

SERVANTHOOD

“LET ME BE AS CHRIST TO YOU”

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As someone who came alive to Christ during the “Jesus Movement” in the 70’s, certain songs contributed to my spiritual developmental. One such song was Richard Gillard’s simple chorus, “The Servant Song.” I chuckle now to think back on how mellow and tender-hearted our college fellowship was when we sang together, “Will you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you? Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.”³²

I’m also astonished and a bit ashamed to say that the servant-oriented impulse of my early years as a Christ-follower diminished as I engaged in vocational pastoral ministry. I certainly understood servanthood to be a disposition of all true Christ-followers. I had taught that to “serve one another” was an expression of loving your neighbor as yourself. Certainly “service” was a spiritual gift. And in my tradition, we often said to one another, “If there’s anything you need me to do, just ask.”

However, until I encountered the virtue of servanthood, manifest so consistently in my interactions with Sovereign Grace people, I would have perceived “service” as a lesser gift. I would have considered it more likely an expression of mature emotional intelligence. I would have thought of it, mainly, as a winsome trait which organizations (including churches) gained through effective customer service training, but not necessarily as a fruit of the functional centrality of the gospel. My perspective has changed.

“How can I serve you?” “Would it serve you if I . . .” “We’re here to serve.” “It is pure joy for us to serve you.” I expect that members and regular attenders of Sovereign Grace churches immediately recognize this vernacular. But until I engaged with Sovereign Grace folk for the first time in 2006, those words were not in my parlance.

We naturally tend to emulate those we admire. I suspect that servanthood, both its vocabulary and practice, have become more discernible in my life, on account of the high regard I have for those who have served my wife and me so well since we joined Sovereign Grace Churches eleven years ago. Servanthood is something we have “caught.”

³² Richard Gillard. “The Servant Song” Scripture in Song, 1977.

However, it's also clear that servanthood is not merely something we "catch." Servanthood is a distinct virtue born of gospel doctrine, and produced in our lives through the active work of God the Holy Spirit.

Servanthood Displayed and Commended

In the final section of his majestic letter to "all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints" (Rom. 1:7), the apostle Paul commends several individuals for their outstanding acts of service. There is "Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae" (Rom. 16:1), someone whom he exhorts the Roman Christians to help "in whatever way she may need" (Rom. 16:2). Paul sends greetings to Prisca and Aquilla, his "fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 16:3), whom he says, "risked their necks" for his life (Rom. 16:4). Then there are Tryphaena and Tryphosa whom Paul identifies as "workers in the Lord," as well as Persis "who has worked hard in the Lord" (Rom. 16:12). Paul draws attention to the mother of Rufus, who had been like a mother to Paul as well (Rom. 16:13).

From the "calling up" of those listed in this brief roster, we learn that servanthood includes helping people in need, risk-taking for others' good, hard work on others' behalf, and mother-like care. Paul attributes the same virtue to Titus, a fellow worker for others' benefit (2 Cor. 8:23), and Philemon whom he commends for refreshing the hearts of the saints (Phlm. 7).

Servanthood, then, seems to be a somewhat broad category for actively and intentionally pursuing the benefit and well-being of others. And though the apostle Paul attributes servanthood to a vast array of people, who serve in a variety of ways" (1 Cor. 12:5), the consummate display of servanthood is witnessed in the person and life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

During his final meal with his twelve disciples, Jesus famously knelt down and donned a towel to communicate that the purpose of his coming was not to be served, but rather to serve and to lay down his life, sacrificially, as ransom for many. His entire aim was our ultimate well-being. That is, to cleanse us from the filth and shame of our sin, and to restore us to a right relationship with the Father. And further, his purpose was that we might watch and learn from his sacrifice, and to love and serve one another in a similar way. Jesus said,

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 an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you (John 13:13–15, see also Mark 10:43–45).

It would seem clear that it is impossible to yield to Christ's lordship and follow him whole-heartedly without servanthood being evident in our lives. The less we're inclined to serve, the less like Jesus we are.

Servanthood Commanded

To serve, then, is a gospel claim on the life of every believer. Paul writes, “Through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:13b–14). It is right to understand servanthood as a powerful and practical means of building up a spiritual community. He writes again,

There are varieties of service, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good
(1 Cor. 12:5–7).

To the Romans, Paul says, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them . . . if service, in our serving” (Rom. 12:6–7).

Nevertheless, servanthood is also more than a useful “gift” given to and exercised by some. Servanthood is an evidence of God’s saving grace. The apostle John writes,

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers . . . By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers (1 John 3:14, 16).

Servanthood is a gospel issue. In Luke 10:25–37, a lawyer comes to Jesus and asks him the most important question in the world. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answers the man with a question. “What does the Bible say? How do you interpret it?” The lawyer, being the knowledgeable person he was, says that the biblical basis for salvation can be summed up in the commands, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

But Jesus, the discernor of hearts, knows that the lawyer’s agenda springs from a desire to justify himself. What he really wants to know is, “Who don’t I have to love?” “What is the bare minimum I have to do to inherit eternal life?” But the question Jesus wants the lawyer, and us, to ask is, “Who can I be a neighbor to today?” Who can I serve? To whom can I be as Christ?

