



SESSION 3 — Serve One Another

- Pastor Keith -

INTRODUCTION

Illustration: 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 trails were wet and their shoes became caked with mud. Much later, someone asked this Taiwanese pastor what he remembered most about Dawson Trotman. Without hesitation the man replied, “He cleaned my shoes.”

See, when they arrived home the next day, they removed their shoes at the doorway, and the Taiwanese pastor retreated into the kitchen to make some tea. How surprised this humble national pastor was a few minutes later to return with the tea and find Trotman sitting on the floor with a small stick, a piece of cloth, and some water, cleaning his shoes. Such a spirit of servanthood marked Dawson Trotman throughout his Christian life. And he died as he lived, actually giving his life to rescue someone else from drowning.

Our almost-2-year-old son, Cayden, was moved up in the nursery a few months ago into a class that incorporates very simple Bible teaching and Scripture memory. Their memory verse for this week is a phrase from Galatians 5:13, “Through love serve one another.”

I think it’s safe to say that “serving one another in love” should be the defining characteristic of every local church Christian (cf. John 13:35).

(1) That this is true is supported by the 50+ “one another” passages in the New Testament letters to local church Christians. These “one another” exhortations explain how to “serve one another in love” and command us to “greet one another,” “pray for one another,” “forgive one another,” “encourage one another,” “bear one another’s burdens,” “admonish and teach one another,” “provoke one another unto love

and good works,” “confess our sins to one another,” and “be humble and unified with one another” (<http://wp.me/p3Z9Wj-oW>).

(2) Furthermore, the fundamental importance of loving service in the local church is highlighted by our Lord, the Head of the church. Jesus declared in Luke 22:27, “I am among you as the One who serves.” And Paul adds this descriptive commentary of our King in Philippians 2:7, “[He] emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant.” Indeed, our Master has never stopped lovingly serving us.

- He served us in accomplishing our salvation through His life and death, for He declared in Mark 10:45, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”
- He continues to serve His people in their temptation, for Hebrews 2:18 teaches that “because He Himself has suffered when tempted, He is able to help [lit. come to the aid of / run to when called for] those who are being tempted.”
- He further serves us by praying for us, for “He always lives to make intercession for” us (Hebrews 7:25; Romans 8:34).

The most notable example of Jesus’ servanthood is found in John 13:1-5, 12-17 when He washed His disciples feet. The text reveals that He understands His true position, He knows He is about to be betrayed, He has every reason to be preoccupied with His imminent suffering, and yet He humbly and mundanely serves others. John 13:3-5 records, “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside His outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet.” (NIV, “Jesus knew _____, so He _____.”)

- **Principle:** “It was not in spite of His greatness but because of His greatness that Jesus served His disciples. ... True greatness in the kingdom of heaven involves serving one another. ... In the mind of Jesus, acts of mundane service were not inconsistent with authority and greatness but rather were an integral part of it” (JB).¹ Jesus stated in Matthew 20:26, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant.” This isn’t pragmatic, but positional—in other words, the lesson is not, “Hey, if you want people and Christ to consider you great, you had better

serve,” but rather, “You are not great in the eyes of your Lord unless, like Him, you are serving others.” So, true greatness (as evaluated and commended by God) equals service. Whatever we may think of ourselves, we are not great (in this real divinely-defined sense of the word) unless we are serving.

- **Problem:** Like the disciples, we stumble at this concept of greatness, because it is so counter-cultural in its sense of values. Our world has redefined greatness, from what God originally intended it to mean. It has taken a concept defined by God and illustrated by His Son and broken it, making it the selfish and degraded opposite. Instead of a self-denying interest in people, we see only an “I-deserve-at-all-costs-to-be-happy” mentality. Rather than seeing the church as needy family members that we can serve, we evaluate church based on how it makes me feel or on what it does for me. “I deserve,” is today’s mantra, whereas Jesus’ was “I serve.”
- **Pattern:** Jesus provides us, then, with our pattern among our fellow brothers and sisters in our local church. He washes His disciples’ feet and then states His point this way, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).
- **Proposition:** As Christ serves you, so you must serve one another. You are never more Christlike than when you are serving.

And, by the way, at the heart of this matter is this reality — we won’t serve the church, if we don’t love the church, and we won’t love the church if we don’t love her Lord. However, if we do love the Lord, then we will love His bride/spouse. If we want to serve the Lord, then we will serve His body.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A SERVANT

While both spiritual gifts and talents should be used to serve one another (1 Peter 4:10), those aren’t required in servanthood.

1. **A servant attitude**

Illustration: A Bible teacher in the Washington, D.C., area noticed a man removing and stacking chairs after the meeting. “Upon inquiring, he learned that the man stacking the chairs was a busy United States senator. It did not take the talent or ability of a senator to stack chairs, but it did take the attitude of a servant” (JB).

By His example and teaching in John 13, Jesus teaches us that we should serve “downward” — The world teaches merely that the lesser serves the greater (i.e., the employee serves his boss, cf. Luke 22:27). It further dichotomizes and pigeonholes people, creating levels, tiers, and castes of people based on financial, occupational, geographical, or personality differences. However, since the gospel completely annuls such a spirit by teaching us of our unity in Christ (cf. Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11), the Christlike servant breaks out of that worldly mold and serves “downward” (i.e., those who by the world’s standard are beneath him in position or station in life).

Negative Illustration: King Rehoboam failed to learn this kind of servanthood (cf. 1 Kings 12:1-15 esp. v. 7), and it cost him ten of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Positive Illustration: Paul practiced such “downward” service, for he said in Acts 20:34, “You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me” (i.e., his interns).

