

STUDY 8

The True Servants

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THE TRUE SERVANT

Mark 10:35–45 and John 13:1–17

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).¹

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet . . . (John 13:3–5).

In these two verses the 'awesome' glory of God is clearly revealed! Jesus the Son who is perfectly one with the Father tells that he came not to be served but to serve. He displays this servanthood by washing the disciples' feet and ultimately through laying down his life for many. This shows the incredible holiness of God. He is totally set apart from and contrary to the flesh, the world and the devil. Whilst those in every way seek to self-justify and self-glorify, we see the Son of the Most High God, humbling himself to become a servant!

This servanthood of Christ, however, must not be seen as an upturning of the nature of God, nor an emptying of his glorious divinity. Actually it is the very nature of God Himself. The glory of God is unveiled in Jesus and we see the servant. This is not God simply serving humanity to bring redemption, it is God being God.

We see Jesus at the Last Supper under great pressure and at the hour of his greatest need, serving his disciples and teaching them. He is, as is his Father, other-person centred; he is pure love and grace; he is the great servant. This is no character flaw or weakness, but is rather the truth of humanity. Jesus is living in the reality of Godhood, not simply in obedience to the Father but in perfect accord with the Father. As the Father loves and serves, so does the Son (and the Spirit for that matter), and here we see the awesomeness of our God!

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New International Version.

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Jesus serves his sheep by laying down his life, by becoming a sheep and giving his very life as a ransom for his sheep. This ‘ransom for many’ must be seen in light of the particular meaning of the Greek expression:

<i>Kai</i>	<i>dounai</i>	<i>ten</i>	<i>psychen</i>	<i>autou</i>	<i>lutron</i>	<i>anti</i>	<i>pollon</i>
and	gave	the	life	of Him	a ransom	in place of	many

The Greek word *anti* is understood to mean ‘in place of’, or ‘a substitution for’. It is particularly used in reference to the substitutionary atonement within the temple worship.² This ‘substitute’ comes not as a means of appeasing God’s wrath, but as a gift from God displaying His grace and therefore His service to and for the worshippers. (His life is the price paid not only for the redemption of many, but is nothing less than a stepping into their places, enduring the divine wrath to make propitiation.) Thus we see Jesus laying down his life in service, but this is in the full context of the service of the Godhead.

God is the God who serves, which is His very nature. And thus true man (as Jesus alone is), created in His image, will serve as He does. The fall of mankind has spoiled this true image. Man no longer seeks to live in conformity with the likeness of the Son (with his own true nature), but rather seeks to ‘serve himself’ as if that were some sort of creation mandate:

They have developed certain attitudes to life, to the world about them, and to their fellow creatures. These attitudes are for the most part self-preserving, self-extending and self-insistent. For this reason we serve ourselves before we serve others. To put others before ourselves seems an incredible idea.

For Christ it was not incredible. The nature of God is to consider the fallen human race before Himself. The Son relinquished his prerogatives and privileges of Deity in order to serve man by redeeming him. Nor was he in any way humiliated by what he did. In fact he wished to do so, and greatly loved the doing of this liberating task. He thus expressed the true nature of Godhead. In fact—strange as it may seem—he thus expressed the true nature of manhood—the image of God.³

So we see that God Himself is the ‘True Servant’ and to live in His image is to serve. The fall has ‘reversed’ this image, but by his act of redemption, Jesus has given regeneration to the fallen ones that they might now be conformed to the image of the Son. Thus they now become the true servants, all through the service of God. The Christian is now free to serve.

FREE TO SERVE

Martin Luther says of the freedom of a Christian, ‘A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.’⁴ A Christian, having been justified by faith alone is a perfectly free lord of all, not needing to submit to anyone. And yet, that Christian lives a life of freedom which is naturally lived out in service and submission. The Christian loves others, and ‘Love

² D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1996), pp. 365–7 has an excellent discussion regarding the substitutionary nature of ‘*anti*’.

³ G. C. Bingham, *The Sons of God Are the Servants of All*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1982, p. 121.

⁴ Martin Luther, ‘The Freedom of a Christian’, in *Three Treatises* (Fortress Pr., USA, 1970), p. 277.

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by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved'.⁵ Thus to truly serve is to love. John tells us that, 'We love because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19). This must mean that the one who has known the love of God will be the true lover and the true servant.

True servanthood is not merely the actions of a group of highly motivated like-minded people. The true servants are intimately linked with Jesus who perfectly loves and serves, and as we shall see, the whole Godhead serves all humanity (especially the redeemed) from His glorious nature!

Thus being a true servant is not simply a matter of commitment or vocation, but of the essence of being.

VARIETIES OF SERVICE—ONE ESSENCE

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men (1 Cor 12:4–6).

