

## Servanthood

I don't think anyone will disagree with me when I say that Jesus should be our example in everything. Jesus should be our example in the way we behave, in the way we talk, in the way we think, in the way we inter-act with each other. That said there is one area in particular in which Jesus serves as our example, that of servant hood. The entire story of the life of Jesus is the story of a servant. We read this morning, "Look at my servant, whom I strengthen. He is my chosen one, who pleases me. I have put my Spirit upon him. He will bring justice to the nations." (Isaiah 42:1 NLT) and later on Isaiah will write "When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied. And because of his experience, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins." (Isaiah 53:11 NLT)

Most of us have found out, at one time or another, that we live in a world which values position, money and influence above other things, a world in which the position of a servant is considered a lowly occupation. But we serve a God who turns the standards of the world on their head. In the kingdom of God the role of the servant is the highest position there is, it is the key to greatness, and one we should all aspire to attain.

In the gospel of Matthew, when the disciples were angry because the mother of John and James had asked for a special place for her sons we read, "But Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve others, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:25-28 NLT)

When Jesus came to earth, when Jesus came to serve, when Jesus came to save, He did not do anything by halves, He committed Himself fully to us and to our cause and to our salvation. So if we really want to serve, we can't do it by halves either, we can't do it by playing at it, we need aspire to attain the position of a servant which Jesus assumed. And as we aspire to that position there are two aspects which we need to consider. One involves serving the Lord and the other involves serving each other. I am sure that some here feel they are good at serving the Lord but have a problem serving one another. Because when we look at each other we see each other's faults, we see the speck in our brother's eye and that hinders our serving them. I'm sorry to have to tell you that both are part and parcel of the job. There is no doubt that we have to serve The Lord, supremely, above anything else, but we are also called to serve one another. Paul writing to the Galatians said "For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love." (Galatians 5:13 NLT) We are called to serve Jesus, as our master and we are also to serve each other in love and mutual submission. This is part and parcel of the Lord's command to love God above all else and to love our neighbour as our self.

Before we go any further with this we need to realise what the position and the relationship of a servant in the Bible was. The biblical relationship of servant to master was often intimate. In Malachi it is compared to the relationship between son and father, we read, "The LORD of Heaven's Armies says to the priests: "A son honours his father, and a servant respects his master. If I am your father and master, where are the honour and respect I deserve?" (Malachi 1:6 NLT) Jesus compares it to that of a student and his teacher in Mathew 10:25 we read "Students are to be like their teacher, and slaves are to be like their master. " (Matthew 10:25 NLT)

In Matthew 8:5-13 we also read the story of the centurion who came looking for Jesus, to heal his servant, this displays some of that shared intimacy and shared concern and devotion between master and servant

And, maybe because of this relationship, God gives special protection for His servants. In Isaiah 54 we read “no weapon turned against you will succeed. You will silence every voice raised up to accuse you. These benefits are enjoyed by the servants of the LORD; their vindication will come from me. I, the LORD, have spoken!” (Isaiah 54:17 NLT) and again in Isaiah 66 we read “Everyone will see the LORD’s hand of blessing on his servants” (Isaiah 66:14 NLT) Being a servant enlists His protection and His provision.

So how does Jesus define servant hood? You may have noticed that thirteen of Jesus’ parables mention servants and in six of these, the principal thrust is servant hood. The first is found in Matthew 25:14-30, the parable of the talents. Jesus talks about two men who invested their master’s money well and doubled his return and one man who buried his talent. The master commended the industrious servants, but called the one who buried his talent “wicked” and “lazy.” Jesus was saying that he expects initiative and hard work from His servants.

In the second parable on servant hood which is in Mark 13:34-37. A master left his servants in charge of his house with assigned tasks and told them to be watchful for his return. The master expected to find the servants working and watching when he returned.

In the third parable, in Luke 12:35-40, Jesus describes the servants ready and watching for the return of the master. The emphasis of this parable is not so much on work, but rather on the expectation in the mind of the servants waiting for the return of the master. One part of our work is simply to watch.

The fourth parable, in Luke 12:42-48, teaches about being ready for service. Again the master leaves the servants in charge of his house. Jesus contrasts the watchfulness of the good servants with the negligence of the servants who beat the others and became drunk. What is expected of the servant is his constant state of alertness and willingness to carry out his instructions.

In the fifth parable, in Luke 17:7-10, Jesus asks a rhetorical question: Will the master thank a servant for carrying out his orders? And in verse 10, He tells us that mere obedience is not worthy of the name servant. He is saying that a worthy servant will go beyond the call of duty.

The sixth parable in (Luke 19:12-27) is similar to the parable of the talents, in this one the master gives the various servants an equal amount, but their performance differs radically. The master shows his wisdom, not by entrusting appropriate amounts to the servants, but rather by the justness of the rewards he gives to them. Again Jesus is indicating that he will reward hard work and initiative.

In five of these parables on servant hood, the master is absent. The master trusts the servant enough to leave him alone to get on with things. The time of the master’s return is unknown, and in every case he comes at an unexpected moment. The emphasis is on the servant’s performance while the master is absent, and the emphasis is on three things, initiative, readiness to obey, and watchfulness.

As I have already said servants are mentioned in seven other parables and they all shed some light on the first-century role of servants. We see from these that first-century masters expected their servants to do many menial tasks: gather and burn useless weeds and collect wheat into a barn (Matthew 13:30), call invited guests to a wedding feast (Matthew 22:3), bind an improperly dressed wedding guest and throw him out (Matthew 22:13), bring clothing and kill a fatted calf (Luke 15:22-23), plough and tend sheep (Luke 17:7), and serve food (Luke 17:8). God may expect us to do lowly tasks. The servant does not choose his work, the master does. And it is particularly appropriate to remember this later in our service today, as we renew our covenant with God, and say, “I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you, as and where you choose.”