2. **An observant eye**

We need to develop an observant eye and mind to see what needs to be done and who needs to be helped. This will only happen if we have cultivated a servant’s attitude, for “the reason we don’t see opportunities to serve is that we are continually thinking about ourselves instead of other” (JB).

Drawing from the servant example of Jesus, Paul writes of both of these characteristics in Philippians 2:3-4, “[Servant attitude] Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. [Observant eye] Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

Paul exhorts us to “look...to the interests of others.” The KJV appropriately translates this phrase, “Look...on the things of others,” for Paul is being purposefully general here. There is really no limit to the others-centered attitude we should have. This kind of others-focus:

- meditates upon the good qualities of other believers (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, esp. “thinks no evil” and “believes/hopes all things”).
- shares the burdens and interests of others (cf. Galatians 6:2; Romans 12:15; 1 Corinthians 10:24, 33-11:1).
- looks out for the needs of other believers.

A beautiful illustration of this kind of others-focus is discovered in Christ in Matthew 14:16. When His disciples wanted to send away the hungry crowd, Jesus’ immediate response was, “You give them to eat.” Jesus refused to let them meet their own needs. He knew their needs, and He was focused on meeting their needs. Such an observant, others-focused perspective must characterize Jesus’ followers, as well.

3. ***A faithful character***

Speaking to servants (i.e., stewards), Luke 16:12 asks, “If you have not been faithful in that [responsibility] which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?” (cf. Luke 12:35-48)

Author Jerry Bridges observes, “Few things are more distressing to a person in a position of responsibility for the work of others than to not be able to count on those people to do their job.” Proverbs 25:19 puts it this way, “Trusting in a treacherous/[unreliable] man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips.” NLT: “Putting confidence in an unreliable person in times of trouble is like chewing with a broken tooth or walking on a lame foot.”

Discussion: What do some people use as an excuse for not being faithful in their local church involvement/service?

1 Corinthians 4:2 states this necessity of faithful character in no uncertain terms: “Moreover, it is required of stewards [NIV, ‘those who have been given a trust’] that they be found [NIV, ‘prove’] faithful.”

“The true test of whether we are a servant is that we don’t mind being treated like one.” (i.e., “carpet-mindedness”).

Luke 17:7-10 reminds us of some of the challenges that servants will face, even in the local church — at times, they will be treated like servants! The passages reads, “Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

That text is a reality check and puts us in our place, reminding us to not think more highly of ourselves than we ought. In fact, to help maintain that proper spirit of humility, many of the New Testament authors referred to themselves as “slaves” of God (cf. Romans 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; Jude 1:1; Revelation 1:1).

Servants inevitably face three challenges:

1. ***Inconsiderateness (vv. 7-8)***

People will disregard your feelings, your schedule, your social norms, your privacy, your burdens, etc. Like mothers in a home, they are often taken advantage of with little consideration. Jerry Bridges challenges us, “We tend to resent the inconsiderate actions of others, but if we want to be true servants, we must learn to bear with them” (JB).

2. ***Ingratitude (v. 9)***

“If we are to accept the challenge of being a servant, we must be prepared to accept ingratitude, to accept being taken for granted by thoughtless members of the body” (JB). After we help people, encourage them, protect them, pray for them, counsel them, lift them up, etc. they may go on their merry way with never so much as a “thank you.”

THE CULTIVATION OF A SERVANT

“God must give us a servant attitude. We cannot change our own hearts” (JB).

1. ***Renew your mind with Scripture.***

Fill your mind with Scriptures that teach servanthood, especially with passages that show Christ as our model.

2. ***Ask God for a servant’s heart.***

Earnestly pray for God to give you the “mind of Christ,” found in Philippians 2:5-8.

3. ***Obediently take every opportunity to serve.***

Don’t pick and choose occasions to serve, but consistently obey God’s provision of opportunities to serve.

CONCLUSION

Those who love the Lord will love His spouse/bride, the church. Those who serve the Lord will serve His body, the church. Those who would be Christlike will “through love serve one another.”

In fact, in the paragraph that immediately follows our text, the great Servant Jesus Himself is the victim of such ingratitude (Luke 17:11-19). After healing ten lepers, only one returns to thank Him. If that percentage is any indicator, then we can be certain that we will often be taken for granted, overlooked, and underappreciated. But then, we’re in good company, for we are servants like our Lord.

3. ***Lack of congratulations (v. 10)***

The servants in verse 10 received no commendation or congratulation. In fact, they didn’t even expect it. See, they understood that being a “servant,” by definition almost, exempted them from any such applause. Now, God in His kindness, often honors His servants with recognition, and even promises to exalt them in the final day. But that should not be their goal, and they are not entitled to it. Instead, we ought to have this humble perspective, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”

Application: “All of us are constantly changing roles from serving to being served. [1] 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. [2] 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” (JB).

THE REWARD OF A SERVANT

The reward of faithful service to Jesus Christ is discovered in Luke 12:37, “Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.”

- *Jesus’ servants are like Jesus.* “Servanthood is part of the eternal character of God. The reward of servanthood is to be like our Master for all eternity” (JB).
- *Jesus’ servants will be served by Jesus.* “Jesus appears to be telling us that in some way, He will serve His faithful servants when He comes” (JB). Jesus continues His “downward” service well beyond His first coming.

ENDNOTES

¹ JB = Jerry Bridges, *True Community* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012).