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## CALLED TO BE A SERVANT

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The Apostle Paul, who is the great biblical champion of the theology of God's grace, called himself a servant of Jesus Christ. If he were to summarize his theology, it may be put like this, "I have been saved by the grace of God, and now I am a servant of Jesus Christ. By the grace of God, I am what I am." This was his conviction throughout his life.

In his letter to the believers in Rome, Paul introduces himself with these words, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle set apart for the Gospel of God. . . ." (Rom 1:1).<sup>1</sup> He is the *doulos* of Jesus Christ. *Doulos* is translated in the RSV as "servant," but adds in a footnote, "slave." Paul called himself a "servant" or a "slave" of Jesus Christ. He says in effect, "I am a *slave* of Jesus Christ."

What was a servant or a slave? What was a *doulos* in the first century C.E.? While there are pockets of slavery in different countries around the world today, most of us have not experienced this firsthand. But Paul must have clearly understood what a slave was because there were many slaves in the first century Roman world. In fact, in many places, slaves made up the majority of the population. Sometimes there were more slaves than ordinary citizens. Indeed, slavery was widely practiced almost everywhere in the Roman Empire.

The law classified slaves as domestic animals like cows or dogs. They were like goods and products. They had no "human rights" and could own no property. Their masters owned them. Even their families did not belong to them; they were the property of their master. They had no genealogies, and therefore, there was no possibility of tracing their origin. A slave was considered merely a piece of property. He could be bought and sold in the market place. His life and labors

<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the RSV.

totally belonged to his master. Yet the Apostle Paul, with all these connotations of *doulos* in his mind, remarked, "I am a servant or a slave of Jesus Christ."

Paul was a great man. After he finished his elementary education in his hometown, Tarsus, he went to Jerusalem for further study. There he was educated under Gamaliel who was a renowned Pharisee. He was a great teacher, not only to people living in Jerusalem, but also to citizens of the surrounding nations.

Paul himself was a Pharisee, one of the top religious leaders of the Jewish community. As a young man, (some say in his early thirties), he became a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the supreme council of the Jewish nation in the time of Christ. There were about seventy-one members in the council and Paul was one of them. He had Roman citizenship by birth; and with this he could enjoy all kinds of privileges in society.

He was also a linguist. As we understand, he could speak at least four different languages very fluently: Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and Aramaic. On this strong language foundation, he had built an admirable ivory tower of scholarship. He was a brilliant and promising young man.

Perhaps Paul was a rich man in various aspects. He had sufficient knowledge in many areas; he occupied a highly respected position in the Jewish nation, both in terms of politics and religious activities. He had knowledge, fame, position, wealth, and power. He was proud of himself. He was self-confident. He relied on these outward accoutrements.

But one day, on his way to Damascus, Paul or Saul as he was then called, met Jesus Christ. Rife with hatred against Christians, he sought them out wherever they were living. On this occasion, Saul, who had severely persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem, got a special letter from the high priest to deal severely with all Christians, men and women, that he might find in Damascus. Scripture says that he was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. . . ." (Acts 9:1). This was indeed a reign of terror. Religious terror no less!

As he and his companions were nearing Damascus, suddenly a dazzling light that was brighter than the high sun flashed about them and Saul fell prostrate on the ground. He immediately lost his eyesight. And there he heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, Why do you persecute me?" And Saul said, "Who are you, Lord?" And the voice answered, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." (See Acts 9:3-5).

He met Jesus there on the way to Damascus. It was this same Jesus who was crucified on the cross. He is the Lord. He is our Savior. He is the Messiah. He was resurrected from the dead. He ascended to heaven and now is sitting on the right hand of the throne of God. But Saul did not know it. At that very moment, when he saw Jesus and heard His voice, when he met Jesus personally, his attitude was totally changed and by the grace of God, he became a new man in Christ. This was signified in his name change, from Saul to Paul. And with great conviction he could then declare, "I am a *servant* or a *slave* of Jesus Christ." For the rest of his life, for about thirty years, the Apostle lived and worked as a faithful servant of

Jesus Christ. He used his knowledge, his health, his talents, his time, his energy, and his property, not for his own glory but for the glory of his master Jesus Christ. He loved to introduce himself to others as a “servant of Jesus” because he knew that he was saved by the grace of God. Truly he was a faithful servant of Christ.

There are many great people in the world today: wealthy people, those with political power, good and influential positions, possessing outstanding talents, and commanding respect. But from among many people, God has chosen us and brought us from the world of darkness, and He has led us into the marvelous light of truth. He has saved us from the depths of our sin, and He has given us eternal life. God has made us His servants, His *douloi*.

