

# The King Who Came To Serve

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by David W. Henderson *Discipleship Journal* Issue #117 May/June 2000

"[He] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Phil. 2:7).

I closed the cover of the massive novel, stretching to shake off the fictional world I'd inhabited for the past couple of hours, and rose to go to the dinner table. It was Christmas break of my senior year in college, and I was at the home of a good friend and his family in Denver.

The book I'd just finished, *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand, was deeply attractive to me as a spiritual seeker. Its thesis: Putting our efforts anywhere short of meeting our own needs is foolish and self-destructive. Happiness is our highest moral purpose, and selfishness the greatest virtue. In a moving finale, lead character John Galt argues passionately, "A doctrine that gives you, as an ideal, the role of a sacrificial animal seeking slaughter on the altar of others is giving you death as your standard."

Still mulling over the book, I sat down at the table where Doug and his sisters were in the middle of a conversation. They were talking about how they, as followers of Christ, could become less preoccupied with self and more concerned for others. Fuses started blowing in my brain. "Wait!" I argued, picking up where Galt left off. "Don't you see what a waste that is? It's the moral equivalent of suicide, throwing your life away on other people!"

But my friends knew something I had yet to learn: Jesus inverts everything. Nowhere is this more obvious than in His practice of, and call to, self-abasing servanthood.

## Going down?

When Jesus came to earth, He came not grabbing on but letting go. He emptied Himself of His kingly majesty, set aside His divine power, and stuffed into one ordinary human body so small a portion of His former might and majesty as to be unrecognizable by all but a few.

But that isn't all, not by half. The one whose very divine nature *defines* freedom set aside that holy prerogative as well, relinquishing not only His glory but also His will. Majesty and splendor enough to eclipse all the world's wonders, power greater than gravity itself, the glory of a thousand suns all gathered into one being—yet somewhere between heaven and earth His transporter seems to have misfired, and the second person of the trinity plummeted into the body of a simple servant.

From first to last, Jesus' public ministry is the picture of a servant's determination to serve the wishes of another. "For I have come down from heaven," He explained to the uncomprehending crowds, "not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38). And so He did, going everywhere the Father sent Him (John 7:28–29), doing nothing but what the Father directed Him to do (John 5:19–20), and teaching only those things the Father told Him to say (John 7:16; John 8:28).

And from first to last that resolve was challenged. What was Jesus taunted with in the wilderness if not the temptation to think first about His own needs, to take back His yielded will and serve Himself (Luke 4:1–13)? Yet His determination was unwavering, even bolstered, after those 40 days without anything to eat. "My food," said Jesus not long after, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:34).

And when was the "opportune time" (Luke 4:13) that Satan chose to return with the same temptation? It was that moment in the garden when Jesus faced the agony of His imminent death (Matthew 26:36–44). Yet here, too, He remained determined to the end. "Not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

Jesus began to die long before His death on the cross. He died as He stepped onto the elevator in the heavenlies, pushed the button for the ground floor, and so began His long descent into servanthood. He died again as He stumbled, scorched and hounded, through the wilderness. And Jesus died yet again as He anguished on His knees in the olive grove.

Such is the way of the servant. And in that way Jesus bids us follow.

### **More Like the Master**

When the twelve wound up in a spat over which of them deserved the greatest favor in the coming kingdom, Jesus quickly reminded them of the true standard of greatness: His own pattern of self-sacrifice.

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. —Mark 10:43–45

In His final hours Jesus reinforced this, etching into the minds of His disciples a picture of the self-emptying descent He'd made and to which He called them. The guest of honor stood, stripped off His robe, garbed Himself as the lowest of household servants, and knelt to scrub off the manure and mud from the feet of His followers.

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master. —John 13:14–16

Far more than a call to the foot-washing business, this is a reenactment of heaven emptying itself for the sake of earth. In so doing, Jesus set an example for all of us who would count ourselves as His followers.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. —Phil. 2:3–7

Jesus calls each of us to a whole new self-understanding. We are God's servants. Sons and daughters, yes, but servants nonetheless.

### **At Your Service**

What is a servant? Someone whose heart is intent upon, and whose will is bound to, the will and wishes of another. If I am your servant, what you say goes. You have the last word.

Perhaps the best biblical image of this single-minded resolve to meet the needs of another lies in the spare words of Psalm 123:2: "As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God."

The master moves his finger in command, and the servant—while capable of ignoring or debating the merits of the directive—simply obeys. He does not waffle, hedge, debate, and eventually acquiesce. He obeys. A true servant is one who has learned to subdue the defiant autonomy of self and to subject the will to the wishes of another.

One of the most provocative practices of men and women in biblical times was the custom of referring to themselves in conversation with God as "your servant." Consider the child Samuel, who responded to the Lord's voice by saying, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:9). Mary's acquiescent spirit before the angel of the Lord is revealed in her words, "I am the Lord's servant . . . May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). And other examples abound. Abraham, Moses, and David regularly addressed themselves to God as "your servant," and Paul, Peter, James, and Jude all opened their letters with this same self-description: "servant of the Lord." We discover this is consistent with the way God views His followers, referring to them often as "my servant Moses," "my servant David," "my servant Caleb," or "Israel, my servant." In God's economy, His people are His servants.

