

Special Section: Love: The Most Excellent Way

Loving By Serving

“Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant,” said Jesus, the greatest of servants. How can you express Christ’s love through service?

By Jerry Bridges

THE LATE DAWSON TROTMAN, founder of The Navigators, was visiting Taiwan on one of his overseas trips. During the visit he hiked with a Taiwanese pastor back into one of the mountain villages to meet with some of the national Christians. The roads and trails were wet, and their shoes became very muddy. Later, someone asked this Taiwanese pastor what he remembered most about Dawson Trotman. Without hesitation the man replied, “He cleaned my shoes.”

How surprised this humble national pastor must have been to arise the next morning and to realize that the Christian leader from America had arisen before him and cleaned the mud from his shoes. Such a spirit of servanthood marked Dawson Trotman throughout his Christian life. He died as he lived, actually giving his life to rescue someone else from drowning.

LOVE, FELLOWSHIP, AND SHARING

One of the plainest expressions of love in Scripture is fellowship—*sharing* with others. One of the most valuable things we can share is ourselves: our time, our talents, our energies in serving others in the Body of Christ. Dawson Trotman was a master at spiritual fellowship, but he also knew how to share himself in serving others.

The greatest example and teacher of servanthood was of course the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul said of Him that He took “the very nature of a servant” (Phil. 2:7), and Jesus said of Himself that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

Although Jesus’ entire life was one of service, the most notable example of His servanthood was that of washing His disciples’ feet on the evening of His betrayal, recorded for us in John 13:1–17. The instance was notable both because of the setting and because of the mundaneness of His service.

Jesus of course knew that it was the night of His betrayal and that the very next morning He would suffer on a cross for the sins of the world. He would, from our viewpoint, have had every reason to be preoccupied with His imminent sufferings. Yet Jesus took time to tend to a duty—that of washing the feet of guests—that was usually left to the lowest servant in a man’s household. He did this under full awareness of His own Divine dignity. John says of Him, “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, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him” (John 13:3–5)

It was not in spite of His greatness but because of His greatness that Jesus served His disciples on that evening. Through His own attitude toward servanthood He taught us that true greatness in the Kingdom of God consists not in position or authority but in serving one another.

If we are to master the scriptural principles of true biblical fellowship, we must master this one: *true greatness in the Kingdom of heaven consists in serving one another*. Jesus said, “. . . whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:26).

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power. Jesus recognized that He was the sovereign God, that He was both Creator and sustainer of the universe. His Incarnation and humiliation did not alter the fact that He was the eternal God the Son. And in full knowledge of who He was and the authority that was His, He arose from the table and began to wash the feet of the disciples. In the mind of Jesus, acts of mundane service were not inconsistent with authority and greatness but rather part of it.

WHAT IS GREATNESS?

Jesus’ concept of greatness—and obviously His is the correct one—is so contrary to the world’s sense of values that even we Christians have difficulty grasping it. Even the disciples vied among themselves for position rather than for the privilege of serving one another. The mother of James and John asked Jesus that her two sons might sit, one at His right hand and one at His left, in His Kingdom. And on that memorable evening of the Last Supper, the disciples were disputing among themselves who was greatest. Their action may seem crass to us today, but essentially we are no different. Our actions may be more subtle and refined, but our attitude too often is one of striving for position rather than the privilege of serving one another.

Competition has no place in the fellowship of believers. Rather we are to honor one another above ourselves. Serving one another within the Body is a very practical and concrete way to honor one another. By serving I simply mean *doing helpful deeds for one another*. Jesus washed His disciples’ feet. Dawson Trotman cleaned a national pastor’s shoes. Paul, shipwrecked on the island of Malta, gathered a pile of brushwood to put on the fire built for his fellow passengers. Each of these acts was incredibly simple and mundane in and of itself. But this is what servanthood within the fellowship of believers is all about: being alert to the little things that need to be done, and doing them.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SERVANT

One of the beauties of servanthood is that it requires no special talent or special gifts. Of course, we are to use our spiritual gifts to serve one another. And if God has given us certain natural abilities, we also want to be good stewards of those abilities to serve others in the Body. But it requires no spiritual gift or talent to wash feet, clean shoes, or gather firewood. All that is required is a servant’s attitude.

A well-known Bible teacher once spoke to a men’s group at a church in the Washington, D.C., area. Afterward he noticed a man who stayed behind to remove and stack the chairs. Upon inquiring he learned that the man stacking the chairs was a busy United States Senator. It did not take any talent or ability usually associated with being a Senator to stack chairs. But it did take the attitude of a servant.