Paul shows that there is diversity among Christians. There are varieties of gifts, varieties of service, and varieties of workings. These varieties are in unity under the confession that 'Jesus is Lord' (1 Cor. 12:3), and they occur under the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God who works all of them in all men. Unity in the Spirit does not mean uniformity.

The gifts (*charismaton*), services (*diakonon*), and workings (*energmaton*) are to be taken as parallel (but not synonymous), and describe the full range of what Paul (in v. 7) calls 'the manifestation of the Spirit'.⁶ All things (gifts, services and workings) done in the church are ultimately effected by the powerful working of God. Thus the true servants display a variety of manifestations of the Spirit and these are all of one essence, flowing from the Godhead.

The varieties of service are seen as the outworking of the body of Christ (of which he is the head), and they are therefore always for the common good within this body (1 Cor. 12:6–7). 'The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body' (1 Cor. 12:12–13). In saying, 'So it is with Christ', Paul is saying that the church is Christ in his members.⁷

TRUE MINISTRY IN ACCORD WITH THE GOOD SHEPHERD

It is clear that the true ministries of the church are those in accord with the ministry of the Good Shepherd. Jesus leads the sheep in his paths; they are his body, and the body will naturally do as the Head leads and directs. If the church's ministries were not in accord with the Good Shepherd then they could not be called 'true ministries'. '“Woe

⁵ Luther, 'The Freedom of a Christian', p. 278.

⁶ G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987, pp. 586–8. This tends to flatten out distinctions between 'charismatic' gifts and 'non-charismatic' gifts in the modern sense of those terms.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, tr. H. Beveridge, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1989, book 4, ch. 17, p. 575.

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to the obstinate children,” declares the LORD, “to those who carry out plans that are not mine” (Isa. 30:1). The church must look to the Good Shepherd who is leading her, and seek to live in conformity with his purpose.

This purpose, however, is not simply a job description with a plan for the church to work through. The church, as the sons of the Father, is at the heart of His will. ‘The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed’ (Rom. 8:19). The sons joining in the ministry of the Good Shepherd is their purpose, and not a means to an end. Thus as the sons minister/serve, as the sons display the manifestation of the Spirit in the variety of the body, they live in their own true nature. Their service is in essence a ‘shared sonship’ under the Father, and not just a collection of individuals working for God. It is the body of Christ, harmoniously ordered by the Spirit, participating in God’s plan and purpose in all things.⁸

THE CHURCH’S SERVICE AND THE SERVING SON OF MAN

The term ‘service’ or ‘ministry’ (*diakonia*) applies to the whole church, and is by no means confined to elders or pastors. To minister is to serve. If we speak of ‘my ministry’, we must be speaking of ‘my service’, and not something which glorifies the one who has a ministry! Jesus said:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all (Mark 10:42–44).

True authority is exercised in true service for the good of those under that authority:

To wish to have the place of authority may be all right [1 Tim. 3:1], if it is for exercising it for the purpose for which authority is ordained, i.e. to serve others. If it is only to lord it over men, then it is a Gentile way, if to serve, then the Kingdom way.⁹

It is easy for us to agree with this, not realising that it is a complete upturning of the sinful nature, the world and the devil in every aspect. All of these seek authority for self-glory (and even the deceitful sinful heart seeks to serve to gain its own glory). None of this evil upsets the fact that ‘shared sonship’ is both creational and has been restored through redemption. The sons will serve just as does the Son.

The nature of the Son is to serve, just as the very glorious nature of God is to serve. Mark continues, ‘For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45). The lordship of Christ is with the view to serving. It is not that the Lord also serves, but that his suffering is his lordship which is his service.¹⁰ Jesus in giving his life for many was not stepping down from, or laying aside his lordship, but rather displaying it. His humility and obedience to death were not void of his glory, but they were his glory (John 17:1–5)! The fact that his service caused him to be exalted to the highest place was not his motive, but rather the basis and foundation of his glory (Phil. 2:6–11).

⁸ See G. C. Bingham, *I Love the Father* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1974), p. 115.

⁹ G. C. Bingham, *St. Mark: A Commentary*, NCPI, Blackwood, n.d., p. 65.

¹⁰ I. Pennicook, *The Coming King*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2005, p. 71.

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As the Son of Man is glorified in his servanthood, we see that the Shepherd gives gifts (of serving) to true servants to exercise within the church. The Father honours them as they serve Jesus, and so they are glorified as is the Son (John 12:25–28).

The church's service follows the example of the Son of Man, and in fact, the church's service is a participation in the very divine nature:

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them (John 13:14–17).

Jesus is the example, but he is also the giver of gifts which always accord with his service as the Son of Man. Luther says:

This is a truly Christian life. Here faith is truly active through love (Gal 5:6), that is, it finds expression in works of the freest service, cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself he is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of his faith . . .

