



SERVANTHOOD

THE LOW ROAD TO OUR HIGH CALLING

INTRODUCTION

What is the greatest challenge you will face in following Christ? If you answer that question correctly, you will also identify the primary characteristic of a disciple of Christ.

Simply stated, the greatest challenge for any believer is to become a servant like Jesus. Correspondingly, Christ-like servanthood is the distinguishing trait of a maturing disciple of Christ.

1ST CENTURY — THE FISH

In the first century, believers needed a symbol that would identify themselves to one another, especially in areas where persecution was rampant. The symbol of a fish was chosen. Perhaps “fish” was chosen because of the term “fishers of men” but, probably, “fish” became the Christian symbol because the five letters in Greek used to spell “fish” are identical with the beginning letters of 5 Greek words that said, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” That word in English is “ICHTHUS” (7 letters) but in the original Greek, there were only 5 letters.

When two people met, a believer would use his foot to draw a slanted line in the dirt, somewhat like the outside line of a quarter moon. The other believer would draw the same line going the other way to complete the fish emblem, and spiritual identification was completed.

ANY CENTURY — SERVANTHOOD

The “fish” physically identified believers in the first century as being followers of Christ. Of greater significance, the spiritual distinctive that identifies believers in any century is servanthood. This “symbol” of authentic discipleship cannot be drawn in the sand or worn as an ornament, because this “symbol” is actually a lifestyle. This characteristic is spiritually engraved on the heart of a believer and affects every aspect of daily life.

How much do you know about following Jesus selflessly in order to serve others – a path described as servanthood? Your answer and subsequent application to your everyday life will correspond directly to your knowledge of Jesus, the depth of your personal

relationship with Him, and your obedience to Scripture that is a response of your love for Christ.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Servanthood depends on your choices that lead to becoming more and more like Christ. When you start the process and then stick to it, you will soon discover that the most difficult transition any believer will make is to become more and more like Jesus Christ . . . which actually means to become a servant (bond-slave).

The reason that servanthood is so difficult for a believer is that it begins with dying to self. Scripture emphasizes that “dying to self” is a believer’s responsibility.

Luke 9:23-24, And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

(See also Romans 12:2; Colossians 3:5, 8-10; 1 Peter 2:11—full text listed in box on second page.)

“Dying to self,” however, cannot be accomplished by one’s own power or insight. If “dying to self” depended solely on our abilities, we couldn’t and wouldn’t become more like Christ, since our wisdom and strength are woefully inadequate to accomplish that transformation. Thank God, through His

mercy and abundant grace, He has provided divinely powerful and completely sufficient resources (Jesus Himself, Holy Spirit, Scripture) to enable a believer to mature spiritually. The issue is not God’s supply, which is more than ample for a believer to mature spiritually. The issue is a believer’s willingness to rely on God’s plan and power to become a fruitful servant of Christ by leaving old patterns of life in order to be conformed to the image of Christ.

Bible verses are often not difficult to understand, but applying them to our lives is, often, an all-out war. Yet, surprisingly, many believers clamor for “more of God” in just about every way possible except dying to self. For example, we hear a lot about “renewal” and “revival” and the pressing need for these supernatural moves of God in

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the Body of Christ. Neither of these will ever be authentic moves of God unless individual believers and entire church families come to grips with the practical implications of being Christ-like servants.

Becoming Christ-like must, of necessity, include dying to self. Dying to self, though, is not the focus of everyday life. Jesus has been and always will be the focus of a maturing disciple's life.

Believers are to focus on Christ, the perfect servant. As we maintain this focus, we will realize that Christ-centered servanthood comes from the inside out, accomplished by our cooperation with God in developing the character of Jesus within us. As that inward development progresses, we will respond more and more in a Christ-like manner to life's situations and, especially, in our interactions with others.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHRIST-LIKE SERVANTHOOD

The Lord made it easy to understand servant characteristics by referring to Himself. A key self-description is in Matthew 11:28-30, given by Jesus in the context of inviting others to come to Him.

