

CHAPTER 7

SERVING . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

Ministering hearts are disciplined to labor, for they regularly move beyond their comfort zones, they put themselves in vulnerable spots, they make commitments which cost, they get tired for Christ's sake, they pay the price, they encounter rough seas. But their sails billow full of God's Spirit.

R. KENT HUGHES

It's been gone since 1861, yet people still recognize the name. The Pony Express was a private express company that carried mail by an organized relay of horseback riders across a series of 184 stations. The eastern end was St. Joseph, Missouri, and the western terminal was in Sacramento, California. The cost of sending a half-ounce letter by Pony Express varied from \$25 to \$125 in today's dollars, depending upon when during the life span of the service it was sent. If the horses held out, and the weather and the Indians held off, that letter would complete the nearly two-thousand-mile journey in a speedy eight to ten days, as did the report of Lincoln's Inaugural Address.

It may surprise you that the Pony Express was in operation only from April 3, 1860, until November 18, 1861—just nineteen months. When the telegraph line was completed between the two cities, the horseback service was no longer needed.

Being a rider for the Pony Express was a tough job. You were expected to cover seventy-five to one hundred miles a day, riding hard day and night, changing horses every ten to fifteen miles. Other than the mail, you carried

little else besides a revolver and a knife. In order to travel light, and to increase speed and mobility during Indian attacks, the men rode in shirtsleeves whenever possible, sometimes even during the fierce winter weather.

How would you recruit volunteers for this hazardous job? Bolivar Roberts, superintendent for the western end of the Express, is said to have placed this ad in a San Francisco newspaper in March 1860: "Wanted—young, skinny, wiry fellows not over 18. Must be expert riders willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred."^[1]

Those were the honest facts of the service required, but the Pony Express never suffered a shortage of riders.

We need a similar honesty with the facts about the Discipline of serving God. Like the Pony Express, serving God is not a job for the casually interested. It's costly service. God asks for your life. He requires that service to Him become a priority, not a pastime. He doesn't want servants who offer Him the leftovers after their other commitments. And serving God isn't a short-term responsibility either, for unlike the Pony Express, His kingdom will never end, regardless of the technological advances in the world.

The mental picture we have of the Pony Express probably compares with the one imagined by the young men of 1860 who read that newspaper ad. Scenes of excitement, camaraderie, and the thrill of adventure filled their heads as they swaggered over to the Express office to apply. Yet few of them envisioned that excitement would only occasionally punctuate the routine of the long, hard hours and loneliness of the work.

The Discipline of serving is like that. Although no more spiritually grand and noble way of life can be found than living in response to Christ's summons to serve, the daily realities of such a life often appear as lowly and pedestrian as washing someone's feet. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously declared, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."^[2] Such a call to serve Christ summons up images of legendary martyrs, fearless in the face of persecution, or of a triumphant death after a lifetime of planting the flag of the gospel among unreached peoples. Instead, it seems that far more commonly Christ's call is to a death by degrees, washing feet in obscurity. We're drawn to the appeal of service when it holds out the promise of bold adventure, but repelled when it means—as it more often does—feeling

banished to serve Christ in a dreary corner of a seemingly inconsequential place. To have served Jesus by walking with Him during His three-year ministry would have been a glorious adventure; to have served Him three years earlier as His sweeper and saw-sharpener in the carpenter's shop wouldn't have been as appealing.

The ministry of serving may be as public as preaching or teaching, but more often it will be as sequestered as nursery duty. It may be as visible as singing a solo, but usually it will go as unnoticed as operating the sound equipment to amplify the solo. Serving may be as appreciated as a powerful testimony in a worship service, but typically it's as thankless as washing dishes after a church social. Most service, even that which seems the most appealing, we perceive as we would the tip of an iceberg. **Only the eye of God sees the larger, hidden part of it.**

Beyond the church walls, serving can manifest itself as babysitting for neighbors, taking meals to families in flux, running errands for the homebound, providing transportation for the one whose car breaks down, helping with lawn or home maintenance, feeding pets and watering plants for vacationers, and—hardest of all—displaying a servant's heart in the home. Serving typically looks as unspectacular as the practical needs it seeks to meet.

That's why serving must become a Spiritual Discipline. The flesh connives against its hiddenness and sameness. Two of the deadliest of our sins—sloth and pride—loathe serving. They paint glazes on our eyes and put chains on our hands and feet so that we don't serve as we know we should or even as we want. If we don't discipline ourselves to serve for the sake of Christ and His kingdom and for the purpose of godliness, we'll "serve" only occasionally or when it's convenient or self-serving. The result will be a quantity and quality of service we'll regret when the Day of Accountability for our service comes.

