

The True Nature of a Servant

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As you know the theme of our festival this year is servanthood and you've already heard of many ways to be of service as a Christian. I believe we are called to be of service, but when do I know that I've done enough? How much do I need to focus on service every day? When is it okay to have time for myself?

As I prepared for this presentation the words of our theme scripture kept coming to mind again and again, and became the driving force as I was praying for guidance about what to say. Let me read it to you once again:

Philippians 2:3-4 NIV, Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

There are many ways of looking at service, which is right? I think most Christians agree that when we became a Christian we became servants of God. We are called to worship, to spread the gospel, to love God and our neighbors, is this what servanthood means? Just serve God and obey his commands?

Most Christians go to church, some read the Bible, and attend Bible studies. Some teach Sunday school, lead worship experiences, and participate in various aspects of outreach, and I believe that all these are forms of service, but is that all there is?

Most Christians also seek to live an honest life, to treat others fairly, be responsible citizens, and donate to charities. Is that enough now? What about the things I want to do? This seems to be one of the big questions that all Christian eventually ask themselves, how much service is enough?

We have so many examples in Scripture of lives lived in total servitude with apparently no thought to individual needs or concerns. Is that what we are all really called to do? Do any of us here measure up to this standard?

Our greatest example of a life lived in service is the life that Jesus led. Much is written about the last years of Jesus' life, but we really don't know much about his life before the events recorded in Scripture. Scripture tells us that Jesus lived a life free from sin, and this must include his time as a child and a young adult growing up in a family.

How many of us can think of the childhood of anyone we know that was lived without sin? I know I can't and certainly in my own life I can recall many times where the last thing I was thinking about was being of service to God or others. Yet if we are to believe Scripture we must believe that Jesus grew up with such a connection to the divine that even as a young child he sought to serve God by serving others.

We are called to live a Christlike life; can we really do this? Can we really live a life where our own needs and desires are always secondary? I can't find anywhere in Scripture where Christ put himself before the needs of anyone else, but I've never met anyone (including myself) who ever lived this selfless of a life.

So, it was these questions that prompted me to write this presentation. Mostly it was because I really don't know the answers myself and I want to explore it with you. I've read books and listened to many great leaders in the church talk about service and sacrifice, but I'm still left with questions.

I've read the stories of the people who died in service to Christ in the mission fields. Those who gave all their possessions and sacrificed themselves for the sake of the gospel. I've read and I listened, but I don't want to do this, do any of you?

Oh sure, I've sent money to people who do these things, but I honestly haven't even spent a day in a local shelter dishing out food. There are times that I feel like I'm a failure as a Christian because I haven't done all I could.

I've even read many stories of avowed atheists with a totally humanistic belief structure who have done more in service to others than I have. Have we all failed as Christians if we can't engage in this level of service at least part of the time?

I say that I want to be of service, I believe that I want to live my life as Christ lived his, but I also know that I have fallen short of this ideal again and again. I know I am forgiven of my sins, and I believe I am saved by grace through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, but I also believe I should want more than just the assurance of salvation.

These are hard questions to answer, it's common in our world today that we are told to center on ourselves, yet I can find no way of reconciling that ideology with living a life modeled after Christ. I saw a meme not too long ago that really struck a chord within me. Here's how it goes:

Things that Jesus never said:

- "Listen to your heart"
- "Be true to yourself"
- "Trust your gut"
- "Feel good about who you are"
- "Happiness is what matters"
- "Just be a good person"

What Jesus actually said:

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Luke 9:23b

This prompted me to read this passage from Luke in context. This is where Jesus identifies himself as the Messiah and talks about what it means to be one of his disciples. Here are Jesus' words to his disciples from Luke 9:23-26 NIV:

23 Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. 25 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? 26 Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the

Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

This speaks volumes to me of not only Christ's willingness to sacrifice himself for our sins but of his instruction to us that a life lived for him will be a life of sacrifice, a life lived for others. This brought to mind one of my favorite excerpts from the devotional book *"This Day with the Master: 365 Daily Meditations"* written by Dennis Kinlaw.

"Satan disguises submission to himself under the ruse of personal autonomy. He never asks us to become his servants. Never once did the serpent say to Eve, 'I want to be your master.' The shift to commitment is never from Christ to evil; it is always from Christ to self. And instead of his will, self-interest now rules and what I want reigns. And that is the essence of sin."

What does all this mean for us? I know for me it has meant a lifetime balancing my needs, wants and desires, along with the needs, wants and desires of those I love, with the needs, wants and desires of others, some of whom are quite unlovable.

I have certainly gotten the balance wrong on more than one occasion. The Lord is faithful and just and he forgives me, leading me on to greater service, but, as I've asked before, when is it enough?

In writing this and praying for that selfsame leading, I've come to the inescapable conclusion that for me the answer to this question must be "it is never enough".