Matthew 11:28-30, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Basic to understanding Christ-like servanthood is to

understand the two self-descriptive terms used in the above passage that describe our Lord. The first word is "gentle" (or meek). This word means "strength under control." It is the picture of a wild horse that has been tamed or a tiger coming under the control of his trainer. Jesus, who could have called 10,000 angels to be at His command, kept His awesome power under control because He was a servant.

The other term by which Jesus characterized Himself is "lowly in heart" (or humble). This word describes a helper of others who provides what is needed in a completely unselfish manner. This "humble" helper has no thought for his own comfort or welfare but lives to be of benefit to others.

Since God wants us to conform to the image of His Son, these two qualities are what He wants to see emerge and continually develop in all followers of Christ. When believers live as Christ-like servants, "renewal" and "revival" will no longer be a future hope . . . they will, instead, characterize a present reality.

THE MODEL OF SERVANTHOOD (JOHN 13:1-17)

At the most critical time of His life, Jesus exemplified the heart and action of a true servant in John 13, a few hours before His arrest and subsequent crucifixion. The timing of this servant example should help us realize that there is not any time in which servanthood gets a holiday, since being a servant is a way of life.

Scripture References

Romans 12:2, Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Colossians 3:5-10,⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. . . .⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

1 Peter 2:11, Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

Philippians 2:5-7, Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.

Hebrews 12:1-2, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

John 13:1-4, Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, 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.

In those days, dirty roads and open sandals made for quite dirty feet, even dirty legs. As a result, servants washed the feet of guests when they arrived at a home. If there were no servants, usually the first arriving guest took on that responsibility (maybe that's where the concept of "fashionably late" came from . . . who would want to wash feet?).

At this evening gathering, known historically as the Last Supper, no disciple volunteered to wash feet – the room was filled with proud hearts and dirty soles. The disciples were more than willing to fight for a throne (position and prestige) but not fight for a towel.

It was at that point that the Master and Lord of the group began to wash feet, which allowed disciples of all ages to learn the lessons of authentic servanthood.

John 13:5, Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

While the disciples perhaps winced at their lack of basic social etiquette, Jesus taught them a basic principle of servanthood, which was unannounced service with no thought of recognition or return.

Sometimes we serve, but we want it to be announced so others can "observe our humility." Who hasn't done a good deed for someone else and then announced the results, often looking for some form of thanks? However, authentic servanthood makes no such announcement.

Jesus, in his interaction with Peter, presented another facet of servanthood – authentic servants not only give . . . they know how to receive as well.

John 13:6-11, He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of

you." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

Believers who are not humble and meek do not give sacrificially for the welfare of others. They have an enormous reluctance to receive from others as well. At the root of both of these extremes is the same problem – PRIDE.

It is important to point out that Christ-like servanthood is strength, not weakness. From that position of the "strength of sacrifice," servant disciples are not concerned with, "If I do this for them, they might take advantage of me and expect me to do it always." Or, "If I receive from them, I owe them and will have to repay in some way."

Authentic servanthood doesn't play the game of "who served whom last." Jesus broke through that façade by teaching His disciples that true servanthood was designed to impact a much wider audience.

John 13:12-14, When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

After Jesus washed their feet, the disciples could have easily thought that Jesus expected them to wash His feet in response. However, instead of saying, "Now wash my feet," Jesus broke through their veneer of pride by telling them to "wash one another's feet" whenever that opportunity arose, not waiting to serve, in return, those who served them first.

With an all-encompassing perspective of being a servant, Jesus destroyed the shallow servanthood mentality of "If I wash your feet, you wash mine" or "If I scratch your back, you scratch mine" or "You do something for me and I'll do something for you."