The Greater Serves the Lesser

No one ever gets to a place within society as a whole or the Body of Christ in particular where he or she is too important to serve others in the ordinary tasks of life. In fact, *one of the chief characteristics of a servant is that he serves downward, that is, to those who by the*

world's standards are beneath him in position or station in life. It is relatively easy to serve those above us. Even the world expects this. But Jesus served downward. Quite apart from His deity, He was, on a strictly human plane, the leader of that band of twelve apostles. He could have asked one of the disciples to wash all their feet but He chose to do it Himself.

Jesus recognized that in the world, the lesser serves the greater. At one time He said, "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27). But though this may be true in the world, in the Body of Christ it is to be different. Again Jesus said, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15).

Solomon's son, King Rehoboam, did not learn the lesson of serving downward. Shortly after ascending the throne of Israel he was approached by some of the people, asking that the heavy yoke of taxation and forced labor be lightened. Upon consulting the elders who had advised his father, Rehoboam was told, "If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants" (1 Kings 12:7). Rehoboam, however, did not listen; he did not learn to serve downward. As a result he lost ten of the twelve tribes from his kingdom and created an irreparable separation within the nation of God's people.

Recently I learned of the owner of a large and successful car dealership who has learned to serve downward. When asked on a radio interview what his number one priority was in running his business, he said it was to serve his employees. What a surprising answer! We would not have been surprised at an answer such as, "To serve my customers." Everyone would say that. After all, that is the way to maximize profits and, besides, it sounds very noble—or pious if one happens to be a Christian. But this man runs his business to serve his employees. He believes his first priority is to provide for his employees a decent and fair place in which to work and earn their livelihood. He has learned to serve downward.

As I have studied the subject of servanthood in the Bible I am struck by a number of instances where the servant was in a position, from the world's point of view, above those he served. Paul, for example, said, "You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs *and the needs of my companions*" (Acts 20:34). We would expect Paul's companions—actually those he was training in the ministry—to care for his needs. But Paul was a servant. He supplied their needs.

Seeing Needs

Serving others usually requires no special talent or ability. It does take a servant attitude to want to serve others and an observant eye to see what needs to be done. If we have the servant attitude, we can develop an observant eye. The reason most of us do not see the opportunities to serve is that we are continually thinking about ourselves instead of others. We have not learned that we are to look not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others (Phil. 2:4).

Of course, God must give us a servant attitude. We cannot change our hearts. But we can do those things which God ordinarily uses to change us. He uses the Scripture, prayer, and obedience. So we must fill our minds with the Scriptures that teach servanthood, many of them cited in this article. We must pray earnestly for God to give us the heart of a servant, and then we must obey. That is, we must respond to every opportunity to serve which He places before us. We cannot pick and choose our occasions of serving others if we want God to give us a servant's heart. *He changes us in the midst of obedience.*

Serving Faithfully

As important as it is to serve downward, however, we must not think of that as the only opportunity to serve one another. Most of us find ourselves in positions, even in the Body of Christ, where we are under the authority or supervision of another. The Sunday school teacher

reports to his or her superintendent, the missionary to his field director, the choir member is under the authority of the choir director at least for a limited time. Some of these situations are voluntary while others, as in the case of the missionary, are vocational assignments. In either case, however, the common denominator is carrying out the instructions or directions of someone over us.

As we serve those whom God has placed over us in the Body of Christ, the most important character trait is that of faithfulness or trustworthiness. Can the person over us count on us to do the job which we have been given to do? Or will we through a lack of commitment to the task fail to fulfill our responsibility? Few things are more distressing to one in a position of responsibility for the work of others than to not be able to count on someone to do his job. As Solomon observed in such a picturesque fashion, "Like a bad tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in times of trouble" (Proverbs 25:19). My observation over years of serving in both a Christian organization and a local church is that the lack of a serious commitment to faithfulness in assigned or agreed on tasks is a major problem among Christians. We somehow feel that since we are serving in a voluntary capacity, commitment to faithfulness is not important. But God is the One who requires that we be faithful.

Writing under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, Paul said, "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2), and Jesus said, "And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?" (Luke 16:12). Whether our responsibilities to serve have been given to us directly from God, or through someone over us in our church or Christian organization does not matter. In either case God requires that we be faithful in carrying out our assigned or accepted responsibilities.

CHALLENGES OF A SERVANT

It is not easy to be a servant to others in the Body of Christ, regardless whether we are serving upward or downward or simply serving our neighbor or friend. As someone once observed, the true test of whether we are servants is that we don't mind being treated like servants!

Jesus describes the challenges facing those who have set themselves to be servants:

Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, "Come along now and sit down to eat"? Would he not rather say, "Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink"? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty." (Luke 17:7-10)

Such an attitude toward a servant may sound heartless and perhaps even cruel to us today, but apparently it was a typical attitude in the days of Jesus. Unfortunately some of this attitude exists within the Body of Christ today—not deliberately, perhaps, but nevertheless just as real and challenging to those who would be servants.

