

Chapter 7.

The Dignity of Servanthood

Who is this God whom we were made to serve?

In Psalm 50:21 God says to one alienated from him, "You thought that I was one like yourself."

A true God does not exist unless he is a being apart from all other beings, unique and incomprehensible. In order to "know him, we must begin by acknowledging that we cannot completely understand God. For in order to be God, he cannot in his essence be what we are. He is a being to be worshipped, with utter awe and reverence, before whom we realize the finiteness of our humanity. I cannot truly comprehend the significance of his love for me until I recognize that God is Love itself, infinite, eternal, all-encompassing Love. Only then will I know what it means to be loved. No human love can offer that quality of love, yet that is what I need. And only as I learn what it means to be so loved will I know what it means to be truly loving.

But how can we know this God whom we cannot understand? Since only God can know God, he must somehow be translated into terms we can comprehend. Nature tells us of his power and majesty, but though his character is attested to in the things which he has made, he is more than his creation. "God is spirit," Jesus tells us, "and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." We know, then, that the understanding of God is spiritually discerned.

But God is a Person--a Person with whom we can relate as persons. This we know because he chose to reveal himself in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The fact of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is in itself unfathomable. We can scarcely comprehend, far less appreciate, the incredible fact that Christ Jesus our Lord who was the *morphe* of God, should choose to set aside that identity, taking instead the identity of a servant.

The Greek word *morphe*, used in Philippians 2:6, 7, translated "the form of," means the actual nature or essence subsisting in the individual and retained as long as the individual himself exists.

"Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross".
(Philippians 2:5-8)

Jesus Christ, though he could not in essence cease to be God, deliberately chose the identity of a servant, that he might subject himself in obedience to the will of the Father, to the extent of dying on the cross! Oh, that there were words to describe the magnitude of his condescension, the venture of love, in this incomparable act of God!

We are not called upon to describe it in words, but to live it. Herein is the very essence of the Christian life. In his act of complete identification with us and the giving up of his life on our behalf God in the Person of Jesus Christ, both set us the example and provided us the means by which human beings may be redeemed and live redemptively with one another.

Because God in Christ became one of us, setting aside the prerogatives of his identity as God, in order to live our life and die our death, we may enter his family as beloved children. Infused once again with the life of

God, we become temples in whom Christ himself dwells to restore in us the image of God!

He who was God, emptied himself, humbled himself, became obedient unto death, even death on a cross, the most degrading form of punishment. This he chose to do. And because he made this deliberate choice to set aside his own human will in order to accede to the will of the Father ("Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done!"), "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:8-11).

In this is outlined for us a way of life unique in society, for we are exhorted to have this same mind-set, to do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than our- selves. We are to look not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others, resulting in a mutual exchange of encouragement in Christ--the fruits of which will be love, affection, sympathy, and full acknowledgment of the work of God's spirit in our lives.

What a beautiful picture of harmonious and fruitful relationships! How far removed from any trace of posturing, pretended humility, or of a pseudo-submission, submission which is simply a manipulative skill designed to accomplish our own ends. How totally different from a self- demeaning, repressive acquiescence, produced by fear or a faulty self-image.

This portrait of our Lord has all the elements of wholesome humanity, and contains all of the criteria by which we may test the authenticity of our own relatedness toward God and others. The Apostle Peter exhorts all Christians to servanthood, involving personal sacrifice and suffering, saying,

"For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

"By his wounds you have been healed," he tells us, and reminds us that this redemption found us "straying like sheep and returned us to the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls."

God, through Peter, uses the marriage relationship to illustrate the effectiveness of this kind of submissive attitude: A husband straying like a sheep may be persuaded to return to his Shepherd by the reverent and chaste behavior of a wife whose spirit is subject to Christ. The healing of humanity was accomplished by the death and life of Christ Jesus who was willingly subject to the Father's purpose. This healing may be extended through us to the hurting, straying people around us, when we choose to make ourselves available to God's purpose for them.

By our Lord's example, we learn that a submissive spirit, a commitment to servanthood, begins with a strong and authentic sense of identity. Jesus Christ was God; there was no doubt about the fact, nor was there any doubt of his awareness of the fact (John 10: 30). He, God the Son, was equal with God the Father. In the Godhead there exists perfect unity, oneness, and harmony, and of course perfect equality.

However, seeing that we were helpless creatures, lacking in ourselves the resources necessary to meet our needs, God elected to make himself available to humanity. How could God the Son, equal with God the Father, become his obedient servant? How could God become vulnerable to suffering and death? Only by choosing to become man, for man was designed to serve God. Only if he who never knew sin should choose to be sin, so that he could satisfy the penalty of our sin: death on a cross.