Still, the word catches in our throats.

Letters from the close of the 18th century often ended with this standard ascription of service: "I am, with due respect, your obedient, humble servant." But over time, the closing shriveled into a mere formality: "I am, etc." I have to admit that I am much more comfortable identifying myself as the Lord's etcetera (bold proclaimer? wise leader? faithful minister?) than as His humble, obedient servant.

## **Me First**

The challenge, of course, is that when God plants His Spirit within us, He doesn't excise our will in the same operation. That internal free agent remains, stubbornly persisting in its concern for self.

When I push the button to change channels with my remote, it doesn't have to decide whether or not to carry out my request. It has no mind of its own. It is a mere switching device. Human beings, however, are no mere robots. We have wills, and it is precisely here that we feel the rub of the call to servanthood. God makes a request and we . . . think about it.

Over the past three months, as I've been writing this article, I've come to see anew how deeply rooted is my nasty habit of thinking of myself first. It emerges at every turn: work, marriage, home, church.

I suspect I'm not alone. Sinners that we are, all of us—especially in the free and wealthy world of the West—feel a sense of entitlement. Lurking in the back of our minds is a vague but powerful sense that we *deserve* to be tended to, to have our needs met, and we feel put out when we have to set aside our carefully cultivated needs and wants for the sake of another. This is the siren song of the displaced self within: "What about *me*?"

I've been forced to confront my selfish expectations as I've followed Christ into the demands and privileges of ministry. Three years ago I was in a delightful ministry position in the rich panorama of the Colorado mountains. I was comfortable and content and had no thought of leaving. The Lord, however, had other plans. He began to ready me for both a greater and a harder work, using passages such as Jeremiah 10:23—"I know, O Lord, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps"—to pry loose my grip on my present happy circumstances.

In His providence, God called me to take the helm of a church far from the people and position and beauty and community I had so come to love. It is a special church, and many parts of the task have been a great joy and privilege. But other parts have not been so easy. Silly Putty is like concrete compared to the stretching I've gone through. God has had much to teach me.

Not long ago I was startled to realize I was feeling trapped, not in the church where I now serve but in ministry itself. "Wait a minute! When do I get to vote? When do I get to pick my life circumstances?"

Turns out I had managed to invert the universe, forgetting that it is I who exist for the sake of God, not God who exists for me. "You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay!" (Isaiah 29:16; see also Jeremiah 18:1–6).

It is God's prerogative to do with me whatever may best serve His kingdom purposes. Is this not the captivating subplot of the book of Jeremiah: God's right to the prophet's service, hard though it be?

Recently I was turning onto a highway on-ramp not far from my house when a car coming from the other direction pulled right in front of me. I hit my brakes, waited impatiently for the offender to go past, and then went on, bugged by the insolence of this pushy driver. The next time I was at the intersection the same thing happened. This time I was more put out. But then I noticed something. The yield sign faced me, not the other person. Turns out I was the offending party.

Traffic Law No. 37 for the highway of servanthood: When we pull up to an intersection with the Lord of the universe, the yield sign always faces us.

### **As You Wish**

How does a person subdue the will? Simple: execution. Much as I wish the answer were a tad less extreme, a capital solution is required. So long as the self breathes, it resists. Hence the practice known as mortification, putting to death the insistent whines and pleas of the will. The prescription traces all the way back to the first doctor of souls. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). When Jesus talks about taking up our crosses, He does not have life's burdens in mind. In Jesus' day, carrying a cross meant only one thing: a walk to the gallows.

Ayn Rand was remarkably prescient in identifying death as the central posture of the Christian faith. Yet tragically she missed—and I so often forget—Christianity's grandest surprise: that real life is found on the far side of death, not on its nearer shore. She was sure that true life was found in protecting, nourishing, feeding, and serving the self. She was dead wrong.

"Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:24). Self becomes most fully itself not when it insists on its own way, but when it is yielded to the will of its Maker. "Our wills are ours," wrote Tennyson, "to make them thine." Life begins with death.

I find I don't die very well.

Self proves a reluctant victim of capital punishment—unless, in my dying, my eyes are not on me but on the one who has died for me. Then service becomes a glad love gift, a happy sacrifice. In the wonderful movie *The Princess Bride*, the fair maiden Buttercup has a servant named Wesley. Whenever she asks him to do something for her, his reply is always the same: "As you wish." But one day she discovers that when Wesley says, "As you wish," what he means is "I love you."

The only way a servant's act can ever be anything other than the teeth-gritting, self-concerned labor of the will is when it is motivated by love. Where have I fixed my eyes? On the servant? Or on the Master, whom I love with the whole of my life? The focus of our gaze is all the difference between labor's hell and servanthood's heaven.