Not every act of service will, or even should, be disciplined serving. Most of the time our service should spring simply from our love for God and love for others. Like our worship and evangelism, so also our service should often flow from within—without any need of discipline—as a result of the life-transforming presence and work of the Holy Spirit. But because the Spirit of Jesus within us causes us to yearn to be more like Jesus, and also because of the persistent gravitational tendencies toward selfishness in our hearts, we

must also discipline ourselves to serve. And those who do will find serving one of the most sure and practical means of growth in grace.

But lest we begin to think that serving is merely an option, let's chisel this into the cornerstone of our Christian life.

EVERY CHRISTIAN IS EXPECTED TO SERVE

When God calls His elect to Himself, He calls no one to idleness. When we are born again and our sins forgiven, the blood of Christ cleanses our conscience, according to Hebrews 9:14, in order for us to "serve the living God." Every believer's Bible exhorts him or her to "serve the LORD with gladness" (Psalm 100:2, NASB). **God's Word has no place for spiritual unemployment or spiritual retirement or any other description of a professing Christian *not* serving God.**

Of course, motives matter in the service we offer to God. The Bible mentions at least six motives for serving.

Motivated by Obedience

In Deuteronomy 13:4 Moses wrote, "You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him." Everything in that verse relates to obedience to God. In the midst of this cluster of commands on obedience we find the mandate to "serve him." We should serve the Lord because we want to obey Him.

John Newton, the slave trader who became a pastor following his conversion to Christ and wrote such hymns as "Amazing Grace," illustrates obedient service as follows:

If two angels were to receive at the same moment a commission from God, one to go down and rule earth's grandest empire, the other to go and sweep the streets of its meanest village, it would be a matter of entire indifference to each which service fell to his lot, the post of ruler or the post of scavenger; for the joy of the

angels lies only in obedience to God's will.^[3]

Can you imagine one of those angels refusing to serve? It's unthinkable. Likewise, how can any professing Christian think it acceptable to sit on the spiritual sidelines and watch others do the work of the kingdom? Any true Christian would say that he or she *wants* to obey God. But we disobey God when we do not actively serve Him. We sin when we refuse to serve God.

Motivated by Gratitude

The prophet Samuel exhorted the people of God to service with these words: "Only fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you" (1 Samuel 12:24). When serving God seems like a burden, remembering the "great things he has done for you" vaporizes the burden.

Do you remember what it's like *not* to know Christ, to be without God and without hope? Do you remember how it feels to be guilty before God and unforgiven? Do you remember the terror of knowing you have offended God and that His anger burns toward you? Do you remember the horror of knowing you're only a heartbeat away from hell? Now do you remember the experience of seeing Jesus Christ with the eyes of faith, and of understanding for the first time who He really is and what He has done by His life, death, and resurrection? Do you remember the joy of your first awareness of forgiveness and deliverance from judgment and hell? Do you remember the initial, incomparable realization of your assurance of heaven and eternal life? When the fire of service to God grows cold, consider what great things the Lord has done for you.

God has never done anything greater for anyone, nor could He do anything greater for you, than what He has done in bringing you to Himself. Suppose He put ten million dollars into your bank account every morning for the rest of your life, but He didn't save you? Suppose He gave you the most beautiful body and face of anyone who ever lived, a body that never aged for a thousand years, but then at death shut you out of heaven and sent you into hell for eternity? What has God ever given anyone that could compare with the salvation He has given to you as a believer? Do you see that God could never do anything for you or give anything greater to you than the gift of Himself? If

we cannot be grateful servants of Him who is everything and in whom we have everything, what *will* make us grateful?

Motivated by Gladness

The inspired command of Psalm 100:2 is, "Serve the LORD with gladness" (NASB). God expects His servants to serve—not grudgingly, grimly, or glumly—but gladly.

In the courts of ancient kings, servants were often executed for nothing more than looking sad in the service of the king. Nehemiah, in 2:2 of the book that bears his name, was grieving over the news he'd heard that Jerusalem was still in ruins despite the return of many Jews from the Babylonian exile. As he was serving food to King Artaxerxes one day, the king said, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Because of what that could mean for him, Nehemiah wrote, "Then I was very much afraid." That's because you don't mope or sulk when you serve a king. Not only does it give the appearance that you serve reluctantly, it also reveals your dissatisfaction with the way he's running things.