God did not pretend to become one of us; this was not Deity at play! This was God who is Love, loving. This was God at work to bring us to rebirth through his travail and agony. This was God the Son refusing to assert his right to be equal with God, so that our needs might be met through his love-offering. Can we grasp it? In this supreme act of Love, God has told us that love knows no equal rights; that love's incentive makes possible a transfer of identity in which we become servants to one another, deferring to one another's needs, giving priority to one another's interests. Willing to pluck out our eyes that others may see, to be the grain of wheat

which dies redemptively.

The Apostle Peter, who enjoins us all to a life of servanthood, first establishes who we are:

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people...Once you were no people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:9,10).

"Live as free men...but live as servants of God," Peter says, for God's people have an identity which is secured by the character of God himself, and being a servant is no threat to that security. It is simply the means by which we may identify with Christ's own act of love, and so, Peter says, "Be subject for the Lord's sake...mindful of God...for God's approval."

The Apostle Paul speaks in concert with Peter:

"Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God". (Ephesians 5:1)

Then, having established who we are, and citing again the example of Christ himself, he says:

"Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ". (Ephesians 5:21).

And again, as various relationships are cited, the basis for subjection is Christ's example, our love service to one another being "as servants of Christ," "as to the Lord", "rendering service with a good will, as to the Lord and not to men."

Christ's example also teaches us that authentic submission is not reluctant nor grudging! Nor is it the result of imposed authority. It is rather a chosen, deliberate, voluntary, love-initiated response to another's need. It is an act of worship to God, whom we serve in serving others. In no way, then, is authentic submission a violation of our humanity. It is appropriate to the purpose for which we were created, since in serving his creatures we are serving and worshipping our Creator. It acknowledges the dignity of our humanity because it is service freely rendered from a will surrendered to the loving purpose of God.

The world's list of great ones includes such as Napoleon, Lenin, Alexander, Machiavelli, none of whom is acknowledged for his humility! The Lord Jesus Christ, through whom and for whom all things were created (See Colossians 1:16), says that those who humble themselves like children are greatest in his kingdom. He further tells us, "He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted". (Matthew 23 :11,12). Peter and James both tell us that as we humble ourselves, God will exalt us. The point, of course, is not that we purchase status with humility. That is the way the world thinks. Rather, a truly humble spirit makes it possible for God to accomplish his purposes in us, to elevate us to godliness. That consummates the purpose for which He made us and redeemed us, and brings us the highest joy and fulfillment.

Again, it is not a game. Humility is not to be used as a bargain chip for greatness, to look good in God's eyes or anyone else's. Humility happens to us when we least expect it and when we are least aware of it. It is the by-product of a realistic appraisal of who we are before God, the appropriate acknowledgment of our needed dependence upon him. It is in no way a denial of authentic personhood, since Christ Jesus sets the pattern for humility in his surrender to death. It is the absence of egocentricity, or self-focus; it is seeing ourselves and others from Christ's point of view. It is the attitude which motivates us to set aside our self-centered ambitions and desires in deference to God's work in both our lives and others', giving precedence to God's plan rather than our own. It is in this sense that we "consider others better than ourselves." It is an affirmation of who we truly are: God's own person, in whom neither conceit nor self-deprecation is appropriate.

Nor is humility a subtle way of patronizing people. There is no condescension in our identifying with another's need; temptation, trials, and failure are common to all. We are equally in need of forgiveness, mercy, love, and grace. Apart from the activity of God's Spirit, the human heart is far from altruistic. We serve in order to be served; we love in order to be loved; forgive in order to be forgiven. We may only serve with self-detachment when we recognize ourselves as agents of God's activity, unable to initiate redemptive attitudes apart from him, but free to be godlike with God in control of both our willing and our doing. (Philippians 2:12, 13)

Martin Luther said it so well:

"A Christian is the most free lord of all and subject to none; a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to everyone."

The Apostle Peter said it first:

"Live as free men (generic, including women), yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God." (1 Peter 2:16)

The Apostle Paul agrees:

"For you were called to freedom, brethren (again, generic); only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another." Galatians 5:13

A free heart is one discharged of self-concern by the confidence that a loving Father-God is in control of all circumstances. A Father-God needing only the consent of our will to release the flow of his character through us, making us adequate for every contingency of life. A spirit thus freed can respond, rather than react, to others. A strong sense of personhood comes from self-forgetfulness, rather than self-absorption. We find ourselves in losing ourselves, because we were made to serve God, not ourselves. When the focus of our thoughts and actions is on ourselves, we become neurotic in every dimension: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. But "losing" ourselves is not simply functional; it is a deliberate choice to follow our Lord's pattern, to set aside our rights (real or fancied), including equality with others, in favor of becoming expendable for Christ's sake in the full dignity of Jesus' own incredible words: "But I am among you as one who serves!"

Servanthood, submission, humility! Three beautiful, healing, redemptive words. This is God's expedient for resolving the tensions in human relationships. And he, God, took his own medicine! Shall we obey this Lover of our souls?

[Chapter 8](#)

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