Isn't that our problem with entering into authentic Christ-like servanthood? A wife cooks her husband his favorite meal and then thinks, "He didn't even say thank you or even notice." A husband makes a repair and thinks, "I worked hard at this and no one said a thing." Or, a teenager cleans up his/her mess, picks up after others and then thinks, "Never again – nobody said thank you or congratulated me on my efforts." In the church, believers sometimes think, "Doesn't anyone ever notice my ministry in the church? I have such a thankless job!"

Notice this key point that Jesus emphasized about authentic servanthood – A true servant meets others' needs, not as a return gesture or to expect accolades. Instead, a true servant serves so the recipients of his

service will respond in service to others.

Practically speaking, we serve for two reasons: 1) to be like Jesus and 2) to demonstrate service to others so they will understand the practicality of servanthood and will pass it on.

SERVANT ACTIONS

How do we get to that level of Christ-honoring service? Jesus, in teaching His disciples, brings servanthood out of the theoretical realm and into an everyday expression of following Him.

John 13:15-16, “For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.”

Christ-like servanthood is something a disciple of Christ does, not something that a disciple merely studies or discusses. Jesus washed feet, so they were to do likewise. Jesus was looking for action, not theory.

Sometimes we treat not only servanthood but our entire manner of Christian living much like the employees of a company whose boss left for an extended trip. When the boss returned to his company, he noticed the unkempt lawn and building exterior. Trash was all over the parking lot. Windows were dirty. Hinges on the front door were coming off. He walked into lobby and there was the receptionist with her hair unkempt, feet on the desk, filing her nails, and listening to the local rock station – and the phones were ringing off the hook. The TV volume in the employees lounge was deafening, and the room was filled with employees eating snacks and telling jokes. The large table in the conference room was covered with board games.

The boss asked his employees, “Didn’t you get my letters that told you what to do?” They replied, “Certainly, we have ‘letter study’ every Friday night where we divide into small groups and discuss what you wrote. We even memorize some portions of your letter, and we think they’re great. We meet on Sunday morning and one of us expounds your letters so that we can learn more from them.”

The Boss said, “Fine, you received my instructions, you studied them, you meditated on them, you learned from them, even memorized them – but what did you do about them?”

The bottom line to authentic, Christ-like servanthood is this – becoming a Christ-like servant involves specific

action and is not merely a topic of conversation or class study.

SERVANT ATTITUDE

Not only is servanthood seen in actions, but it can never be divorced from the right attitude. That attitude is seen in two characteristics of Christ – meek (gentle) and lowly (humble).

Figuratively speaking, when you wash feet, be careful with the temperature of the water. When your attitude is wrong, it is easy to wash another’s feet in boiling, or freezing, water. Some people, with a self-oriented perspective, do not even use water to wash another’s feet. They simply try to scrub the dirt away with a rough instrument, to the point of removing the skin as well.

When a servant’s attitude reflects the character of Christ, there are remarkable results. Not only are the needs of others met, but also the servant providing the help receives a tremendous blessing from the Lord. That blessing is easy to recognize.

SERVANT BENEFIT

True servants of Christ are identifiable. Being blessed by the Lord, they typically abound with His joy.

John 13:17, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

“Blessed” means “happy,” and a servant’s happiness hinges on the right attitude (meek and lowly) that accompanies service to others. Do you want to be truly happy and full of the joy that only Jesus can give? If so, then be a blessing to others with no announcement of your service and no thought of any reward or acknowledgment from those whom you are serving. Minister as unto

Christ, since the bottom line for a servant is the realization that “...it is the Lord Christ whom you serve” (Colossians 3:24).

SERVANTHOOD APPLICATION

- **SERVANTHOOD DEPENDS ON A RESPONSE TO CHRIST’S LOVE**

Immature believers will not be Christ-like servants, because they do not fully understand and, thus, do not respond to the love of Christ in everyday life.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15, For the love of Christ controls us [*hems us in, directs us, compels us*], because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

**Christ-like
servanthood
is strength *not*
weakness**

- **SERVANTHOOD IS LINKED TO FAITHFUL OBEDIENCE TO SCRIPTURE**

Continually immature believers have a habit of not learning from Scripture and, thus, are not oriented to obeying God's truth.