I've lost track of how many times since I became a Christian that I have said "we are not here for ourselves, we are here to serve others". Another statement that I have made many times is "there is no limit to what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit".

I say it, but do I really live this way? Would others say these words define me? I certainly believe these words and I have seen a lot of evidence that much can be accomplished in life if you aren't seeking rewards. I have done this, which was surely a service to others, but I know I can do more.

Throughout my Christian walk I have believed that a life of service to God is built from the bottom up not the top down. I have felt led throughout most of my adult life that providing service in minor things that seem of little importance adds up to a true lifetime of service.

Each act of service, no matter how small, that is done for the glory of God, done without thought of self, builds to a true crescendo of serving God in all things. This said I believe there is never a time when we can stop looking to be of service.

There is no retirement from service, there is no time off for good behavior and there is always something more that can be done. I also believe that the more we focus on the minor or "micro" acts of service, the more the major or "macro" acts of service will naturally follow.

One caution I discovered about myself on this path was that there were times when I was so involved in church activities or in fulfilling various roles in the ministry that it lessened my awareness of the minor needs all around me. I have also found that there are times when these activities can become a focus on self rather than others.

What does all this say about us? It seems a natural human trait to want recognition for the things we do and to live a comfortable life free from a daily struggle to simply survive. Perhaps these are some of the danger signs. When is it too much recognition? When is life too comfortable?

This is also a balancing act, certainly Christ had to deal with mundane issues throughout his life. What to eat, what to wear, what to focus his attention on. It seems from what little we know that he did not live a life of poverty, that his needs as a child were met and that he was cared for and loved as he grew to adulthood.

I believe there must have been times when Jesus participated in activities purely for the enjoyment of that activity. All this was done throughout a life lived without sin or blame, so I can't believe that there should be no thoughts of our own needs and desires in our lives, but when is it too much, when has it crossed the line?

I believe that this is one of the reasons we have been given the Holy Spirit to indwell us and guide us in our thoughts and actions. It is for this that we should remain prayerful and study the word and hide the word in our hearts. It is for this that I believe we should always ask ourselves if the actions we take or the things we desire would be something we believe Christ would do.

One of my favorite Ray Stevens songs is "Would Jesus Wear a Rolex". It is a whimsical yet poignant cautionary tale not to think too much of ourselves. I certainly understand when Jesus cautions his disciples in Matthew 19:23-24 NIV:

23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Does this mean if you are rich you can't be saved? I don't believe so, just that the more you seek the things of this world, the more you may get distracted from the needs around you. There are many examples of wealthy individuals doing much to alleviate suffering in this world, but even that can become a vehicle for self-glorification.

Through the years I've built a sort of checklist to measure motivation. Call it my "self-o-meter" if you will.

- Do I care who gets the credit?
- Are titles or degrees important to me?
- How appreciative (or even aware) am I when others perform a service for me?
- Do I get angry if someone fails in their service to me?
- Am I focused on appearance (mine or others)?
- Do I acquire possessions intending to draw attention?

- Do I become angry (or even vengeful) when wronged?
- Am I willing to forgive any wrong?
- Do I give anonymously?
- Do I lend without concern for return or repayment?
- How often do I ask myself "How would I feel if this was done to me"?
- Is position or fame important to me?
- Would I give up my seat or place in line or hold a door?
- Have I become angry when driving?
- Do I follow too close or allow cars to merge in front of me when driving?
- Will I pay for someone else's meal (even someone I don't know)?
- Do I play music, watch videos, talk on the phone or engage in other annoying activities around others without thinking of how I'm impacting them?
- Do I ignore my phone (and remove my headset) when talking to others?
- Would I keep money I've found or been overpaid?

This list could, and should go on, although some of these seem pretty trivial don't they? I say this, but is there really any level of self-centered behavior that is okay? I have no illusions I have lived a selfless life, and I am certain there will be times when I will continue exhibiting self-centered thoughts and actions, but I believe that once identified such behavior is worthy of asking for forgiveness and the strength to do better.

It's my prayer that all Christians could aspire to greater service. I think one of the impediments is that we tend to only think of service in the macro ways. Jesus ministered to the multitudes, Mother Teresa and the missionaries of charity, William Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery, Corrie ten Boom hiding Jews during the holocaust, Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement.

How could we possibly achieve such things? It overwhelms us and most of us wouldn't know where to start, so often we don't even try. It's easy to say that all things are possible through Christ, but I don't believe that everyone is called to engage in such macro service.

It is also true that, although there have been notable accomplishments achieved by those in macro service, there have also been spectacular failures of Christians to provide service to others on such a scale that many people have been led astray or turned from faith in Christ as a viable path to follow.

It's unfortunate that all too often the greater the influence we have over others the greater the likelihood that our focus will shift from serving others to serving self. Serving as a minister of the gospel is fraught with dangers as I believe that Satan will make the greatest effort to corrupt those in the ministry.

