

Pentecost 17 / October 2, 2022

Luke 17:10

“So also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

Servants

What does it mean to be a servant of Christ? The word ‘servant’ doesn’t capture the deep meaning expressed by the New Testament use of the Greek word. The Greek word is traditionally rendered in English as ‘slave’. It is seldom used now, because of associations to the 18th century slave trade. Nevertheless, neither the word, ‘slave,’ or the more neutral ‘servant,’ capture fully the meaning expressed in the biblical usage of the word. In the ancient world as today, servants were hired for money and their labour purchased for a certain period of time. As employees they were free to leave, could be fired or laid off. Servants could be hired, but slaves often served against their will, or as the result of a legal penalty, often incurred through debt. Slavery in the ancient world was not driven as much by racism as it was driven by poverty, debt and exploitation of the powerless. This kind of slavery continues to exist today.

When Christ speaks of believers as ‘servants’ or ‘slaves’, He is not speaking according to the way of the world. He is taking human categories and giving them a heavenly meaning. To be a servant in the world can be a positive as well as a negative experience. To be a slave of another human being is degrading and offensive. But to be a slave or a servant of God in Christ is liberation from servitude to sin, which leads to death. It is release from slavery to the devil and our sinful nature. When Christ calls us servants or slaves, He is taking a human concept and giving it a new, different and better meaning. Like the parables which cannot be understood with the mind of the world, but must be spiritually discerned to be understood, the meaning of the word rendered as ‘servant/slave,’ is understood by believers through the action of Jesus in His life as our servant and through His death as our Saviour. He served us unto death on the cross that we might be set free from slavery to sin. We are unworthy servants, because of our sin. Jesus sets us free from slavery to sin and makes us worthy to be called the children of God in forgiveness, received through faith in Him and the washing of His blood in baptism. Jesus is the Servant who is worthy to be praised.

One day the disciples argued as to which of them was the greatest. They were not arguing about servanthood, but about personal honour. Jesus said, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.” He wasn’t giving advice on how to gain glory through service. He was talking about forgetting the concepts of ‘greatness,’ ‘glory’ and ‘being first,’ entirely. Being a servant of Christ is not about us. It’s about others. Most importantly servanthood is about Christ. Our place as servants in His kingdom is the result of His service to us on the cross. God expresses the fulness of His love in the service of Christ.

In the world, service is an economic activity. People hire other people to work for them. Servers have a monetary value to their employers. Servers are paid to work for others, the employer and the customers. That’s not the relationship we have with God in Christ. God doesn’t need our service. He could do it Himself if He wanted. Consider everything God does and has done by Himself. Our relationship with God is based on love, not money or service we render. God serves us in love and in love calls us to express His love in our relationship with Him and others. Our service in His kingdom is a response to the surpassing service He renders to each one of us daily in Christ, in the forgiveness of our sins.

The bible calls Christians, ‘slaves and servants of Christ.’ In the ancient world, slaves were purchased with money as an economic investment to the owner. People bought slaves to work and make money for them. Believers have been purchased by God with the blood of Christ, not for any profit we can bring to Him, but simply because He loves us. God purchased us from slavery to sin which leads to death, so we would live in the freedom of the children of God. He purchased us not with gold or silver, but with the precious blood of Christ. Love, not profit, is God’s motivation to purchase us.

In the ancient world slaves were purchased and servants hired for the benefits they could render their master. People hire employees for the same reasons today. God chooses and calls us, not because of what we can do for Him. He calls us in Christ because He loves us. The greatest indignity humans can inflict on each other, is to sell or purchase other human beings for slavery. The greatest dignity bestowed on a human being is to be purchased by God through the blood of Christ. The sacrifice of Christ transformed the cross from a symbol of curse and

death into the paramount symbol of blessing and life. Christ through His service has given new and better meaning to the word 'servant' and 'slave'. In His blood we are released from bondage to sin which leads to death and given adoption as children of God.

To be a servant/slave of Christ means to be forgiven our sins, so we are not under the condemnation of eternal death. It means to have the guilt of sin lifted from our hearts, so we can live each day with clear consciences. It means we have a household relationship with our heavenly Father, who treats us neither as slaves or servants (as the world uses those terms), but as children, dearly loved for the sake of Christ Jesus. To be a servant of Christ means to receive the service of His love in forgiveness, through the sacrifice of His cross. To be a slave/servant of Christ means to receive the service of God's love through His Spirit every day, as we await the fullness of His service in our share of Christ's resurrection.

To be a servant of Christ means living in response to His love, according to the pattern of His love. We love because He loves us. He loves because He is love. We serve because He serves us. Service means living for God and others. Even as Jesus would never tempt us to sin or put a stumbling block before our faith, we serve by showing the same respect for others, especially for our sisters and brothers in Christ. We suspend our rights for the sake of others. In the letter to the Corinthians St. Paul wrote, "If food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat again, lest I cause my brother to stumble." He's saying he would forgo his rights as a Christian to prevent another Christian from being offended, doubting and perhaps losing her faith. Being a servant means giving up our rights to bless and benefit others, for that is what Christ does for us.

Being a servant of Christ means living in the forgiveness we receive from God through Him. Does it sound like a lot to be asked to forgive someone seven times in a day? And bear in mind that in this gospel Jesus doesn't say anything about the person returning each time to say sorry. You better believe it sounds like a lot! That's why He said it! If someone sinned against me seven times, it wouldn't make any difference if they said sorry or not. I wouldn't be in the mood for forgiving. The point is that God does this and more for us every day, for the sake of Christ Jesus. Being a servant is appreciating and expressing God's forgiveness, which we receive beyond measure daily for the sake of our servant Christ Jesus.

Being a servant of Christ is not seeking glory for ourselves. It is seeking to glorify God with our lives, in response to the service of His love. Being a servant of Christ is not seeking a reward for our service, but instead rejoicing in the reward of Christ's service, which He earned through the suffering of His death and gives to us as a gift of grace through faith in His name. Being a servant of Christ is not doing good things for God. It's receiving God's goodness in Christ, realizing that the good things we do are the fruits of His Spirit working in us. Being a servant is receiving God's grace in our hearts through faith in Christ and allowing Christ to work His grace in other people's lives through us.

We are unworthy servants and we are worthy servants. These two things sound contradictory, but they are both true. We are unworthy servants, because we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Jesus is the worthy servant. He is God's Son from eternity, conceived and born in time by the working of the Holy Spirit. He alone lived without sin. He fulfilled the law through His sinless life. He suffered its penalty for sinful humanity through His sacrificial death. Jesus makes us worthy to live and serve as children of the heavenly Father through the forgiveness of sin. And so, we sing, "Worthy is Christ the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God." In Christ we are children of God, made worthy to serve in His name.

God bless us always with the service of His love in Christ Jesus. In His name. Amen