were innocent. One chapter earlier Jesus had confronted all of them for arguing about who was the greatest. They all were in need of Jesus' correction.

Taking this as a teachable moment Jesus called them all together and said this,

"You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 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. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

They all knew that the rulers of the world used power and dominance to get what they wanted. Rulers used others to reach their selfish goals of "greatness". Jesus makes it clear to his followers that the kingdom of God works differently. Whoever would be great, whoever would live a life of significance, must not use others, but serve them instead.

There were six words in the New Testament that could be translated servant. The one that Jesus used here means a simple waiter. One who humbles himself and takes care of others by meeting even the simplest of their needs. At times we are open to attempting great things for God, but here Jesus is calling His followers to serve in the mundane, unknown, behind the scenes type of service.

Jesus then added the word slave to his description of greatness. What a contradiction of terms. To be a servant was humbling enough, but at least you were still your own person. With the use of the word “slave” Christ was telling them that they were not their own. This supports the words of the apostle Paul: *“You are not your own. You have been bought with a price”* (Corinthians 6:20). We now belong to Christ and His, moment by moment, will for our lives. Many only serve when and how they choose, but those who truly have a servant’s heart are even willing to serve when they would rather not, or when it will truly cost them. For they realize that “they are not their own”.

Jesus then continued his teaching by saying anyone who would be great must be a servant and slave of “all”. We are not only to serve those who can somehow benefit us in return. We are not only to serve those who are loving towards us. We are not only to serve those who are of higher status or position than we are. We are to be servants of all. We are to deny self (Matthew 16:24), love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:39), and do unto others as we would have them do unto us (Luke 6:31). This is what it means to be great in the kingdom of God. Our willingness to serve them is to be based on the fact that our needs have been fully met in Christ, so we are now free to meet the needs of others as the Holy Spirit leads.

This was Jesus’ way of life. He “did not come to be served but to serve”. In the same way that a ransom could be paid to free a slave, so Jesus served us by paying our ransom at the cross and buying our freedom from the slavery of sin and death. That is our motivation to serve. We have been loved so completely that we are compelled to do the same.

Jesus, time and again, is found in scripture serving those in need. They were often the very ones who were seen as the castaways of their society (Luke 5:31).

The Apostle Paul sums of the servanthood of Jesus with his words in Philippians 2:3-11:

“³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Each of us has been called to be a servant like Christ. Only Christ can grant us a servant's heart. We must draw near to him. As our needs are met in Christ we no longer have to be consumed with selfish concerns. We no longer have to use others to "meet our needs". We are free to serve others, but it is not natural to us.

We live in a world that has proven to us that it is not trustworthy. We have felt its pain, betrayal, and selfishness. In light of this and the fact that our heart is naturally selfish, we have chosen to hold on tightly to what we have. We hoard our money, guard our hearts, manage our time, and protect ourselves from anything that even begins to make us feel vulnerable or not in control. But God has met our needs so that we can help others.

This is not a call for blind benevolence, or letting others take advantage of us. It is a call for a surrender and a sacrifice that comes out of a heart that is continually filled by the love of God. It is a risk that can be taken because God is our safety net and our firm foundation. God calls us to empty ourselves as He takes full responsibility for keeping us full of what we need most. Peace, love, joy, hope, purpose, and so much more.

Practically speaking it means that our ultimate goal is not caring for ourselves because God is caring for us. We still plan for the future, use our time wisely, and spend money responsibly, but we realize that all we have and all we are belongs to God. We are not owners, we are managers. Since we are God's, everything we have belongs to Him. With this in mind we refuse to hold on too tightly to the things of this world. Instead, we spend ourselves and our resources for the love of God and the love of others. As we delight in God, we allow Him to reorient our priorities to treasure the things that really matter.

We can take this chance of giving ourselves away and serving others because as we seek God first, He has promised to provide everything that we need (Matt. 6:33). God is our Provider, Protector, Refuge, Prince of Peace, Almighty Counselor, and much more. As the Psalmist says "*Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.*" (Psalm 73)

Nancy Ortberg shares a story of how her daughter's concern for the wider church community spoke a word of conviction into Nancy's own heart:

"One evening, my oldest daughter came home from a Sunday evening worship service. She had been deeply affected by the experience and in response had written on a piece of paper, "Help me not to be okay just because everything is okay with me." I was so moved by what she wrote that I tacked that piece of paper up on our corkboard in the kitchen as a reminder that in community it is always *we*. In community, if someone else is not okay, then to some degree, I am not okay."¹

We see examples of this type of desire to help others throughout the scriptures.

Abraham followed God into the unknown so his descendants could be a blessing to the world. Moses returned to Egypt to free the Israelites. David fought Goliath to save the Israelites. Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins. Paul preached the gospel at the risk of his own life for the sake of the

¹ Nancy Ortberg, *Looking for God* (Tyndale, 2008), p. 31

salvation of many. This thinking of “If you are not okay then I am not okay”, is a characteristic of a child of God.