We are servants of God. Do we always remember that we have been chosen by God to serve Him and to serve His people? It is easy to say that we are servants of Christ. But it seems that it is not always easy to live as His servants. Therefore the Apostle Peter tells us, “Live as servants of God” (1 Pet 2:16). This is a sobering statement that forces us to acknowledge the question, “Do we live as faithful servants of God?” Let us briefly examine some characteristics of a servant.

### **1. A Servant Has Nothing to Boast about in Himself**

A servant refuses to boast about himself because nothing he has belongs to him. Everything he has belongs to his master: his clothes, knowledge, power, strength, spouse and children, and even his life. Absolutely everything he possesses belongs to his master. He is merely a steward of these things and gifts. Therefore, he cannot boast about anything he has, does, or accomplishes, no matter how beautiful or brilliant. He cannot be proud of anything. Everything that is in his care has been entrusted to him by his owner.

As the servants of God, do we have anything of which we are proud? What is our pride and our glory? Could it be that our academic degrees, polished manners, outstanding knowledge, and competent skills furnish us with pride and glory? What about our positions or the beautiful things that we have in our houses? Maybe even our talents or those of our children dress us in pride? Do we have anything in us, or with us, that we are proud of, such that it replaces the glory of God in our lives? If there is anything in me that produces such pride, then I am not a servant, but a master. Paul says in Rom 3:27, “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.” If there is anything in us that we can boast of, it must be the cross of Jesus Christ. The Apostle teaches in Gal 6:14, “But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Why? Because God’s mercy and grace are resident in the cross of Jesus. As the servant of God, therefore, we do not receive honor and glory, but always give honor and glory to Jesus Christ our Lord.

## 2. A Servant Is to Serve and not to be Served

Service is the servant's work and responsibility as long as he lives as a servant. Christ's purpose for coming into this world was to serve people, no less than a fallen race of rebellious human beings. He Himself declared, "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The disciples of Jesus had a serious problem of pride and self-exaltation. Their primary concern was, "Who is the greatest among us?" They were full of themselves, always reaching for self-aggrandizement. Their chief concern was being "better" than others. They were not willing to serve others but were always ready to be served by others. Jesus knew that was a great problem, and He tried to correct it. He said, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matt 23:12). He also said, "But many that are first will be last, and the last first" (Mark 10:31).

Jesus came to this world to serve others. He has called us to be His servants to serve other people. We have been called by God, not to be served but to serve. Are we sure that we are servants of God? Then we should love other people. We should understand other people. We should honor other people. We should respect other people. In effect, we should actively *serve* other people.

## 3. A Servant Must be Satisfied with his Status as a Servant

If a servant does not abide by this tenet he is not a good servant. He must always be ready to serve. He must like to serve others. He must live only for service.

Are we satisfied with our status as the servants of Christ? Are we always ready to serve? Are we always willing to serve? Do we always like to serve others? As fellow workers for God, do we love, understand, help, and cooperate with each other? When we serve people with a humble spirit, they will know that we are Jesus' servants.

A servant does not seek his own glory but always that of his master. I think this aspect is extremely important. I am not here to praise myself but to praise my master. I am not here for my glory but for the glory of my Master, Jesus Christ. Jesus said in Luke 17:10, "So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" We are all servants of God. Let us serve our God and other people. Let us always remember that we have been chosen, not to be served but to serve. Let us not fight and bicker over position and place of authority, coveting the cherished places, but let us be satisfied with our calling as servants. Let us be satisfied with the status of service, hence, servanthood.



#### **4. A Servant Always Does the Work that his Master Commissions him to Do**

A servant does not do things according to his own will but only according to the will of his master. One of the best illustrations of this principle is found in Gen 24:1-12. I quote it here at length:

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the LORD had blessed him in all things. And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred and take a wife for my son Isaac." The servant said to him, "Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land; must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" Abraham said to him, "See to it that you do not take my son back there. The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, "'To your descendants I will give this land,' he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there." So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter.

Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master; and he arose, and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor. And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at the time of the evening, the time when women go out to draw water. And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, grant me success today, I pray thee, and show steadfast love to my master Abraham."

In this chapter, we see a beautiful and well-known story of Abraham's faithful servant, Eliezer. Before sending his servant to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor, Abraham called him to oath to take a wife from among his own people and not from among the heathen Canaanites. And then Eliezer departed for the city of Nahor. After several days travel, when he arrived at the entrance of the city, near the well of water, he earnestly entreated God for direction. Scripture testifies that before he had finished his prayer a girl came to get water. From the brief conversation that ensued, Eliezer realized that God had answered his prayer and that Rebekah was chosen as Isaac's wife.