The person who can't serve the Lord with gladness contradicts with his heart what he professes with his lips. I can understand why the person who serves God only out of obligation doesn't serve with gladness. I can understand why the person who serves God in an attempt to earn his way to heaven doesn't serve with gladness. But the Christian who gratefully acknowledges what God has done for him or her for eternity should be able to serve God cheerfully and with joy.

A believer does not look upon serving God as a burden, but as a privilege. Suppose God let you choose anyone in the world to serve and know intimately, but wouldn't let you serve Him? Suppose He allowed you to serve in any political or business position in the world, but barred you from serving in His kingdom? Or suppose He permitted you to serve yourself, doing anything you wanted with your life and with no needs or worries, but you could never know Jesus? Even the best of these things becomes a miserable slavery in comparison with the immeasurable privilege of serving God. That's why the psalmist could say, "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell

in the tents of wickedness” (Psalm 84:10).

Do you serve on that church committee with gladness or with gloom? Do you serve your neighbors willingly or reluctantly? Do your kids get the impression from you that you really enjoy serving God or that you merely endure it?

Motivated by Forgiveness, Not Guilt

In Isaiah’s famous vision of God, notice his response once God had forgiven him:

One of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” (6:6-8)

Like a dog on a leash, Isaiah was straining out of his skin to serve God in some way, *any* way. Because he felt guilty? No! Because God had taken his guilt *away*!

That pulpit lion of London, C. H. Spurgeon, moved with some of Isaiah’s emotion, said in a sermon on September 8, 1867,

The heir of heaven serves his Lord simply out of gratitude; he has no salvation to gain, no heaven to lose; . . . now, out of love to the God who chose him, and who gave so great a price for his redemption, he desires to lay out himself entirely to his Master’s service. O you who are seeking salvation by the works of the law, what a miserable life yours must be! . . . you have that if you diligently persevere in obedience, you may perhaps obtain eternal life, though, alas! none of you dare to pretend that you have attained it. You toil and toil and toil, but you never get that which you toil after, and you never will, for, “by the works of the law there shall no flesh living be justified.” . . . The child of God works not for life, but from life; he does not work to be saved, he works because he is saved.^[4]

The people of God do not serve Him in order to *be* forgiven but because we *are* forgiven. When believers serve only because they feel guilty, they serve with a ball and chain dragging from their hearts. There is no love in that kind of service, only labor. No one feels joy in it, only obligation and drudgery. Christians should not act like grudging prisoners, sentenced to serve in God’s kingdom because of guilt. We can serve willingly because Christ’s death freed us from guilt.

Motivated by Humility

Jesus was the perfect Servant. He revealed His greatness in the lowliness He embraced so He could serve the most basic needs of His twelve friends.

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. 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.” (JOHN 13:12-16)

With astonishing humility, Jesus, their Lord and Teacher, washed His disciples’ feet as an example of how all His followers should serve with humility.

In this world, Christians will always live with an affinity for sin (the Bible calls it “the flesh”) that will say, “If I have to serve, I want to get something for it. If I can be rewarded, or gain a reputation for humility, or somehow turn it to my advantage, then I’ll give the impression of humility and serve.” But this isn’t Christlike service. This is hypocrisy. Hypocritical “servants” will not serve without recognition, without “some return on their investment” of time. They may desire the recognition of applause, public acknowledgment, appreciation via social media, assured results, honor for their example, or, most subtle of all, development of a reputation as holy, sacrificial, or exceptionally spiritual. Hypocrites do this because they feel no inclination for the kind of service that

God alone can see and reward. So if necessary, they will devise clever, yet religiously acceptable and falsely humble ways to ensure some sort of human notice. If this fails, they will attempt to negotiate at least some form of reciprocity for their service. By the power of the Holy Spirit we must reject this self-righteous, hypocritical service as a sinful motivation, and serve “in humility,” considering “others more significant” than ourselves (Philippians 2:3).

Can you serve your boss and others at work, helping them to succeed, and can you be happy, even when they receive the promotions and you get overlooked? Can you work to make others look good without envy filling your heart? Can you minister to the needs of those whom God exalts and men honor when you yourself seem neglected? Can you pray for the ministry of others to prosper when it would cast yours in the shadows? If God places you there, will you, like your Master, serve for years in your own equivalent of an obscure, village carpentry shop if that’s where God wants to grow you in godliness and deepen your knowledge of Him?