This is profoundly instructive in shaping the gospel virtue of servanthood. The only ones who will inherit eternal life are those who are learning to love their neighbors as themselves.

According to the Great Commandment, there are two kinds of love. One is the way we love God. That is, loving with all our whole being. Since God has no needs and is utterly self-sufficient (Acts 17:24–25; Ps. 50:9–11), we don’t love him by giving him anything, meeting his needs, or satisfying his longings. We love

God by delighting in him. We love him by enjoying him with heart, soul, strength and mind, as the object of our pleasure.

The other way to love is by meeting needs, showing kindness, bearing burdens, and being merciful. In other words, we love by serving. That is, we love the way we love ourselves. Scripture assumes what we already know this. There's no one on earth who hates his own flesh. By nature, we are utterly devoted to nourishing, and cherishing, and earnestly pursuing our own well-being (Eph. 5:29). Do you want to know what servanthood looks like? Consider how concerned and committed we are to meeting our own needs, then do that for others.

Servanthood and the Functional Centrality of the Gospel

Self-centered love of ourselves is perhaps the most significant obstacle to servanthood. When my first impulse is to actively pursue my own well-being, I'm faced with two problems. One, I quickly recognize my limitations in accomplishing that goal. I'm a "black hole" of need. Satisfying all my self-serving desires is impossible when relying upon me alone. If I'm insufficient to meet my own needs, how (and why) would I offer myself and my resources to meet the needs of others? Second, I'm far less motivated to involve myself in serving, and caring, and meeting the needs of others if I'm anxious about my own needs being met. I want. I have limitations. Perhaps I won't get what I want.

This is where it becomes more obvious that the best way to love ourselves is to love God with all our being: value him, entrust ourselves to him, and pursue our soul-satisfaction in him. When I believe that all that I need for my peace and joy will be supplied by my faithful, all-sufficient, infinitely competent, steadfastly loving heavenly Father, then I'm set free from insisting that I get what I want exactly when I want it. I'm content in trusting that he is pursuing my best interests with goodness and mercy all the days of my life. And I'm confident that he will do so, because he has purchased the guarantee of the fulfillment of every promise he has made to me, in the death of his dearly loved Son (2 Cor. 1:20).

Obedying the great and first commandment (Matt. 22:38) is then the best and only way we can love and serve and bless and be actively involved in seeking the joy and well-being of others. In fact, the very best way we love and serve our neighbors (and enemies) is to lead them, by our witness, in word and caring servanthood, to love God with all their being.

Servanthood and Our Family of Churches

My first ever visit to a Sovereign Grace Church happened during WorshipGod 2006. I was staying with a friend who worked in Washington D.C., and who had an apartment in Pentagon City. It was a long Metro ride back and forth. Following the first night of the conference, I stood alone at the bus stop across the street from the church. It was late and dark. As the last car left the church parking lot, they waved me over and asked where I needed to go. When I said the Gaithersburg Metro Station, they offered me a ride.

The next day, I crossed paths with this Sovereign Grace Church family again. They immediately expressed how thankful they were to God that they had found me in the crowd, because they wanted to invite me to be a part of their family for the rest of the week. They took me to their home. They served me dinner each evening of the conference thereafter. They were at the Metro station to meet me in the morning, and they dropped me off again at night. Their generosity, their hospitality, their care, their sacrifice, and perhaps most of all, their discernible joy in meeting my needs left an impression on me that I will never forget.

Of course, we can make servanthood something that we shouldn't. We can turn servanthood into an idol. We can make it a means to feeling good about ourselves. However, serving is part of God's creative design for each of us who have been joined to Christ (Eph. 2:10). Serving, according to the strength that God supplies glorifies God as the giver (1 Pet. 4:11) and is nourishing to our souls (John 4:34).

If humility is the foundation of the Shaping Virtues of Sovereign Grace Churches, then servanthood is the capstone. It certainly attracted me. It provoked me. It stirred me. It compelled me.

“Let Me Be as Christ to You”

In 2011, the Lord kindly supplied the faith my wife and I needed to leave our jobs and attend the Sovereign Grace Pastors College. In 2013, by God's grace, we planted Emmaus Road Church in Sioux Falls, SD. It has been one of our greatest joys to serve the people whom God has been building together. It has been one of our greatest joys to serve alongside our dearest friends on earth in Sovereign Grace. We have learned that servanthood is the substance of a gospel-centered life.

“[Christ] died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him, who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 5:15).

And now, as that old chorus testifies, “We are pilgrims on the journey. We're together on this road.” And as we have seen and learned from God's Word, and from our brothers and sisters in Sovereign Grace, “we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.”³³

³³ Richard Gillard. “The Servant Song” Scripture in Song, 1977.