Now Rebekah ran home and rehearsed the entire incident. Her brother Laban dashed outside to meet the man at the spring and invited him home. Eliezer was invited to the big dining table at Laban's house. The table was probably full of delicious food and after several days of extensive and tiresome travel Eliezer must have been very hungry. But foremost in his mind was fulfilling the task, the objective, set out for him by his master. And even though he may have been starving, Eliezer said, "I will not eat until I have told my errand" (v. 33). Here we see a beautiful picture of a faithful servant. He never forgot his errand as the

servant of Abraham. Performing his duty as a servant was more important than food, or sightseeing, or his personal need. What determination! "I will not eat until I have told you my errand."

Then he told his hosts the long story about his master Abraham, how God had led his life and had bestowed great blessings upon him and his household. He also told them how he had met Rebekah at the well, and how quickly his prayer was answered by God. His story was enough to convince Laban and his house: "Then Laban and Bethuel answered, 'The thing comes from the LORD; we cannot speak to you bad or good. Behold, Rebekah is before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken'" (vv. 50,51).

Now the servant had successfully finished his duty. He proved to be a loyal and faithful servant to his master. His mission was accomplished. Then he and the men who were with him ate and drank and spent the night. When they arose in the morning, Eliezer said to Laban's family, "Send me back to my master" (v. 54). Rebekah's mother was astonished. So soon! Her mother protested, "Let the maiden remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go" (v. 55). This is like saying, "Your job is done. I think you did a good job for your master. You deserve some rest. There are some nice places to visit for sightseeing. There are also some good shopping centers. Why don't you go and buy some gifts for your wife and children?" But this faithful servant was not to be distracted. He replied, "Do not delay me, since the LORD has prospered my way; let me go that I may go to my master" (v. 56). His only concern was to do the will of his master. He did not seek his own pleasure. He did not idle away his time. He did not squander his master's money. Instead he thought of his master and the work his master had assigned him to do. And he did all things to the best of his ability in order to satisfy the will of his master.

My dear fellow workers, we are servants of Christ. Our Lord has chosen us to serve him. Let us do our best in the work the Lord has given to us, and let us do it according to His will and for His glory.

Once an evangelist visited a certain college campus. At the gate of the college he met a young teacher and asked him what he taught at the college. He answered that he taught students about Christ. So the evangelist thought that he was a Bible teacher. A few minutes later, he met another teacher and asked him the same question, "What are you teaching here in the college?" He too answered, "I teach students about Jesus Christ." So the evangelist thought that he was another Bible teacher. That day he met a few more teachers and put the same question to each of them. Without fail, their answers were more or less the same, "I teach students about Jesus Christ. In fact, they all taught different subjects in the college, such as English, philosophy, psychology, biology and so on. But the conviction of all those teachers was that they had been called by God to instruct students about Jesus Christ in all the courses they were teaching.

Paul puts it well in 2 Tim 1:11, "For this gospel I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher." Regardless of our specific responsibilities, our main

work assigned to us by Christ is to teach the Gospel and be His witnesses. This should be an integral part of our daily agenda.

### **5. A Servant Has No Authority in and of Himself**

The actions and activities of a servant are executed according to his master's authority. Without his master's authority he is nothing. Nobody will pay attention to him. Nobody will listen to him. Nobody will consider his words as authoritative or trustworthy. But when he comes with the authority of his master the story is different, especially if his master is the king of the nation.

As the servants of God we operate under the authority of God. We dare not operate on our own wisdom or knowledge, especially when we have the authority of the scriptures, the word of God. But if we do not know the word of God, how can we use the authority of that word? Are we diligent students of the word of God? I hope we are.

In closing, I will read a few verses from the Gospel of Matthew.

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with the drunken, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and will put him with the hypocrites; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Matt 24:45-51

We have been saved by the grace of God. Without God's merciful grace, we are nothing and our destiny will be eternal destruction. By His grace, God has forgiven our sins and granted us the gift of eternal life and made us His servants.

We are not keeping the Sabbath in order to be saved, but we are observing the Sabbath because we have been saved by the grace of God. We do not return tithe and give offerings in order to be saved, but we return tithe and give offerings because we have been saved by the grace of God. We are not working for the church to be saved, but we are working for the church because we have been saved by the grace of God. By His grace, God has chosen us to serve Him, His church, and His people. What we need to do is to be faithful to Him and the work that He has given to us until the day when our Master comes to take us home to heaven. Let us ask God to bless us so that we can be, and work, as faithful servants of God all our lives.