An attitude of taking responsibility for our fellow man should be a trait that all believers possess. It does not just mean meeting physical needs. It means relating personally with those in need and serving them in whatever way is required. We must be ready to die to self, invest in others, and pay the price of true, profound relationships.

The world teaches us to watch out for ourselves, but the ways of Christ call us to something totally different. “If you are not okay, then I am not okay.”

We find it difficult to serve for two reasons. First, because of our selfish, sin nature. Ever since Genesis 3 all mankind has been plagued by sin. Because of this we each think of ourselves and our own desires. We see this selfishness even in the life of an infant. One never has to teach a child to scream “mine!” or to cry when they don’t get what they want. Thinking of ourselves, first, is natural for all of us.

At times it is knowingly neglecting to serve others, but at others times we are so “in our own world” that we are not even aware of the needs of those around us.

The second reason that we find it difficult to serve others is that we are used to trusting in ourselves to meet our own needs. That was not how it was intended to be. God is the one who is supposed to meet our needs, but we sinned. Our sins have separated us from God (Isaiah 59:2). Because we are separated from Him, life has taught us to try to meet our own needs. This, too, also drives us towards watching out for our own needs and neglecting to serve others. We are so focused on our own survival that we are oblivious to the needs of others around us.

In John 13:1-5 we find one of Jesus clearest examples of service:

“It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

² The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. ³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.”

The key to these verses is found in verse three. When Jesus reviews His relationship with God the Father, it then puts him in the right mindset to humble Himself before others and serve them. It is the same with us. When we are reminded of who we are in Christ, we are humbled and strengthened to serve others. We no longer have a need to look good to others or win their approval. We no longer think more highly of ourselves than we ought. We have come face to face with our sin and have been broken, but in Christ we have been forgiven, loved and accepted. The Savior of the world loves us. Because we

already have been given all that we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3-4), we can humble ourselves before others and serve them. We are taken care of so we can now turn our attention towards serving others.

With this in mind it would serve us well if we preach the gospel to ourselves every day. It is in the bad news of our sin and wickedness we are humbled and driven to dependence on God. It is in the good news of God's grace that we are made new in our identity of Christ and enabled to live like the children of God that we truly are.

It has been said that if you want to know if you truly have a servant's heart, observe how you react when someone treats you like a servant. If you rise up in pride or shrink back in embarrassment, then there is still work to be done in gaining a servant's heart. A true servant has laid aside the need to impress others or fight for their own rights. He is fully committed to the good of others.

As we delight in Christ He begins to change the desires and priorities of our lives (Proverbs 37:4). We begin to desire the small acts of service for our family more than our own lazy pleasures. We become willing to help others in need, even though it changes the plan that we had for our day. We become willing to spend money to help others, instead of on our own hobbies, comforts or entertainments. We will be willing to stoop down and humble ourselves in acts of service, even though in the eyes of the world it will be embarrassing. In the eyes of the world we will lose position, but in the eyes of Christ our acts will be truly glorious.

Beware. Service is not just another way to be a more successful Christian or to put yourself in a place where God will bless you more. Choosing the way of service may lose you the promotion or the victory. You may not be able to reach your worldly goals with this technique, but if you desire a life of true significance then this is the way to go about it.

To selflessly serve others it will demand preparation. We must position ourselves to be ready and able to serve others. We must order our finances, so we are able to give to others in need. We must be mature spiritually, so we can minister to others as the Spirit leads. We must be well emotionally, so that we help others even in the midst of their pain and suffering. We must be well physically, so that we can have the strength and stamina to bear the burdens of others. We must order our time, so that we can be free to be with others when they need us most. We must pray for a servant's heart, but we also must position our lives so that we will be able to serve others.

Today, humble yourselves before God. Cry out for a servant's heart. Re-order your life so that you will be ready to serve others and rejoice as you are used as a tool of blessing in the hand of God.

This was the way of Jesus. Selfless. Sacrificial. Humble. Loving. Meeting the needs of others.

People are difficult.

Love them anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

Being honest and real will make you vulnerable.

Be honest and real anyway.

You worked hard to earn the money that you have.	Give some away anyway.
If you help someone, others may demand the same.	Help anyway.
People may hurt you.	Invest in them anyway.
When you are cursed . . .	Bless anyway.
Some people may want to be your enemy.	Love them anyway.
You may be afraid of what your coworker may think.	Share Christ's love with them anyway.
The situation may seem hopeless.	Pray anyway.
When you are persecuted . . .	Stand firm anyway.
When you want to take the credit . . .	Give God the glory anyway.

"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

"And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves."

Amen.