So a Christian, like Christ his head, is filled and made rich by faith and should be content with this form of God which he has obtained by faith . . .¹¹

It is interesting to notice that the service that Jesus speaks of in Mark 10 and John 13 both speak against the human ego. In Mark 10, James and John had requested to sit at Jesus' right hand. They are seeking glory, without the comprehension that true glory is found in the baptism of suffering.

In John 13 we see that for the true servant, no task is too demeaning. The sons of Adam feel demeaned by a lowly task, and feel put down when asked. They have visions of a 'glorious ministry'.

Into this the Son of Man speaks of the glory of serving, and that it is his very purpose and life. As the church joins in the gifts of the Good Shepherd, they find joy in service, and are not demeaned by the lowliest of tasks. They are not about defending their status or building their reputation. They know that true ministries are in perfect accord with the serving seen in God. As the children of God minister in accord with God's service, they actually bear the image of God:

The higher you give service to others, the higher you give to yourself. To do this is to love truly, and so to fulfil oneself! This, in fact, is how God is, and so how we are. He is the reality; we are the image. Yet to be the image is also to have reality as a human person. In fact this is the reality. To deny what we are is to deny ourselves. That is, not to serve others is to unserve ourselves. This is why on the one hand love must be wholly unconscious, and on the other hand quite conscious. There is no contradiction here. If we love in order to fulfil an obligation we may well miss actually loving the person. On the other hand we must be on the alert against deliberately not loving. We must deliberately love. After all, it is a command!¹²

As with Jesus, the church's service is not a setting aside of glory, but a partaking in it!

¹¹ Luther, 'The Freedom of a Christian', pp. 302, 303.

¹² G. C. Bingham, *The Sons of God Are the Servants of All*, p. 97.

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GOD IN SERVING ACTION

God is seen in his serving action: (a) within the Godhead; (b) in his serving of humanity; and especially (c) in his serving of the redeemed.

Within the Godhead

In previous studies on the subject of *perichoresis* we have seen the ‘other-person centred’ nature within the threeness of the unity of God. The relationships within the Trinity are a personal union of mutual inter-dwelling. This means that each member of the Trinity is involved *in* the others (John 17:20–23). The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct, but only exist in the *perichoresis*, which is an ‘interanimation’ or circle of mutual giving and receiving in the communion of love. ‘Thus with each person of the Godhead inter-dwelling the other, each gives to the other, honours the other, serves the other, and receives love, honour and service from the other.’¹³ God therefore is seen in His serving action within His very being.

The Father puts everything into the Son’s hands, and through this trust, He thus empowers the Son. The Son obeys the Father and is thus empowered even more. But the Son gives all glory back to the Father (John 12:27–28; 17:1–5). In the end, the Son will give everything back to the Father and make himself subject to Him (1 Cor. 15:27–28). This is the glory of the humility, submission and service within the Godhead (and stands in stark contradiction to the devil and the flesh who, when they see glory grasp it to themselves rather than seeing the true glory of service).

In His Serving of Humanity

We see the heart of God’s service for humanity in the sacrifice and redemption wrought at the cross. Here the whole Godhead serves humanity.

We see the Father serving humanity as He gives his only Son out of his love (John 3:16). The Father gives up His own Son in the sacrifice of the cross as His act of service (See Rom. 8:32; 5:8). It is the Father who sets Jesus forth as a propitiation (Rom. 3:25; 1 John 4:10). The Father is the initiator of the sacrifice (and this is in perfect accord with Lev. 17:11), and thus although Jesus became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13), it is the Father who made him to be a curse as He made him to be sin (2 Cor. 5:21).

We see the Son serving humanity as he gives himself up for them. Paul says, ‘the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal. 2:20). Similarly we see that he laid down his life for us; he gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age; he gave himself as a ransom; and he became a curse for us (John 15:13; Gal. 1:4; 1 Tim. 2:5–6; Gal. 3:13).

We see the Spirit serving humanity through redemption, as it is through the Holy Spirit that Christ gives himself up for them:

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Heb. 9:14).

¹³ (Eph. 1:17; John 5:22, 26–27; 13:3; 14:13; 17:1–5, 22, 24; 18:37; 1 Pet. 4:14; 2 Pet. 1:16–19; Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15). Deane Meatheringham, study 2 of 1991 NCTM Pastors’ School, p. 4.

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The whole Godhead has served all of humanity (1 John. 4:10) through bringing the great and decisive act of redemption at the cross.¹⁴ (God also continues to serve all of humanity through upholding and sustaining them Matt. 5:45).

In His Serving of the Redeemed

He continues to serve and fill His church in every way!

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills everything in every way (Eph. 1:22–23).

The redeemed are the true servants, living under and with His authority and exercising His gifts of service, for through service they are in one accord with God in all His glory.

¹⁴ G. Bingham, study 15, 2000 NCTM Pastors' School morning session, pp. 94–5.