On the other hand, the master could assign highly responsible jobs. Four times the parables mention tasks that involve authority: jobs like collecting rent (Matthew 21:34), being in charge of a household

(Matthew 24:45), and investing money (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27). God may call upon His servants to do the lowest or the highest tasks. Again we need to remember this as we say the words of our covenant, "Your will be done. When I am valued and when I am disregarded; when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking; when I have all things, and when I have nothing." And we need to continually recognise that the choice is His and not ours.

So how do we imitate, The Righteous Servant? We understand, from Jesus' parables, the qualities that He emphasized as essential to servant hood. We have seen that those qualities are, watchfulness, obedience, initiative, hard work, and going beyond duty.

Watchfulness was the one quality most emphasized in Jesus' teaching on servant hood. Biblical servants were watchful, on the look out for the master's interests, and we cannot be obedient until we are watchful. We are to be watchful for His return, but we also need to be alert to His leading in our daily lives.

Jesus exemplified this in John 5:19 we read "So Jesus explained, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does." (John 5:19 NLT) Jesus' eyes were continually on His Father. He was watchful and attentive, vertically to the Father.

And at the same time as Jesus was alert vertically to the Father, He was also alert horizontally to His fellow man. In Mark 5:25-34 we read how he was sensitive to a woman who touched his garments.

If we are to develop this quality of watchfulness and alertness in our life, it is imperative that our prayer life grow, so that we are so in touch with the Father that as we progress through each day, we will constantly be turning to God, to know His direction.

To put it simply, to be watchful is to be available. An employer has the right to expect his employees to be available. The employee (or the servant) is at the disposition of the employer (or the master). The master must be able to call on the servant at any moment. So being a servant means being available, first to God and then to others. Sometimes we get fed up with the many distractions that come our way; but we need to be aware that some of these distractions may really be opportunities for service. We find many distractions in Jesus' life; He never seems to have wasted any of them. He was always available to the needy. They could always count on His attention. Let's look again at our covenant "when there is work for me and when there is none". We need to be watchful to discern the many opportunities for service that come our way. We need to be alert to do the Father's will, at all times.

The second quality we saw was obedience; again Jesus sets us the prime example. In John 6:38-41 He said "For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do my own will." (John 6:38 NLT) His very incarnation, which we have just celebrated at Christmas, is itself an act of obedience. His entire life is a record of total obedience. And at the end of His life, He could confidently assert, "but I will do what the Father requires of me, so that the world will know that I love the Father. Come, let's be going." (John 14:31 NLT) That obedience led to Gethsemane, with its struggle, and to the cross.

Again we need to follow His example, and keep this in mind in our covenant, "I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things". Obedience is total, or it is not obedience. We cannot choose when we will obey if we are to follow the example that Jesus set us. We cannot 'agree' to do the things we like doing, and leave other things left undone.

The third quality was Initiative. No one can doubt that Jesus often took the initiative. Although many of His healings were in response to requests, He often initiated a healing. In Peter's home, He chose to heal Peter's mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14-17). It was His initiative to heal the man with a withered

hand, on the Sabbath, which caused the Pharisees to plot to put Him to death (Mark 3:1-6). He didn't always wait until he was asked. He approached the sick man at the pool of Bethesda and asked if he wanted to be healed. His feeding of the 5,000 was not prompted by any visible factor, only by His compassion (Mark 6:35-44) It can be said that when Jesus saw a need He met it. But it can also be said that, because of His sensitivity to the Father, He was more aware of needs and more able to meet them. When we, as servants, live in a close relationship with the Father He will make us aware of the needs that are around us.

Sometimes we spend too much time waiting for opportunities to come to us, or for someone to ask us to do something. If we are waiting we might not be showing ourselves to be good servants. We need to take the initiative, listen to the Spirit, and do what we believe He is leading us to do. We need to seek opportunities to start projects for God. We need to be alert to the needs of the sick or the troubled, like Jesus' initiatives they may involve opportunities to teach or to share as He did. At times it will involve us moving out of our comfort zone, let's always keep in mind that the cross was not in anyone's comfort zone, but Jesus did not shy away from it.

And our final quality is hard work. Our culture often doesn't think much of this. We know and see so many people whose maxim seems to be to do as little as possible, for as much as possible. Jesus worked hard. We don't get many glimpses of full days in the gospel but there is one in the first chapter of Mark. He starts the day by calling four disciples (Mark 1:16-20), He then teaches in the synagogue of Capernaum (Mark 1:21-22), casts out a demon (vv. 23-27), heals Simon's mother-in-law (vv. 29-31), and then heals multitudes during the evening hours (vv. 32-34). And you would think He must have been tired after a day like that, and yet, if we continue reading that chapter we find that "Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray." (Mark 1:35 NLT)

Jesus led a full life. Whatever anyone could accuse Him of, laziness was not an option. His constant circuits across and around Galilee, His availability to the maimed and the sick, and His perpetual teaching all mark a life of hard work. Jesus never wasted time, dawdled, or procrastinated.

Jesus exemplified all the qualities of a good servant. So today, as we renew our covenant with God, let us make these qualities our own. We are called to the greatest position of all, the position of a servant; we follow the greatest servant of all, our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's seek to follow His example and to be good servants in His service and in all that we do.

### **The Covenant**

I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me, in all that I do and in all that I may endure; when there is work for me and when there is none; when I am troubled and when I am at peace. Your will be done. When I am valued and when I am disregarded; when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking; when I have all things, and when I have nothing. I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you, as and where you choose.

Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. May it be so for ever.

Let this covenant now made on earth be fulfilled in heaven. Amen.