John 14:15, If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Hebrews 5:12-14, For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

If we, as believers in Christ, are serious about allowing Christ to be the Lord of our lives, our commitment to Him will be readily demonstrated by an eagerness to obey His word. For many believers, Christ-like servanthood will never be a reality because they do not have a habit of obeying God's Word in their personal lives.

- **SERVANTHOOD DEPENDS ON PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT WITH PEOPLE**

Just as we don't get in physical shape by reading a book, so servanthood will not be part of our lives if we only read about it. Servanthood has to be demonstrated "up close and personal" with others who need help. Sometimes the help given will focus on physical aspects of life, but the help may also be in response to an emotional or spiritual need in another's life.

- **SERVANTHOOD INVOLVES SERVING WHERE OTHERS WILL NOT**

A true servant doesn't hide from the most thankless jobs that no one else will touch. Often this is as basic as

showing kindness to the most arrogant, spiteful, proud, and rude people you can imagine – sometimes those with whom we must work, sit beside in class, or even have as family members.

Christ-like servanthood continues no matter what the response, especially when it looks as if "I have been burned enough already." If we don't serve in the situations that are difficult, how will we learn what it means to die to self and how will anyone else learn what it means to have "new life in Christ"? Serving only when and where we "feel like it" is what we did prior to knowing Christ.

- **SERVANTHOOD ALLOWS US TO GIVE UP OUR PERSPECTIVES TO EMBRACE CHRIST'S PERSPECTIVE**

To gain the perspective of Christ is a difficult mental and attitudinal switch, but it must be done. We must stop basing our decisions to serve others on what we think or how we "feel," and, instead start basing our decisions for serving on obedience to Scripture and following the example of Christ.

One of the convenient excuses some use to avoid true servanthood is to say or think, "I can't do it." As members of God's family, all of us could encourage an advancement of servanthood in the Body of Christ by reminding one another to discard the "I can't" phrase when it is used in conjunction with serving others. If one avoids being a servant, a believer would be more accurate to say, "I won't."

Those who have the promise of "I can do all things through him (Christ) who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13) are denying the power of God in their lives by using "I can't" as an excuse not to serve.

With the servant example of Christ before us and with ample opportunities to serve all around, embrace being His servant as you continue to grow up in Him.

SERVANTHOOD: THE LOW ROAD TO OUR HIGH CALLING

Study Outline

I. The Sign of Discipleship

- A. In the first century, the sign was a fish
- B. In all centuries, the sign is servanthood

II. The Lordship of Jesus Christ

- A. Dying to self is your responsibility (Luke 9:23-24; Romans 12:2)
- B. Becoming like Christ is your choice (Philippians 2:5-9; Hebrews 12:1-2)

III. The Characteristics of Christ-like Servanthood (Matthew 11:28-30)

- A. Gentle (meek) in heart
- B. Humble (lowly) in heart

IV. The Model of Servanthood (John 13:1-17)

- A. The setting for servanthood (1-4)
- B. The lessons of servanthood
 - 1. Unannounced service, not “watch my humility” (5)
 - 2. Grace-giving and grace-receiving (6-11)
 - 3. Recipients of servanthood respond in service to others (12-14)
- C. The actions of servanthood (15-16)
 - 1. Servanthood is something you do, not something you merely talk about
 - 2. Servanthood is rooted in an attitude of being meek and lowly in heart
- D. The benefit of servanthood—personal happiness (17)

V. The Practical Application of Servanthood

- A. Servanthood depends on obedience to God’s Word
 - 1. Believers fail to obey because of a lack of response to God’s love
 - 2. Believers fail to obey because they are not Word-oriented
- B. Servanthood depends on personal involvement with people
- C. Servanthood involves serving where others will not
- D. Servanthood allows you to give up your perspective and embrace Christ’s perspective