I'm grateful and thankful for those that stay true to Christ and have been of service to others on such a scale, but most Christians will never serve in this way. The danger to us is believing that this is the true nature of service, that we then relax in our vigilance and let others carry the ball. If I can't achieve great things, it doesn't really matter how little or much I do in "Micro" service for others in my little sphere of influence.

Oh how Satan must love this, he doesn't have to turn us from our faith to achieve his goals, just render us ineffective. This is the reason I look for service opportunities in the little things and ask for guidance to be an effective witness in all that I do. This is especially true when we connect with those we love who know us best.

I recently went on a long trip with my wife and daughter. This trip was the culmination of many years of my wife wishing she could travel to Europe with me resisting all along. I went with them on the trip saying I wanted to support her and that I owed her this after fifty years of marriage.

I said this, but I didn't do this. Despite their efforts to include me in a trip that many would envy, I found fault with almost every aspect of our travels and kept making negative comments for the first half of the trip. I even became angry and vengeful when we were cheated out of money by a taxi driver.

Finally, my daughter called me on my behavior one evening and thank God I listened and rather than becoming angry with her. I became convicted that I had failed to serve those I love most in this life. For the rest of the trip I prayed and asked for the strength to keep my mouth shut if I couldn't find anything positive to say, and yes I believe that sometimes the best way to serve is to keep our mouths shut. At the end of the trip, I told them I was ashamed of my behavior and asked for forgiveness.

You know the funny thing was that when I quit focusing on myself and sought to serve them I actually had a great experience with many wonderful memories, and as for the taxi driver? Well, I had to ask God for forgiveness for my anger and vengeful response and the strength to forgive him and pray for him as well.

I found I could serve even the taxi driver by praying for him and forgiving him. Prayer is one of the most common ways we can serve. How often do we tell someone we'll pray for them and then don't do it? All too often we say we will pray with the intent to provide comfort but then don't really follow through. I want to do better here as well. If I say it, I want to do it every time without fail, and not only when I go down the prayer list each day, but also every time they come to mind.

You see? Service is not necessarily the big things we all think of when the subject comes up. The vast majority of Christians have and will live their lives with little notoriety but that doesn't mean you can't serve. I believe that the greatest opportunities for service present themselves as small acts, the "Micro" acts of service.

Micro service is sometimes just a smile and a willingness to help—even when you'd rather keep watching that program or reading that book. Sometimes it is simple empathy for the hurt someone else is feeling. Micro service may be ensuring that you don't idolize any Christians for their accomplishments.

For me loving God is easy but love my neighbor as myself? That's the commandment and the expectation, but as you can see I didn't even hit that bar with the people I hold most dear. I'd give my life for them, but will I give them my service in all things?

How can I be of more service? By realizing that service as practiced by Jesus is not just about grand gestures or impacting thousands at a time. Every moment I draw breath is an opportunity for service, in the way I think, in every word I say, till it's the most defining thing about me.

But, other than scriptural mandate, why would I want this? There are things I enjoy doing and if all I do is look for service opportunities how can I ever find happiness in just doing something for myself? Some believe that service at this level would become a drudgery, can't I ever just have fun?

I don't believe that the two are mutually exclusive, that is what Satan would have us believe, and it takes us back to centering on self. There are many things I enjoy doing that none the less present opportunities to be of service. I don't think it has to be on our mind every minute, trust in the spirit to lead you and make you aware of those times.

I want this because I have found greater joy and happiness in all things if I can be used by God in some way in whatever I'm doing. One of the most significant services we can render is ensuring what others see in us matches up with the things we say and that they point the way to a relationship with Christ.

Every expression on my face or gesture I make can send a message of service or a message of indifference. Everything about us should say that we are something unusual, that we have access to strength and joy that passes all understanding and that we want to share it through acts of service. Even more so when it's not expected, and no one is even aware that a service was rendered.

Service from the bottom up, like a glass filling with water, micro act by micro act. Will we be content to only wet the bottom? Or will we keep pouring until the glass overflows? I don't believe there is any activity we can engage in that won't present an opportunity for service if we look for it, if we pray for it.

For me, my prayer is that being of service to God and to those around me will become the steady state, the default setting. It really is not about what we want. We were not created to focus on self and fulfilling our own desires. The truth I have found in this journey is that the greatest joy and fulfillment in life comes from serving others.

So, as I bring this to a close I return to my questions. When is it enough? Can we live a life like Christ led his? Can I serve in a meaningful way? I've already answered that I don't believe our service will ever be enough, and I must add that I don't believe it will ever be often enough within that parameter. All we can do is continually ask God to always use us as he sees fit to the glory of his kingdom.

But will our service be meaningful? I believe that any service freely given to another, with no expectation of recognition or reward, and with the full acknowledgement that our desire to be of service comes not from ourselves but from the power and love of Christ that flows through us, will be meaningful and make an eternal difference in our lives and the lives of those around us.

To me, this is the true nature of a servant.

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