Observe the *inconsiderateness* of the master in Luke 17:7-8. The servant has worked all day and is obviously tired and hungry. Yet before he can rest and eat, he must prepare and serve the master's meal. A lack of consideration toward those serving is too often evident within the Body. Many Christians are still self-centered. They are thoughtless and impatient. They make demands or create extra work for others. They don't clean up after themselves when they have a class party in the church social room. They fail to plan ahead and then they need something done

“right now.”

Mothers, even in Christian homes, are especially susceptible to inconsiderateness. The athletic uniform, dropped in the bedroom three days ago, suddenly needs to be washed immediately. Dad is late for dinner and doesn't call. Toys, games, and various articles of clothing are scattered around the house for Mom to pick up. Never mind how it should be. This is too often the way it is. Mom is a servant and the rest of the family are often inconsiderate.

We tend to resent these inconsiderate actions of others, but if we want to be true servants we must learn to bear with them. Quite apart from what a child or husband or Sunday school class needs to learn about being considerate, if we are to be servants within the Body, we must learn to accept the inconsiderateness of others.

Then observe the *ingratitude* of the master Jesus described. “Would he thank that servant because he did what he was told to do?” Suppose the athletic uniform is washed on time, the dinner is kept hot, waiting for Dad's late arrival. All the miscellaneous items dropped around the house are picked up and put in their proper place. Does Mom get thanked? Too often not. After all, that's what moms are supposed to do.

How about the Sunday school teacher who shows up with a well-prepared lesson Sunday after Sunday? Does anyone ever think to thank her for her faithful service? Or consider the person who works many hours behind the scenes to handle the administrative and logistical details for a weekend retreat or conference. How seldom is that person's labor adequately acknowledged! *Yes, if we are to accept the challenge of being servants, we must be prepared to accept ingratitude; to accept being taken for granted by thoughtless members of the Body of Christ.* But Jesus does not stop with our acceptance of inconsiderateness and ingratitude. He presses home the role of a servant even more. When we have done our job as a servant and have borne up under inconsiderateness and ingratitude we are not to congratulate ourselves for our heroic role. Rather we are to humbly say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.”

If we aspire to be servants we must accept the role of a servant. This is the toughest of all the demands of servanthood. We must accept the fact that God, in calling us to be servants, calls us to accept inconsiderateness and ingratitude as a normal part of our lives. When we have endured the inconsiderateness and overlooked the ingratitude we are simply to say, “I have only done my duty; I have only done what God has called me to do.”

Quite obviously I have painted a rather dark picture of the Body of Christ in its treatment of servants. Happily, considerateness and gratitude are shown much of the time. The fact is, all of us are constantly changing roles from serving to being served. When we are being served, we need to be sensitive to the demands we make and careful to express gratitude when someone else serves us. But when we are serving, we need to accept our role and serve as unto the Lord, whether or not considerateness and gratitude are shown.

THE REWARD OF SERVANTHOOD

One of the most intriguing verses in all the Bible to me is Luke 12:37. In that passage Jesus says, “It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.”

The context of this verse is the return of the Son of God for His own (see Luke 12:40). Jesus appears to be telling us that in some way He will serve His faithful servants when He comes. As New Testament commentator William Hendricksen said, “What is promised here, therefore, is that our Lord, at His second coming, will, in a manner consonant with His glory and majesty,

‘wait on’ His faithful servants.”¹

It is obvious then that the servant spirit of Jesus did not exist only during His human life on earth. At His return He will serve us. The infinitely Greater One will serve the lesser ones. Servanthood is part of the eternal character of God. The reward of servanthood is to be like our master for all of eternity.

Suggested reading: Gary Collins, *How to be a People Helper* (Vision House, 1976); Gene A. Getz, *Building Up One Another* (SP Publications/Victor Books, 1977); J. Gregory Mantle, *Beyond Humiliation* (Bethany Fellowship, 1975); Andrew Murray, *Humility—The Beauty of Holiness* (Christian Literature Crusade, no date); Charles H. Spurgeon, *Counsel for Christian Workers* (Baker, 1976); Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion—The Cult of Self-worship* (Eerdmans, 1977).

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: How Can I Serve Others?*

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On Your Own How Can I Serve Others?

We can't argue with the Bible's requirement that Christians be serving others. But often we fail to serve anyway. Ask God to keep your eyes open today and tomorrow for special ways to serve others. As you think of them, list them here, then do them. Later think about the effects of your service in your life and the lives of those you served; write about those effects in your daily journal or diary or in another handy place.