In the Discipline of service, God looks not only for a job well done, for even the world serves well when it leads to profit. He also calls us to serve with humility, because that leads to Christlikeness.

Motivated by Love

At the heart of service, according to Galatians 5:13, should be love: “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”

No fuel for service burns longer and provides more energy than love. I do some things in the service of God that I would not do for money, but I am willing to do them out of love for God and others. I read of a missionary in Africa who was asked if he really liked what he was doing. His response was shocking. “Do I like this work?” he said. “No. My wife and I do not like dirt. We have reasonably refined sensibilities. We do not like crawling into vile huts through goat refuse. . . . But is a man to do nothing for Christ he does not like? God pity him, if not. Liking or disliking has nothing to do with it. We have orders to ‘Go,’ and we go. Love constrains us.”

When Christ’s love controls or constrains people, they “no longer live for

themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Corinthians 5:15). They serve God and others, motivated by love for God and others. Jesus said in Mark 12:28-31 that the greatest commandment is to love God with all you are, and the next most important one is to love your neighbor as you love yourself. In light of these words, surely the more we love God the more we will live for Him and serve Him, and the more we love others the more we will also serve them.

EVERY CHRISTIAN IS GIFTED TO SERVE

Spiritual Gifts

At the moment of salvation, when the Holy Spirit comes to live within you, He brings a gift with Him. We read in 1 Corinthians 12:4,11 of different varieties of gifts, and that the Holy Spirit determines by His sovereign will which gift goes to which believer: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. . . . All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” Equally important, 1 Peter 4:10 certifies that each Christian receives a special gift, a gift intended for use in service: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”

You may already know that the subject of spiritual gifts sparks ongoing controversy in many parts of the church. The primary passages on this topic are Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:5-11, 27-31; 1 Corinthians 14; Ephesians 4:7-13; and 1 Peter 4:11. I encourage you to read them all prayerfully. Regardless of your theology of spiritual gifts, the two most important points about them remain those given in 1 Peter 4:10, namely, (1) if you are a Christian you definitely have at least one spiritual gift, and (2) God gave you that gift for the purpose that you serve with it for His kingdom.

Perhaps you have heard little about spiritual gifts, or for whatever reason never identified your spiritual gift. Relax. Many Christians serve God faithfully and fruitfully for a lifetime without ascertaining their specific gift. I’m not

suggesting you shouldn't try to discover your gift; I'm saying that you aren't relegated to benchwarmer status in the kingdom of God until you can name your gift. Study the biblical material on spiritual gifts and carefully choose some of the best books from the torrent of tomes written on the subject. But by all means, don't be discouraged from serving, for you may still serve effectively without knowing the name of your gift. J. I. Packer reminds us, "The most significant gifts in the church's life in every era are ordinary natural abilities sanctified."^[5]

Stay in balance. God has given you a spiritual gift, and it is not the same as a natural ability. That natural talent, rightly sanctified for God's use, often points toward the identity of your spiritual gift. But you should find out the special gift God has given you while you're serving as diligently as you can without that definite information. In fact, in addition to the study of Scripture, the best way to discover and confirm which spiritual gift is yours is through serving. If you have an inclination to teach, you may never know if your gift is teaching until you accept that class and try. You may discover through a ministry to people who are hurting that your gift is mercy. On the other hand, through involvement in a particular ministry you may confirm what your gift is not. Years ago I thought I had one gift until through serving it became painfully clear that I had an entirely different gift.

I encourage you to discipline yourself to serve in a regular, ongoing ministry in your local church. You don't necessarily have to serve in a recognized or elected position. But find a way to defeat the temptation to serve only when it's convenient or exciting. That's not disciplined service. Those with a servant's heart and eyes will find themselves compelled by love to serve in ways and times beyond the expectations of their "official" ministry in the church, but in doing so they will not neglect the ongoing ministry of the local body of Christ.

You may feel overlooked, you may feel limited by an unusual schedule, you may be physically incapacitated, but you can still find ways to serve. People with unusual schedules or physical limitations often make powerful intercessors in a prayer ministry. Despite their restrictions, those with hearts to serve always find ways to serve.

A flight attendant in our church works overseas routes. When she's on the job she's gone for several days at a time. And she's not on a regular Monday-

through-Friday schedule. She had always been one who wrote letters of encouragement and gave away books as a ministry; however, when she joined our fellowship she looked for a disciplined way to serve along with other believers rather than just individually. But how to do this with her schedule? It soon became apparent that her spiritual gift is service, that is, meeting practical needs. She also excels at hospitality. Now she belongs to a ministry team in our church that specializes in hospitality. Because it is a group ministry, the work doesn't require her presence every time they serve. When in town, she contributes her part.

God gives spiritual gifts for use in service. If He intended no use for your gift, there would no longer be any purpose for your life. Why would God allow us to live beyond any usefulness to Him? In His wisdom and providence, He gifts each believer to serve and keeps each believer alive as long as He wants him or her to serve.

The point of this chapter, however, is a call for *disciplined* serving, with the goal that we become more like Jesus. Some spiritual gifts incline toward ministries conducted out of the spotlight and which often go unappreciated by the masses. And yet, like Jesus, no matter how much public recognition we gain in ministry, God calls us to times of service in the shadows as well. Regardless of your gifts or talents, determine to employ them for Christ and His kingdom. "Some have the gift of helping, and these actions [of service] come more naturally," writes Jerry White. "For most Christians, serving requires a conscious effort."^[6] Or to put it another way: "Serving requires discipline."

Serving Is Often Hard Work

Some teach that once you discover and employ your spiritual gift, then serving becomes nothing but effortless joy. That's not New Testament Christianity. The apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:12 about "the equipping of the saints for the *work* of service" (NASB, emphasis added). Sometimes serving God and others is nothing less than hard work.

Scripture describes Christians not only as children of God, but also as servants of God. Recall how Paul typically started his letters by referring to himself as a servant of God, as in Romans 1:1. Every Christian is a servant of

God, and servants *work*.

Paul described his service to God with these words in Colossians 1:29: “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” The word *toil* means “to work to the point of exhaustion,” while from the Greek word translated “struggling” comes our word *agonize*. So for Paul to serve God was “to agonize to the point of exhaustion.” That doesn’t mean his ministry was miserable toil; in fact, the reason Paul worked so hard was because the only thing he loved more than serving God was God Himself. God supplies us with the desire and power to serve Him, then we struggle in service “with all his energy that he powerfully works” in us. True ministry is never forced out by the strength of the flesh. But do not misunderstand: The result of His power working mightily in us frequently feels like “toil.”

That means when you serve the Lord in a local church or in any type of ministry, it will often be hard. Like Paul, sometimes your service will also be agonizing and exhausting. It will take your time. It will often prove more stressful or less enjoyable than other ways you could invest your life. And if for no other reason, serving God is hard work because it means serving people. Despite all that, remember: Service that costs nothing accomplishes nothing.

And even though serving God can be agonizing and exhausting work, it is also the most *fulfilling and rewarding* kind of work. In John 4 we read where Jesus had been talking with the woman of Samaria. He’d been walking all day. He was tired, thirsty, and hungry. And it was all because He’d been serving His Father. While He was resting at the well near Sychar, this Samaritan woman came to the well. They talked and her life was changed forever. As she went back into Sychar to tell others about Jesus, His disciples returned from buying food there. When they offered some to Him, He said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his *work*” (4:34, emphasis added).

Jesus found the work of serving God so satisfying that He called it His food. Serving God sometimes so physically exhausted Him that He could sleep in a boat even as waves crashed over the sides. It once meant forty days without eating. For Jesus, service meant frequent nights of sleeping outside on the ground. It meant getting up before daylight to have any time alone. But in the midst of all the weariness, hunger, thirst, pain, and inconvenience, Jesus said that the work of serving God was so fulfilling that it was like food. It

nourished Him; it strengthened Him; it satisfied Him; and He devoured it. Serving God is work, but there’s no work so gratifying.

Disciplined service is also the most *enduring* kind of work. Unlike some things we may do, service to God is never valueless. The same Paul who agonized to the point of exhaustion while serving God reminded us, “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

You don’t have to serve God long before you’re tempted to think your work actually is in vain. Thoughts come that your service is a waste of time. You see few, if any, results. God promises, however, that regardless of what you think and see, your work for Him is never in vain. That doesn’t mean you won’t frequently feel as though nothing has resulted from all your efforts, nor does it mean that you’ll someday enjoy all the fruit you’d hoped and prayed for. But the Lord’s promise does mean that even if you can’t see the proof, your service to God is *never* in vain.

God sees and knows of all your service to Him, and He will never forget it. He will reward you in heaven for it because He is a faithful and just God. I love Hebrews 6:10: “For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.”

Disciplined service to God is work—hard and costly labor sometimes—but it will endure for all eternity.

MORE APPLICATION

Worship empowers serving; serving expresses worship. Godliness requires a disciplined balance between the two. Those who can maintain service without regular private and congregational worship are serving in the flesh. Regardless of their length of service or how well others think they serve, they are not striving according to God’s power, as Paul did, but their own.

In worship, our experience with God and His truth refreshes our reasons and desires to serve. Isaiah didn’t say, “Here I am! Send me” (6:8) until after his vision of God. That’s the order—worship, then worship-empowered service. As A. W. Tozer put it, “Fellowship with God leads straight to

obedience and good works. That is the divine order and it can never be reversed.”^[7] We cannot long endure the demands of service without receiving the power for them through worship.

At the same time, one measure of the authenticity of worship (again, both personal and interpersonal) is whether it results in a desire to serve. Isaiah (quoted above) is the classic example here also. Tozer again says it best: “No one can long worship God in spirit and in truth before the obligation to holy service becomes too strong to resist.”^[8]

Therefore, we must maintain that the pursuit of godliness requires that we discipline ourselves for both worship and service. To engage in one without the other is to experience neither.

You are expected to serve and gifted to serve, but are you willing to serve? The Israelites knew without a doubt that God *expected* them to serve Him, but Joshua once looked them in the eye and challenged them on their *willingness* to serve: “If it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve. . . . But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15).

When I think of a faithful willingness to serve, I remember a quiet little man from a church where I was a staff member. On Sundays his arrival always went unnoticed, for he came long before anyone else. Nevertheless, he burrowed his old car into an obscure corner of the parking lot to leave the best places for others. He unlocked all the doors, got the bulletins, and then waited outside. When you walked up he’d give you a bulletin and a big smile. But he couldn’t talk. He was embarrassed when newcomers asked him questions. Something had happened to his voice long ago. When I met him he was into his sixties and living alone. When he experienced car trouble, which was often, he told no one and walked more than a mile to the church. Because of his vulnerability, he was robbed and beaten several times, at least twice during the three years I was in that church. Some longtime church members told me they suspected he lost his voice as the result of being beaten years before. Extensive arthritis stooped his shoulders, prevented him from turning his neck, and made hard work of simply unlocking doors and handing out bulletins. But he was always there, always smiling, even though he couldn’t speak a word. Everything about his life worked to keep him unheralded and in the background, even his name—Jimmy Small. Yet despite his drawbacks,

setbacks, handicaps, and a plethora of potential excuses, he willingly served God. And he served in a disciplined way, which in the sight of God was neither small nor in vain.

The gospel of Christ creates Christlike servants. The Lord Jesus was always the servant, the servant of all, the servant of servants, *the Servant*. He said, “I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:27). Jesus is our great example of servanthood. But He did not come to earth, live, and die just to make us more servant-hearted, for we needed much more than that. Because of our sin, we needed to be reconciled to God, and no one makes himself or herself acceptable to God by trying to emulate Jesus’ example of service. No one can serve so much or so well that he or she becomes sufficiently righteous before God. We must understand and believe the gospel of God to be right with God.

The gospel of Jesus Christ transforms sinners against God into servants of God. The Holy Spirit works through the gospel to turn those who serve their idols (such as wealth, career, sports, sex, house, land, education, hobby, drugs, politics, and so on) into servants of God, just as He did in the apostle Paul’s day when the missionary wrote to some relatively new Christians, “You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Those who believe the gospel of Jesus receive the Christlike hearts of servants. So one of the clearest indications that people have truly believed the gospel of Jesus is that a new, Christlike desire to serve begins to overcome their selfish desire to be served. They start looking for ways to do something for Christ and His church, especially ways that will serve the gospel. Has the gospel you believed given you a servant’s heart? Is your service rooted in the gospel?

Still, it is true that if gospel-transformed, servant-hearted people are to grow more like Christ, they must *discipline* themselves to serve as Jesus served. Will you?

WANTED: Gifted volunteers for difficult service in the local expression of the kingdom of God. Motivation to serve should be obedience to God, gratitude, gladness, forgiveness, humility, and love. Service will rarely be glorious. Temptation to quit place of service will sometimes be strong. Volunteers must be faithful in spite of long hours, little or no visible results, and possibly no recognition—except from God for all eternity.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR

- [1] Christopher Corbett, *Orphans Preferred* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2004), 84.
- [2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (1937; New York: Macmillan, 1963), 99.
- [3] E. M. Bounds, *The Essentials of Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 19.
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